

Chemistry

by Megan Willoughby

The phone rings while I am asleep. I don't notice it at first.

In my dream, I hear a brash humming. The dream is seemingly insignificant; I was at my friend Mika's house with Hannah and Camilla. We were sitting and laughing. "And then the sound begins. We ignore it.

It gets louder and louder and I finally wake up.

I look at the clock. 3:06 AM.

The phone rings again. The sound fills my ears. It makes me feel old. The outside world is too quiet, the phone is too raucous.

I stumble to the phone, my room is dark and the shadows on the walls are fearsome. I expect devils to be smiling back at me.

I rub my face.

I'm glad that whoever made me rise on this unholy hour didn't call on the house phone; even though I've finished my freshman year at college, my parents still have some sort of power over me. What can I say? I still live in their house.

It's summer. I can feel the chill nighttime breeze sweeping through my window.

My hand grasps the phone and I flip it open.

"Hello?" I imagine I sound very groggy.

"Jess?"

It takes me a moment to register who it is, but I say her name anyway.

"Hannah?"

Her reply is rushed and forced, and I can hear the phone shake. "Can I come over?"

I'm not sure what is happening. Is someone hurt? Did she get kicked out of her house? Is she just plain afraid? I don't know why I've thought any of these things.

"Yeah, of course you can," I say warily. "What's wrong?"

She doesn't say anything.

"Hannah?"

"I'll tell you when I get there."

"Okay. . ."

Her phone cuts out and I am left wondering. It takes fifteen minutes to get from Hannah's house to

mine, ten if you drive fast. I have that nervous-sick feeling in my stomach and there's nothing I can do about it.

I continue to sit in the dark, attempting to muster enough courage to turn on the light. Everything is so different yet the same in the fluorescent glow. Eventually, I turn it on. My eyes squint and I brush the hair out of my face. I leave my room, still startled by the light, turn on the hall light, unlock the front door, and turn the porch light on. It's dark outside. There's no moon tonight.

There's nothing to do but wait. So I pace. While doing so, I pass a mirror. I look like shit, and I know it. My hair is disheveled; I was too tired to take my makeup off, so it's smudged in places. My eyes are red, it looks like I've been smoking. I haven't, though. I'm tired. "And I'm sure I'm about to become even more weary.

I stand in front of this mirror until I see headlights reflect off of it. It feels like there's a feather tickling the inside of my stomach, like how I felt when I first went on the Haunted Mansion ride at Disneyland.

Hannah runs up to the door. I let her in before she has a chance to knock.

She comes at me and hugs me, she attacks me, really. She holds me close to her. We've never been this close together. I can't fathom what is wrong. She usually goes to Mika for these sorts of things. I'm one of her close friends, but Mika, he's her best friend.

She lets me go.

"Come on, Hannah." I lead her to my room.

"Wait," I stop in the hallway. I get a piece of paper and scribble a note to my parents. "Hannah staying night, will explain in morning."

When I return to my room, I find Hannah sitting on my bed. Her eyes are incredibly red. She's been crying.

Before I sit down, she says it.

"Mika and Camilla got in a car accident."

I look down at the floor and bite my thumb. Hannah licks her lips. What am I supposed to say?

"They're dead."

I look at the floor again.

I can't cry. I'm numb. I put my back against my dresser and slide to the floor. It hurts. Not just my back, but everything. My heart is on fire. My stomach is somewhere below the earth.

We are silent for a very long while. Hannah begins to cry again.

"Are you sure?"

"I talked to Mika's sister. She had to ID the bodies."

I look at the floor. I can't meet her eyes.

"How?"

"A car swerved into their lane. They drove off the road into a tree." She is mechanical. I know that if she puts any emphasis on anything, she'll cry harder.

I try to move my legs but I can't.

"Where?"

"On the road to the lake."

We're silent again. Hannah is shaking, though she is not crying.

I never could have imagined this indefatigable numbness. Never. Nothing has ever felt like this. Not even when my Grandpa died. My two best friends are dead. It's me and Hannah now. Separate and so alone.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask her.

I still can't move.

"The hours after this."

I suddenly have enough strength to move. I take a seat next to her.

She speaks again, "the hours after this. "After we fall asleep, if we ever will sleep. What then?"

I can't believe that she's able to think. I'm numb. Completely numb. I can't think of anything but the numbness and how much it hurts.

"What happens when we go to the memorial? Do I even want to go to the memorial? Will there even be a memorial?"

"How are you feeling?" I finally speak. It feels awkward.

"Wondering. Confused. Angry."

"How did you expect me to react?"

She finally looks at me. "I was thinking about how you would react when I was driving here. "And I realized that I had no idea how you would react. "And that scared me. "All I want to do is cry. . ." She starts to cry. "But I can't stop wondering. I'm thinking about everything. What were they saying to each other? What was going through their minds? How long did it take? What did the crash sound like? I'm thinking of then and the future." Convulsions shake her body like a seizure, earthquakes wave throughout her body.

My hands are shaking. Finally I'm showing some sign of distress.

"I'm thinking about now," I say quietly. "I can't think about the future because that means that they

won't be in it. I have to deal with now. "And then I'll deal with them."

This is the most I've said. I never want to speak again.

The summer breeze is blowing through my window. The blinds are clacking against the glass. The air in my room feels too thin. I go to close the window. I don't want to breathe this air. I decide to spray air freshener.

"Why did you do that?" Hannah asks.

"I dunno..." I don't want to tell her that I can smell the crash through the window. I can smell the rubber, the burning oil. I'm not sure if that makes sense. Now that I know what happened, everything seems heavy. The world is bogged down.

"What are you thinking?" she says quietly.

"I'm thinking about before we all went off to college. "About how we were hours away from each other, and how we all tried so hard to make things not change. "And we all grew in our own ways during the past year. "And when we saw each other after we all came home, how it felt so familiar and normal."

"And?"

"And how all of that was in vain."

She looks at me blankly. "It wasn't in vain."

"It was. If we had all grown apart and forgotten each other, it would have been a lot easier to deal with."

She looks at me again, her gaze unflinching. "That wouldn't have made it easier at all. They'll always be the people that were once our best friends."

I fix my gaze on the floor. "Don't say that."

"Say what?"

"Once."

"Jess."

"Hannah, I can't move on as quick as you. I'm still asleep. I still can't fathom it. I can still smell the crash outside of the window. Or the smell of Mika's cologne. Or Camilla's perfume."

We are quiet. I prayed we would keep everything up. That nothing would fall apart. I guess nothing is certain.

"Jess, do you want to know something?"

"Hm?"

"It seems kind of stupid to say, but I used to really love Mika."

"I know," I say. I don't want it to come off rudely.

"How?"

"I could just tell."

"How?" she repeats.

"Do you remember when we dissected the frogs in Chemistry?"

"Yes."

"I could tell. You were smiling more than you ever had with Mika that day. I had never seen anything so genuine."

"I always did."

"I know."

She crawls under my covers. "I think I'm going to go to sleep."

I climb over her and turn the light off.

We talk about Chemistry class and everything that happened during those long school days.

Chemistry, and nothing else.

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