

## Am I Dead?

As I rise from the couch, something inside my mind snaps. My thoughts begin to race as I fight for air. *Am I having a heart attack?* I stare at the bodies around me. *How the hell did I get here?* Everything seems strangely familiar. My skin begins to itch. I stagger into the bathroom and plunge my fingers down my throat. Nothing.

I plead to Mason. "Get me out of this. Make it stop, please."

From the stunned look on his face he has no idea what is manifesting inside of me. Neither do I.

"Have a cigarette," mutters Sara, "get some rest"

They don't give a shit about me. The last thing in the world I can do is rest. I pace frantically in my bedroom, changing in and out of clothes believing it will alter my state. I stumble into my pajamas, clench my eyes, and plead for sleep. My heart feels like it's beating for a thousand people. The decay of the apartment charges through my nostrils as I inhale months of cigarette smoke that clings to the walls. My head throbs with confusion. Voices, footsteps, and sirens scream in my ears. I begin to pray, something I have not done in years. I have deprived myself of so many things that I once loved. I want to fall asleep instantly, wake up, and feel normal *whatever the fuck that is*. If I could just split my skull open and reach inside to turn the switch off, I could make it stop. This is Hell. I suddenly glimpse myself from above. I must be dying. *Am I dead?*

I rush to the mirror and stare at a grinning skeleton. I look to Mason for comfort, but I envision the Devil instead. I picture myself running and never stopping.

"Are you mad at me?" whimpers Sara.

I force her out of the way and grab the phone. It is four o'clock in the morning. My mother answers.

"Mommy, I am dead and in hell, please rescue me."

"Lynn..Lynn, relax, everything is going to be fine. What's going on ... Lynn?"

"I don't know, please, please, please, come get me."

"Lynn, what is wrong? Are you using drugs?"

"Yes, No, I don't know, help me please," I am moaning.

"I'm on my way Lynn. Is Mason with you?"

"I think, yes, yes, he's here...I am going to his house...I'll be there."

"Stay with him," pleads my mom.

I drop the phone on the ground and run to my room.

"Make sure you hide the bong if your mother is coming here," yells Sara before slamming her door.

I seize my wooden rosary beads from my dresser drawer and dart downstairs out into the street. I sense danger hunting me. Mason clutches my arm and pulls me back onto the sidewalk, as cars swerve to dodge me.

"Am I dead? Are you not telling me something Mason?"

"No babe, you're not dead. You are right here with me."

"I don't believe you, you're lying."

Mason stays by my side. I sense my existence creeping away. Time is blurry but it seems I haven't slept in years. Today I am being punished for all of the bad choices that I have made. I wish to make it right, but I guess my time is up. Standing outside, agitated, I gaze at my neighbors as they leave for work. One seems familiar. I stare directly into his eyes, he passes through me. I am an illusion.

Mason flags down a taxi and pulls me inside. As we cross the Manhattan Bridge, I peer out the back window and witness the orange sky rising behind me. In this moment I am protected. The rays of warmth grant me a sense of calm and serenity that my soul has been needing. I desperately cling to it as it slips away. I insist that we take the cab to The Robert's House, a building that I lived in during my first year in the city. I might find something there, a valuable clue. I jump out only to see that it is no longer open. *Did it ever exist?* I am in a fucking nightmare. Where the hell is the alarm clock to pull me out? I race down 3rd avenue to Mason's apartment. The glaring daylight is burning my eyes and stinging my skin. I am exposed to the world, as every pedestrian I pass stares right through me. At Mason's place, I shiver with fear as I peel my clothes off in the bathroom. I force myself into the shower. The lights are blinding and the water reeks of bleach. The hammering of my heart is all I can hear. Slithering back into my pajamas, I rush outside searching for relief only to find none. Mason chases after me as I plot my escape. I am darkened, confused, delirious, and mad all at once.

It is nine o'clock in the morning and I am now terrified that my mother is coming. When she pulls up to the curb I spot my little sister sitting in the back seat. For the first time, the sight of my mom does not relieve me. I turn to flee but Mason forces me into the car and I fight to get out.

My mother grabs my hand, "do you trust me?"

I say "yes", but I am lying.

We speed off leaving Mason frozen on the curb. The Lincoln tunnel is my birth canal and I am being torn out of the city, the womb I have known for so long. I listen to my demons yelling for me to come back. I sob and shake as Stephanie holds on to me. Thrusting my legs, unable to sit still, I begin running in place. I am paralyzed with thirst so we stop at a gas station. My mom hands me two bottles of water and I begin to guzzle them. It does not satisfy me. I plead to her for reassurance. We drive past a big rock painted with dull red letters, *Jesus Saves*.

"See that Lynn, what does it say?" I hear the fear in her voice.

I want so much to believe it but I am powerless. Coming to a standstill in traffic, a woman in a hideous green car smiles and winks at me. She must know something that I don't. Paranoia has set in. I scrutinize each expression on my mother's face searching for the key. If I am clever enough to solve this riddle, I will survive.

When we arrive in Pennsylvania, where I grew up, we rush immediately to the hospital. The emergency room becomes my confessional. I purge all of the dirty secrets that I have kept locked away. I own up to my sins, exposing my love affair with the pretty poison I call ecstasy. I can't stop biting the skin off my fingertips. I tell the doctor about my friends, the clubs, the drugs, and the lies. All the lies. My mother sits speechless in her chair. A drop of blood falls from my thumb onto my pants. The doctor discusses substance abuse treatment facilities with me as if I were completely lucid. Now I know I am crazy. No one seems to realize the shape of my mind. All I can smell is the doctor's rotten breath as he hands me two sleeping pills and tells me to go home and take them before bed time.

"Come back if your condition worsens. Take care."

We silently pull into the driveway of the house that haunted my childhood. My mother insists on offering me tea as if it is some kind of magic potion. The thought of

ingesting anything makes me ill, but Mom copes the only way she knows how. She avoids it, confident that this will simply disappear. She draws me a bath, but I refuse to get in it. I disintegrate over the next few hours. My mother guarantees me that I will be fine after getting some rest and hands me the two tiny pills with a glass of water. I stare into my hand. Music suddenly begins thrashing in my head. Chills surge through my core as familiar voices invade my ears.

Are you feelin it? Are you feeling it? Are you feelin ...?

I will not fall for these tricks. I reject mom's invitation and place the pills on the counter. This is only a test. A simple test by your emergency broadcast system. Here is the perfect opportunity to just say no. I am certain these are no better than the shit I was popping in the city. No one will convince me of their lies. Stacey seems to think that this is all an act. Lynn trying to hog the spotlight ...again. Frustrated by my behavior, Stacey gets a nurse on the phone to assure me that the pills will provide me with rest. As if I am going to listen to another person in the medical field. Yeah right. The whole time my father continues watching television as if nothing is wrong.

"Just swallow the pills Lynn. Stop making such a big deal of it," he mutters before going to hide in his room. The usual supportive advice from father of the year.

I crawl into my mother's bed as she holds me in her arms. Stacey and Steph bring blankets into the room and lie on the floor. Stephanie, wise beyond her years, lies in front of the door, sure I will try to escape. With eyes wide open, hallucinations creep in as I watch my mother's face morph into Mason's. I'm a bomb set to explode. I stumble past Stephanie and dart outside. My mother chases after me, sobbing, pleading with me to stop, as if I have control over this.

"Let me go mom. Please let me rest in peace so I can move on to the next world."

"Lynn, I love you. You are alive! I am your mother I am telling you the truth."

"You are keeping me here in this life and I need to leave. I know this is hard for you but I can't go on like this. I am dead."

Having no other choice they pull me into the car and take me back to the hospital. It is morning again, the days have melted into each other and I have lost all sense of clarity. My father is already at the hospital where he works as a nurse. He enters the room showing no emotion and avoids looking at me. Great bedside manner. We all sit in

a dark windowless holding cell. It is the first time we have sat together as a family to confront anything. I am instructed to sign papers to commit myself to the psychiatric ward of the hospital. If I do not cooperate, my parents or the state will be forced to commit me. Tasting the barrel of a gun in my mouth, I scribble my name and it is done.