

Prey

It was just another month, another week, another day, of my completely unremarkable life.

I was strolling along the sidewalk on my way to school that sunny Wednesday, my cello case in my right hand, my backpack slung over my left shoulder. I'm not a big fellow, and to anybody who sees me accompanied by my cello, I'm sure it looks comical, as the instrument is about the size of me. I'm certain they wonder what a teenage boy could possibly be doing with a cello. It's not a puzzling mystery. I like to make music. Tada!

Some kids my age, which was sixteen at the time, probably would have gotten a ride to school. Unfortunately, that wasn't an option for me. My father and I weren't well-off, so we didn't own a vehicle. I was also lacking in friends, and therefore was unable to hitch a ride with anyone else. The other alternative, the bus, wasn't my cup of tea, as there were some unruly types who used it as their method of transport, and they would make my ride somewhat unenjoyable. Walking was the smartest choice.

In case the scarcity of friendships was not enough to display my lowly reputation, it was while I was meandering down the sidewalk that a fancy red car very purposely grazed a puddle and showered me with dirty rainwater. I flinched, wiping the moisture from my face with my free hand.

“Loser!” a deep voice bellowed from the car as it zoomed down the road.

I grimaced. “Good morning, Darrell,” I muttered to myself, striding along to feign confidence and preserve some dignity.

A few minutes later, Jenson High came into view. Each morning, when I saw the building, the same feelings coursed through me: irritation, because I knew what people I'd encounter inside; dread, because I knew they would taunt me no matter what; and anxiety, because I wanted to get through the day as quickly as possible. The only silver lining that morning was the fact that my clothes were mostly dry by the time I entered the school.

I managed to get to the music room without Darrell or any other predators spotting me, which was a miracle in itself. I carefully laid my cello beside the chairs where the orchestra, which I was a member of, would practice during lunchtime. Afterwards, I left the room and hurried down the hall. My locker was only a few feet away when somebody stepped in front of me, blocking my path.

“Hey, Ethan. Where are you going in such a hurry?” Al asked cheerfully.

I gritted my teeth, looking up at him. It was no great feat that he was taller than me, but there were few who were even remotely as tall as him. He easily surpassed six feet, and he probably would have made a decent basketball player if he didn’t already have a flourishing career as a drug dealer.

“Just heading to my locker,” I replied casually. “Do you need something?”

Al’s mouth quirked up at the corners. I found it quite unfair that he was handsome, with his disheveled black hair and mischievous green eyes. He was a snake - he sounded too shady to be truthful, but had a face too entrancing to doubt. “I need money,” he told me, studying my face. “For resources.” There was something unnerving in his eyes, like hunger or malice. Perhaps both. “Maybe you could help.”

I sighed. “Sorry, Al. I don’t have any money.” I tried to walk around him, but he put an arm across my chest, stopping me.

His eyebrows rose. “I’m disappointed, Ethan. I thought you’d understand better than anybody the true value of money. You *are* the poor kid, after all.”

Anger made my flesh burn. “I know money is valuable,” I retorted. “That’s why I don’t spend it on dope.”

Al snickered. “I know that. However, I approached you first because, frankly, I don’t trust many people. A majority of the school population knows I’m running some kind of operation, but they have no evidence.”

I chuckled. “Operation? That’s what you call it?”

He narrowed his eyes at me warningly. “Don’t get cocky, Ethan. Some of our peers like to stick their noses in other people’s business. I think you and I both know you wouldn’t rat me out, even if you were armed with the knowledge to get me thrown into a juvenile facility. Am I right?”

“What do you want from me, Al?” I exclaimed, feeling impatient.

“Keep your voice down!” he hissed, looking around suspiciously. Nobody was paying any attention to us. “Let’s make a deal. If you get me a hundred dollars in a week, I won’t beat you to a pulp.”

“Al,” I said pleadingly, feeling helpless, “I don’t have a hundred dollars.”

“Too bad.” Al crossed his arms. “I would have asked somebody else, but you’re so good at keeping secrets. Aren’t you?”

“Yes,” I mumbled, willing to say anything that would make him go away.

“Good.” Al cracked his knuckles individually, staring at me all the while. “I hope you don’t prove me wrong. If you do, getting pummelled will be the least of your worries.”

I turned away from him. “Great. See you next Wednesday for the consequences.” I made my way to my locker, checking over my shoulder to make sure Al was gone. He was. I leaned my head against the metal door, annoyed. I hadn’t been in school for ten minutes and already I owed Al money. I was going to get pounded the following Wednesday because there was no way I was getting him the cash. Even if I miraculously stumbled upon a hundred dollars, I wasn’t wasting it on the likes of Al. As for telling the cops about his “operation”, he needn’t fret – if getting beaten was the least of my worries, I didn’t want to find out what the most was.

Nothing else irked me until first-period English.

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I was sitting at my desk, waiting for our English teacher, Mrs. Stevens, to begin teaching. Most of my classmates were chatting away to their buddies. Me? I was organizing my binder. I didn’t have much else to do.

That’s when Darrell arrived.

Darrell was the worst. Unlike Al, who had a “job” to occupy a great deal of his time, Darrell was consistent when it came to tormenting me. I had been on his radar since I’d met him at the beginning of the school year, along with the other ill-fated underlings in our school. He played sports – not that all athletes are colossal jerks, but it certainly didn’t reduce his inflated ego. Additionally, he was handsome. Not hazardously handsome like Al; Darrell was airbrushed

handsome, with brown hair, hazel eyes, and an above-average stature. He knew it, too. Even his walk emanated arrogance.

They say you should only use the word “hate” when you really mean it. I *hated* Darrell.

“Hey, scum,” Darrell called to me, plopping into an empty seat two rows away. Mrs. Stevens was too busy looking through her notes to notice the term of endearment. “Enjoy your shower? Looked like you needed one.”

“It was refreshing,” I answered drily. “Thanks for being so thoughtful.”

Darrell waved a hand dismissively. “Don’t mention it.” He turned away to converse with some of his despicable cronies.

After ten more minutes of binder re-organizing, Mrs. Stevens finally spoke up. “I’m going to assign questions that refer to the novel we’ve just read,” she proclaimed, gesturing towards us with the book in her hand. “There’s a significant number of them, so I’m dividing you into groups of three.”

My heart faltered.

“Can we choose our groups?” somebody towards the front inquired hopefully.

Mrs. Stevens shook her head. “No. I already have them arranged.”

There was a collective groan amongst my classmates. I fidgeted nervously, listening as she read our verdicts, waiting and praying.

“Ethan Hughes,” she said, “Simon Douglas-” Simon, one of Darrell’s minions, made a disgusted face. I smirked humourlessly. The feeling was mutual. Nevertheless, I could tolerate

Simon. I just didn't want to have to sit with Darrell for the next half hour. Sadly, luck was not on my side as Mrs. Stevens concluded, "-and Darrell Woods."

At first, Darrell wore an aggravated expression, but that was soon replaced by a malevolent grin. For some reason, it didn't make me feel better.

So, that's how Darrell, Simon and I ended up sitting together, desk to desk. Mrs. Stevens passed out the worksheets, announced that she had to run to the staff room, and then took her leave. I wasn't broken up about it. She wouldn't have been much help anyway.

I worked silently for a while, not wanting to interact with the other members of the trio. I couldn't ignore it, though, when Darrell suddenly asked, "How are you today, Ethan?"

I looked up from my writing, surprised by the inquiry, but not trusting him. "Fine," I responded warily. "And you?"

Darrell toyed with the pencil on his desk. "I'm well, thanks," he replied with a devilish smile. "You know, I was thinking about something."

I bit my tongue to keep myself from responding, *Oh yeah? That's a first.* Instead I asked, "What were you thinking about?"

Darrell glanced at Simon, who grinned his encouragement. "I was thinking," Darrell told me, "about your cello. That thing is probably worth a lot."

It was true. My cello was several times more expensive than my old, shabby cell phone. It was an interesting observation on his part, but I wasn't sure where the conversation was heading. "So?" I demanded, my voice guarded.

Darrell put up his hands as a sign of self-defence. “I’m just saying it’s pretty rotten of you to have a cello while you and your dad are so broke.”

I glowered at him. “That’s none of your business.” When my dad and I had hit financial lows in the past, I’d offered to sell my cello. Dad wouldn’t hear of it. He thought I deserved to own something I wanted but didn’t need, besides my humble phone.

Darrell sneered at me. “I think that’s kind of greedy. Doesn’t *your* mom preach about selflessness?”

A cold feeling settled over me. I looked down, wanting nothing more than for him to shut up. So I told him to. “Shut up, Darrell.”

“Wait!” Darrell cried in mock realization. A few of our classmates were staring at us. His voice dropped a few decibels, and he murmured, “That’s right. Your mom’s not around, is she?”

My eyes widened in disbelief. Yes, my mother left my father and I shortly after I was born, but I never talked about her. Ever. “How did you know that?” I whispered.

Darrell winked. “I do my research.”

I couldn’t fathom that he looked for things he could hold against me, that he would go so far as to shove my mother’s absence in my face. I swallowed the lump in my throat, looking away as I tried to regain my composure. For a while, I tuned everything else out. Until I heard Darrell flinging insults. This time, they weren’t directed at me.

I glanced up at Darrell, who was looking past me, and turned to see another trio of students not far behind us. They were inferiors like myself when it came to our school’s social hierarchy. There was Louise, an eccentric girl with rainbow hair, ripped clothes and feathers hanging from

her ears; Bailey, a genius boy with thick-rimmed glasses and a frail frame; and Jim, who was mild-mannered, kind, and also a little pudgy. I hoped Mrs. Stevens hadn't put them together intentionally, because if she had, it was cruel. Like leaving injured gazelles defenseless against a lion. Darrell was letting the three of them have it, insulting them for any characteristics he deemed amusing. Neither of them were responding.

Any other day, I would have kept my mouth shut, but that day was different. After the rainwater bath, Al's ambush, and the comment about my mother, my temper was soaring, and so was the instinct to stand up for my fellow gazelles. "Will you just knock it off for once in your pathetic life?" I cried, scowling at him.

Darrell's eyes flicked back to me. "You've got an attitude today. What, mommy issues driving you to the brink?"

I curled my hands into fists. "You must be really insecure about yourself to ridicule people like that," I stated angrily. "Maybe you're trying to overcompensate for something. Care to share?"

Darrell's cheeks turned pink, his head swivelling self-consciously. Everyone was looking at us, some people pretending they weren't. Darrell jabbed a finger in my face. "I'm not overcompensating!" he snarled. "I'm just telling them like it is."

"But, you're not," I countered with a frown. "You're just trying to highlight what you consider to be bad traits. You don't mention good things, like how creative Louise is, or how incredibly intelligent Bailey is, or the good-naturedness Jim retains. I find it absolutely bewildering that you can make fun of them when they're all so much more amiable than you. Sorry, I didn't think that through. I wouldn't expect you to know what 'amiable' means."

A hush fell over the room. Darrell's eyes narrowed into slits. His voice seeping with threat, he murmured, "Are you trying to call me stupid?"

"No," I answered simply, staring back evenly. "I *am* calling you stupid."

Everybody gasped. Simon was gawking at me, looking flabbergasted. Bailey, Jim and Louise were wearing matching looks of astonishment. Even *I* was surprised by how bold I was.

Mrs. Stevens returned at that moment, and we all went back to work as though nothing had happened. Every time I dared to look at Darrell, he was glaring back. *If looks could kill*. That expression finally made sense.

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I successfully avoided Darrell the rest of that day. We had no other classes together, and I kept to the bathroom during recess and the music room during lunchtime. Did I regret what I'd said? No. Was I looking forward to paying for it? No. Nobody said anything about the incident. I didn't blame them. That would be like shooting yourself in the foot.

After school, I marched away from the building, glad to leave. I had a cello lesson, and was eager to reach my teacher's apartment. Anything to get my mind off of my impending doom. Alas, a cello lesson can only last so long, and two hours later I was on my merry way again, this time travelling towards home.

Since it was late winter, the sky was dark, even though it was not yet evening. There was no snow on the ground, but a chill was in the air. I zipped up my jacket, shivering. The street looked deserted. The only sounds were my footsteps, the whistle of the wind, and the slow progress of car tires.

Tires? I thought. I stopped, and the sound of rubber on pavement ceased. Goosebumps rose on my skin, but not because of the frigid air. Bit by bit, I turned around on the sidewalk. At the end of the road, its headlights two glowing eyes in the gloom, was Darrell's car.

He hit the gas. I took off, running as though my life depended on it. For all I knew, my life *did* depend on it. For a moment I considered that Darrell might run me over, but no, even Darrell wouldn't be that dumb. Still, he was closing the gap between us.

The tires screeched as the vehicle came to an abrupt stop. He was going to get out and chase me on foot. I wasn't fast to begin with, even less so dragging my huge cello. Even so, I didn't abandon my instrument. I would sooner suffer than sacrifice my cello. On my left, a heavily-wooded park beckoned. I ducked into it.

He must have been following me, as creepy as that seemed. The guy knew how to hold a grudge, and how to seek vengeance. Running through the trees, getting whipped by branches and tripped by roots was bad enough. I shuddered to think of what he might do when he actually caught me. There weren't any "ifs" about it. Undoubtedly, Darrell was going to catch me.

"Where are you running, Ethan?!" Darrell yelled as he chased me through the foliage. Branches cracked behind me, the noises getting closer. "You brought this on yourself!"

My foot hit a rotting log. I flailed as I fell, landing face-first in the grass. My ribs hit my cello case, making me groan in pain. Then, something struck me in the back of the head. It was Darrell's fist.

"Stop!" I begged. "I'm sorry! Please stop hitting me!" I wasn't really sorry, but I did want him to stop. I tried to roll over so I could better defend myself, but ended up taking a blow to the eye.

“Am I stupid?!” he shouted, kicking my head.

“No, you’re not!” I covered my face with my arms.

“Pathetic, motherless freak!” he spat at me.

Something snapped. Loudly. We both froze, he in mid-punch, I in mid-cringe.

“What was that?” I moaned, hoping it was a passerby who could put an end to the abuse.

“I don’t know,” Darrell murmured. He looked concerned, obviously afraid of getting into trouble with whoever might be around. He reached into his pocket and brought out his phone, fiddling with it until it emitted a bright light. He began scanning our surroundings while I rose cautiously. If I took off, he’d go right back to his previous task, forgetting a vague sound.

“See anything?” I asked as I lifted my cello, feeling paranoid. I knew there was nothing in the park to be afraid of, but it was dark and creepy. I watched a lot of horror movies.

Darrell shook his head and began to reply, “No, I think it-”

I’ll never know how he intended to finish the sentence, because at that second something jumped out of the shrubbery. Darrell screamed and fell as the savage...*thing* attacked him. The light from Darrell’s phone, which was lying on the ground near the scuffle, illuminated the beast. Its fur was brown, and it was as big as a bear, but it wasn’t a bear. Its face was too thin, its ears too long and pointed.

I was stunned, frozen temporarily while Darrell’s shrieks of pain rang through the air. Something wet spattered across my face as the creature tore at him. When I snapped out of it, I began to do the only thing I could think of: I hit the animal with my cello. I didn’t know how else

to help, so I kept hitting the monster, my lungs burning with the effort. I only stopped when I noticed Darrell wasn't yelling anymore. He wasn't making any noise at all.

The fiend whirled in my direction. It looked canine, wolf-like, but much larger than a wolf was supposed to be. Its blue eyes stood out in stark contrast to its dark fur.

The strange wolf bared its fangs and leapt at me. I thrust my cello in front of me, discovering that the only time I was willing to sacrifice it was when my life was on the line. I felt myself falling.

The last thing I noticed before everything went black was how stunningly human its eyes seemed.

~

I had dreams. This confused me, because I didn't think the dead could dream. I dreamt of the huge, brown wolf, prowling through trees, teeth bared, blue eyes filled with determination. I dreamt about Darrell and how he harassed me. Suddenly, all I could hear were the pain-filled cries that had escaped him.

It didn't feel like a nightmare. His agony didn't upset me. That was scariest of all.

The dreams faded when I opened my eyes. I'd thought that the animal had killed me, but looking around, I saw that wasn't the case. I was in a hospital, with its white interior and that sterile smell hanging in the air. I felt fine, save for some severe bruising I was fairly sure Darrell had contributed and a stinging sensation on my chest. There was a stitched-up wound, five inches long, stretching from my chest to my collarbone. A sickening feeling settled in my

stomach as I realized it was a claw mark, which my attacker had been gracious enough to christen me with.

“You’re awake,” said a voice. I groggily twisted my head to see my father sitting beside my bed, face ashen and voice weak with worry. “You’re alright. It’s okay.” He smoothed my hair with his hand.

I felt disoriented. After searching my brain for words, I blurted out, “My cello? Is it broken?”

Dad frowned. It was a strange thing to say after such an event, I’ll admit, but it was the first question that came to mind. “The cello’s fine,” he assured me, gesturing towards the other side of the room. The case was propped up against the wall. There was a long scratch down the front where its black material had been stripped away. Kind of like the skin on my torso.

I blinked, thinking back to the park. My memory was a little hazy. “Darrell,” I murmured. Primarily, I recalled him beating me. Then the image of him being maimed floated into my mind. I didn’t know what to ask, so I just said his name again. “Darrell.”

My father’s mouth became a thin line, and his eyes glistened. Dad was always a mush, but this time I could sense it was for good reason. His voice quaked as he said, “Your classmate, Darrell...he’s dead.”

I waited to feel some form of remorse, some inkling of grief. After all, I had tried to save Darrell, which should have meant I’d feel bad about his death, but there were no emotions even relatively close to remorse. Strangely enough, I felt smug. I didn’t show it. “What happened?” I grumbled, rubbing my eyes.

Dad bit his lip. “You didn’t come home. I went out looking for you, and ran into the Woods family while they were looking for Darrell. Eventually, we began to search the park, and that’s where...we found you.”

“There was...an animal in the park!” I told him frantically, remembering. “Not your everyday squirrel, Dad! It was an enormous beast! Did they find it? Did anybody see it?”

“Nobody saw an animal,” Dad informed me, shaking his head, “although the medical examiners said that the...damage done to Darrell certainly looks like it was inflicted by an animal of a significant size. They think maybe a cougar found its way into the park.”

“No,” I protested, “it was a wolf! A really, really big wolf! The size of a grizzly! Its eyes...looked like they could belong to a person...”

“Shush, Ethan,” Dad crooned, patting my arm. “You’re tired. You should rest.”

“I’m fine,” I argued, but I did feel tired, despite having just woken. I laid my head back down on the pillow, my vision blurring with fatigue.

“Go to sleep,” my father advised with a chuckle. Before I passed out, I heard him humorously add, “Maybe after you have a good sleep you’ll stop talking about werewolves.”

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Later that same Thursday, after I regained consciousness, I was released from the hospital. I took the rest of the week off of school, more for the sake of mental recovery than physical, and poorly repaired the abrasion on my cello case with a black permanent marker. Darrell’s funeral was that weekend. A lot of people attended, but I didn’t. Nobody expected or coaxed me to do so. I heard Darrell was in a closed casket. Having seen the attack, I wasn’t surprised.

Werewolf.

Why was that word sticking with me so persistently? The very concept was nothing but baloney. No matter how often I told myself this, I kept thinking about the size of the animal, and its wolf-esque stature. Most of all, I could not forget the sight of those unmistakably human eyes.

I went back to school on Monday. No one asked me how I was, but they all had a fine time staring at me. The morning passed uneventfully, but Al was lying in wait for me at lunchtime.

“How’re you doing, scratching post?” he asked, stepping in front of me while I walked down the hallway.

I pursed my lips. “Just peachy, Al. Get out of the way, please?”

Al grinned. “Fine. Just remember, whether you were in the hospital or not, I need a hundred dollars in two days, or else I’m going to send you there again. Got it?”

I glared at him. I’d almost died mere days before, and he was still grilling me for cash? I could not comprehend his heartlessness. I shoved past him and strode into the cafeteria, where I purchased my mediocre food and sat down at the table in the corner, preparing to eat alone as I did every day. For a short time, I did just that.

Suddenly, a hand appeared in my field of vision, dropping something on the table in front of me. I looked at it, trying to determine what it was. It was a curled strip of black material, coiled up like a spring. With a jolt, I recognized it as the same material covering my cello case. My eyes moved from the shred to the hand that placed it, then travelled upwards until I reached the face.

Frail, bespectacled Bailey gave me a nervous smile. “Hi.”

“H-Hi,” I stuttered, gaping at him. I looked down at the scrap. “Where...did you get that?”

Bailey rocked back and forth on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back. “Where do you think?”

My eyes travelled from the scrap to look at his face once more. I stared into his eyes for what should have been the first time, but it wasn’t. I’d looked into those crystal blues orbs not a week before when I stood face to face with the wolf. “It was you,” I whispered, goosebumps rising on my skin. “You were...that thing.”

Bailey nodded, his face grave. “The wolf condition is genetic, passed down through the bloodline. I’m adopted, so I never had anybody to teach me how to handle it, but I’ve known what I am for as long as I can remember. I can usually choose whether I want to...transform or not, but sometimes the animal takes over. Normally, there are warnings, and I’ll get far away from civilization so I don’t endanger anyone. The forced conversion doesn’t last long. I feed in that time, on small animals and the like, because my instincts tell me to. On Wednesday night, the transformation snuck up on me. I went to the park because I didn’t think anybody would be there. I saw Darrell and I couldn’t help myself. I had to take advantage of the opportunity.” Bailey was trembling. “You have to promise you won’t tell anyone. Please. I couldn’t keep it to myself. It was driving me crazy. Besides, I thought you had the right to know.”

My heart was thudding faster than it ever had. Not tell anybody he murdered Darrell in cold blood? How could I possibly let murder go unpunished? Not that Darrell had ever been nice to me. He’d bullied me relentlessly, from the time we met up until a few moments before he was killed. The more I thought about it...what reason *did* I have to avenge him?

“Hold on,” I interjected when he was about to speak again. “You just *decided* to kill Darrell, right?” Bailey winced at my words, but didn’t object. “You didn’t kill me, though. Why?”

Bailey smiled slightly. “You defended us the other day. Why would I have killed you?”

I gulped. If I hadn’t stuck up for him and the others that day in English class, Bailey might have killed me, too. I didn’t want to be near him at the moment. “Well, I won’t tell anyone. Don’t worry,” I said conclusively.

Bailey, apparently sensing the end of the conversation, nodded quickly. “Thank you. Listen, Ethan, if there’s ever anything you need, don’t hesitate to let me know.” He began to walk away.

“Wait!” I called, making him to turn to look at me again. “Anything?” Bailey nodded. I was quiet for a few seconds before I asked, “Do you know who Al is?”

~

Well, that’s my story. Relax, I didn’t have Bailey kill Al. At least, not yet. I had him frighten Al out of his wits, then I so coincidentally asked Al about it the following day. That certainly scared him away from me for a while, but not permanently. Anyway, Al’s still on probation. His life is still in my hands.

You might be wondering what the point of this story was. The classic tale of prey becoming predator, predator becoming prey. An account of comeuppance. Throw in an allegedly mythological creature and you’ve got yourself a lovely fable, don’t you? Except, it’s not a fable. It’s fact. An experience I thought I should share unto you for its ever-important moral: be nice to people. No matter how “inferior” they seem, be kind. Treat all of them with compassion, because at the end of the day, you don’t know who those people really are, or in Bailey’s case, *what* they really are. This is important even when it comes to normal people like me, because you have no idea what kind of people we’re acquainted with, who we can sic on you at a moment’s notice. Long story short, if you’re good to people, it can be greatly rewarding. Being a decent person

saved my life. However, if for no good reason you are a rotten, despicable being to somebody...well, you just might get chewed out for it.