

An Eternal Mess

Neve Quinn

To my parents and friends,
who always encourages this little hobby of mine.

Ben, are you coming to Mandy's house?

I picked up my phone to read my mom's text. I looked at it for a while, contemplating if I should even respond.

At least just drop by and say hi to everyone.

Now I really didn't want to go. 'Everyone' meant all of her friends and their annoying ass kids who I had the unfortunate opportunity to go to high school with. All the kids who went off to college, and were about to finish up their degrees. Even worse, their judgmental parents who pretend to understand kids like me, but secretly praise god every day that their kid didn't end up like me. But I knew this was important to my mom, and this is the least I can do for her. She deserves a moment where she can pretend that things are normal. Like things haven't been spiraling.

I'll be there in 20.

I shut my computer and got out of my bed. I put on a beanie, not bothering to brush my hair. It's grown out way too long, but I can't seem to find the energy to cut it. I quickly brushed my teeth and went out the door. The air was cold; I could see my breath on my way out to the car. I knew I had to scrape the snow off before I could leave. The last time it snowed was 3 days ago but my car has been in the same spot for the last few days. I haven't really had any motivation to leave my room, let alone my house.

The ride there was nice, it was dead silent and the roads were empty. Winters are always quiet here, I like to think the snow is soundproof. *I should leave my house more.* I thought to myself. Dread pooled in my stomach and chest and I pulled into a driveway full of cars, with more cars on the street. I parked a bit further away than I needed to, I thought the walk would do me good. Definitely *not* trying to procrastinate.

I could hear laughing through the old glass windows as I walked up to the front door. A Christmas tree illuminated the fancy dining room and candles sat in every window. I knocked, and rang the doorbell. *Could have just done one of those, idiot.* I squeezed my eyes closed, as if it would help shut up my own thoughts.

"Ben!" The door opened to a woman whose name I could barely place.

"It's good to see you." It was a lie, but I smiled regardless. The woman ushered me into the room with all the other adults who were just as loud and obnoxious as I had remembered. The fireplace was going, some fake pine was draped around the bricks. It had fake snow and brown branches. I think it was supposed to look chic, but it just made it look

dead. Every part of the room was warm. The heat from the fireplace, warm string lights, gold ornaments hanging on the tree. Despite it all, everything still felt cold.

“God it’s been forever!” Mandy, my mom’s best friend (who she actually talks shit about all the time), wrapped me in a hug. Her breath was laced with redwine and her turtleneck smelt of her expensive floral perfume. My mom stood behind her, holding a glass of sparkling water. She stopped drinking ever since I first got put into rehab.

“You haven’t changed one bit.” Mandy shook her head and smiled. I looked at my mom whose face seemed to fall when she heard that.

“Thank you Mandy.” I said. Again, I did my best to fake a smile. I even tried to make it reach my eyes this time.

“He’s got your kind eyes Jennifer.” She puts her I wondered what that said about me. Mandy rubbed my mom’s shoulder and walked back over to her seat.

“Ben the other kids are in the den, but either way you’re more than welcome to stay here with us.” I had to stop myself from laughing at her calling us kids when we are all in our twenties, but I can't blame her.

The den was nicer than the living room. The string lights in here felt cozy, and the fabric on couches were worn, unlike everything else in this house that felt like it had just been unboxed. People's voices quieted down when they noticed I had come in.

“Oh Ben! I wasn’t sure if you were coming!” Alex beckoned me over to the couches where everyone was sitting. The table was littered with plastic cups, foam still coating the bottom of some. Cans of cider and white claws littered around the table. There was some

party game on the table that looked like it had been abandoned. Those are usually only fun for a little bit anyway. I took a seat next to Austin, my former best friend. I'm not sure if we're even friends anymore; we haven't spoken in over two years. He smiled at me when I sat down. It wasn't a *friendly oh haven't seen you in a while* type of smile. It was more of a *I'm sad for you* pity-type of smile.

We all talked for a while. Maybe an hour, but I wasn't checking the time. Everything on the table was distracting me. A girl named Molly was talking about some final project she had due when my phone buzzed with another text from my mom.

How are you doing?

Everyone's drinking here. I sent back.

Mandy said she kept some soda in the kitchen for you. I had to look back at that text for a second time.

You told Mandy? I asked.

I just told her you're sober.

I told you not to tell people, mom.

She's my best friend. I should be able to talk to my friends about stuff.

Austin doesn't drink anymore either. She sent a second later.

Ok.

I need to leave, this is all too much for me. Clearly, I'm not ready for something like this. I don't want to be around all these kids who I don't even like, and their parents who I like even less. I stood up and put my coat back on.

"Are you leaving already?" Austin asked. He didn't even look like Austin, he was clean-shaven, and his hair was done so neatly, I would have believed he was in the military.

"Yeah." I said. I looked back down trying finding my keys that had been buried in the couch cushion. He followed me to the door. "I need to get out for a bit."

"Can I come with you?" I stopped at the top of the stairs.

"You want to come out with me, even though you don't even reply to my texts?" I asked.

"I thought maybe we could talk about it." He looked directly into my eyes. I turned around and continued down the stairs while spinning my keychain around my finger.

"Yeah sure, whatever."

We sat in the car for a few minutes, waiting for it to warm up before we left. The engine doesn't work well on a good day, let alone when it's 18 degrees out and frost is

plastered on the hood. After about five minutes of nothing about the sound of the defroster at full blast, I turned on the radio and pulled out of the driveway.

“So um, how’s Utah?” I asked, turning the defroster off.

“Different than Maine, but good. It’s good for me.” Utah is the last place I would have thought would be good for Austin.

“What are you majoring in again?” I asked.

“Family studies.” He paused. “And I’m getting my minor in theology.”

“Oh yeah. You’re like into that stuff now right?” I had seen all of his posts on facebook talking about finding God, loving Jesus and all the bullshit.

“Yeah, I’m a youth leader now.” He sounded proud and I felt jealous. “It’s really helped me through everything.” The radio cut out for a moment. “I heard you got sober.” I gripped the wheel. I guess his mom told him and I can’t help but wonder what else about me they talk about.

“Yeah. I’ve been sober for about 4 months.” I thought about the last time I drank with him. The police got called that night.

“It feels good, doesn’t it.” I could feel him smiling next to me.

“You don’t drink anymore either?”

“Been sober for a year now.” Of course, he has been sober for longer than me.

“Let me guess, the lord doesn’t want you filling your body with toxins or some shit?” I rolled my eyes.

“Actually Ben, it has more to do with the accident that nearly killed me. But yeah also I guess you probably think it’s just the bible bullshit that I know you hate.”

I pulled off to the next exit. The lake would be a good place to go. It's quiet this time of night. "I'm on a journey to heal myself, and if you can't deal with that maybe that's something you need to work on." He added

"I have been working on myself for *years*, Austin." The radio was just static now. "And why the fuck is everyone on some sort of journey these days?"

"Because some of us want more from life than what happened to us." Austin's voice was calm and it made me angry for some reason.

"What the fuck is wrong with you Austin? Like what- you found Jesus and just forgot everything that happened? Is there something missing in your brain?" I didn't mean to, but I started to raise my voice. I pushed down on the brakes, we were about five minutes away from the lake where the roads started to get curvy.

"Slow down." Austin said.

"Yeah I know. We're going like 15 miles per hour."

"Well you need to break harder. We-" He stopped talking. He just stared out the fog framed window, as we passed by the two crosses that were stuck in the ground. I slowed down even more. I suddenly felt bad that I could have even forgotten this road.

"Shit. Sorry Austin." I spoke up after we had passed the next curve. "I forgot. I really should have gone the other way." I took the next right into the parking lot that overlooked the lake.

"It's fine." He took a deep breath. "It's just the first time I've been past it in like over two years." I didn't have much to say. The radio had come back on but I turned it down.

“I’m not angry that you are doing well now.” I started. “It’s just I don’t get-” I don’t even know what I was trying to say. “I just don’t understand how you moved past it so fast.” I adjusted my hat. “It’s hard to imagine something like that when I’ve been struggling since freshman year of highschool and nothing even happened to me.”

“But something did happen to you.” Austin turned to me but I couldn’t do the same.

“Yeah, I started drinking and ruining my life with drugs. I did this to myself. It was *my fault*.” I don’t understand why he is trying to relate to me. Our issues are very different. I have to deal with what I did to my parents and my friends, because of what I did to myself. I can’t even be bothered to try to heal myself when I can barely get past the guilt of fucking up so badly in the first place.

“You know I blame myself?” He said. I glanced over. He was no longer looking at me. Just straight forward at the dashboard.

“Hm?” I shook my head. “Austin, that doesn’t even make any sense.

“Yeah um.” He cleared his throat. “I um- Harper didn’t even want to go out that night. I kept asking and finally convinced her. I had blankets and shit set up in the trunk. I had one of those mini projectors and we were gonna watch a movie on the other side of the lake.” His voice was shaking.

“Okay but regardless. You didn’t cause the accident. It’s not your fault an asshole decided to drive drunk on the same road that night.”

“I was going 10 over.”

“Austin that doesn’t mat-”

“She didn’t want to go out Ben! We should have never been on that road, if I had just listened to her, she- she wouldn't be dead.” His voice fell as brought his knees up to his chest. “I really think it should have been me.” I didn’t say anything for a couple seconds, too scared of saying the wrong thing.

“Austin. There was nothing you could have done-” He cut me off again.

“I know. Everyone tells me that but- it doesn't change the fact that my girlfriend was killed and I was the one at the wheel.”

“Yeah. I know.” I took a deep breath. “I’m sorry for what I said before. That you uh were fine and that um”

“For asking me if there was something missing from my brain?” He laughed a bit. I turned to face him and his lips were curled into a slight smile.

“Yeah uh that too.” I laughed as well and the car felt lighter.

“Don’t worry about it, we all say stupid shit.” This time the silence was comfortable.

“Want to start heading back?” I asked.

“To that hell house? No.” Austin threw his head back. “But we should.” I thought for a moment, about what we used to do in highschool.

“How about we make a stop at the gas station first? Ya know, get some more snacks for the party.” I glanced at him.

“Let’s do it.” He said. I pulled out of the parking lot. I was about to turn the radio back up but stopped.

“I just want you to know that I’m really happy that you're happy.” I said.

“Thanks.” He said. “And I’m really happy you’re still trying.” My eyes teared up a bit but I blinked it away as I turned the radio back up. Two seconds later I turned it back down again.

“Thanks. That um. Means a lot.” I said.

“Just put on the music dude.”

Acknowledgements

Music has always been an important part of my life, and this story was inspired by the song *Orange Juice*, by Noah Kahan. I never planned to publish any of my work. Even though this is a self publish, and I don’t think I would plan to sell my work, this is a recent goal I set for myself. Despite the fact that it’s not been professionally proof-read, it’s the first edition and I plan on maybe making a second edition later on. I would like to thank my parents for encouraging me to keep writing. I know they are most likely reading this (Hi mom, hi dad), so to both of you, your support was what motivated me to keep this hobby. And to my good friend Clodagh, who is always willing to read whatever I write. Clodagh’s an amazing artist, and it is always a great pleasure to share our work with each other. Once again, thank you to everyone who made this possible, I hope to share more of my stories with you in the future.