

Washed Away by Brittany Cole

I hear the dull hiss of cars passing in dashes of sound and I feel a warm breeze flirt with my ankles. My eyes work their way open and my legs shift to find the cool spots of my sheets.

Next to me, Jamie stirs. She cuddles up to me, laying her head beside mine. In her creaky morning voice, she says, “Let’s stay here all day.” And we do.

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I sit across from Jamie the next day at our kitchen table, which is actually a wobbly card table with two white, plastic patio chairs pulled up to it. A lukewarm mug of coffee sits in front of me, half drunk.

“We could watch a movie,” I suggest.

Jamie shrugs, slouched in her chair with her legs swung over its arm rest. It warps slightly beneath her legs.

“Or... go for a walk,” I try again.

“Nah. Too much work,” she says.

“Okay. How about we fiddle around on our guitars?”

She examines her finger nails, picking out the dirt. “I don’t feel like it,” I hear her say, low, like the faraway mumble of thunder.

“Well, I think I’m going to play my guitar,” I say, standing up.

“Oh yeah?” Jamie asks, placing her hands in her lap and looking up at me.

“Yeah, it’s been a while since I’ve picked it up. I kinda miss it.”

My guitar has to be buried in dust by now. It’s been leaning against the back wall of my closet for ages, ever since that one spring day—I remember because the windows were open and the birds were singing along as I played.

“I don’t think you should,” she says lightly, and she begins to lackadaisically trace circles on the simulated wood grain surface.

“Wait, why?” I ask, standing behind my chair. I want to play for the birds again.

She looks up, raising her eyebrows and cocking her head. “You know what, like three songs? It’s just a little tiring hearing the same shit every time you play.” Jamie pauses. I start to walk away, but she goes on. “And no offense, but what’s the point of playing? You always get bored of it within ten minutes. Just stay here and keep me company. I want to sit in silence.” She

stops tracing invisible circles and flops her arm over the chair arm rest. “Don’t you wanna spend some time with me?”

“Of course I do,” I mutter, and I defeatedly sit back down. A few minutes later, she gets up and sits on my lap, settling her hard head on my boney shoulder. I stare out the window at the shivering tree branches. The leaves on the tree are starting to turn orange and yellow, and some red. I don’t know what kind of tree it is—leaves are just leaves to me. But I stare at those dying leaves until my coffee becomes completely cold and the room becomes completely veiled in shadows. The birds have probably all flown south anyway.

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The next morning, I wake up before Jamie does. I feel inexplicably good. I shower, get dressed, and doll up my face in makeup I haven’t used in months. I don’t think I did my makeup the right way because it looks kind of funny—I’ve never been good at makeup, and my eye shadow looks uneven—but I look better than usual and that’s enough for me.

I’m in the kitchen, just about to begin making a grocery list, when Jamie emerges from the bedroom, squinting and scratching the back of her head.

“What are you doing?” she slurs, massaging her face.

“I’m about to head out,” I reply, jotting “milk” on a post-it at the kitchen counter.

“You know we don’t have the money for that,” she says, suddenly very awake.

“Well I know, but I’d like to eat something different. I’m just gonna get a few things.” I add “bread” to the list and tap my pen against the counter.

She scowls. “So you’re gonna blow all our money on some ‘new’ food? We have food here.” Her tone is nasty.

“Jamie…” I say her name like it is dripping from a faucet. “I’m just gonna get some basic things. Nothing big.”

“Amelia Ellsworth!” she chides. “There’s food here that we should eat first. There’s that package of instant mashed potatoes, and a bag of chicken nuggets in the back of the freezer. And some Nutella. And Golden Grahams! Amelia, we have Golden Grahams!”

I try to reason with her. “I’m sorry, but—”

“Sorry but what? Sorry but the food here isn’t good enough? Sorry but I like being wasteful?” Now she’s on a roll. “Sorry but I love spending money we don’t have? What the hell? You can’t just go off and make all these decisions on your own! We have this conversation every week.”

“I just want to be able to buy food like everybody else, without fucking feeling guilty for it!” I scream. The cry leaves me like a bullet. I don’t mean to shout, but something snapped. “Why does it have to be like this with you?! I just want to eat something different! Why is that such a bad thing?” My heart is racing. “You always have to be such a fucking bitch about it.”

Jamie charges me, and I step backwards, but she knocks me down onto the floor. I move to get up, but she shoves me back down. I stay there a couple seconds longer before pushing myself up, but Jamie drives me back down again, and the back of my head bounces off the kitchen floor. Her strength surprises me; she is a small girl, but she is fierce. She hits hard and with all her weight.

“Jamie, how could you—” She kicks me in the side and I groan.

Jamie stands over me. Her expression stuns me—it is hard and merciless; she is not sorry, and she will not back down. I know she has a temper, and she’s roughed me up a bit in the past, but never like this. I curl up, the side of my face against the cool tile. My head is throbbing and my side aches.

“Stay there until you realize how reckless you’re being with our money.” She climbs up on the counter top and perches over me, daring me to move so she can crush me again. “Maybe if you starve all night, you’ll appreciate the food we have here.”

I succumb. My mascara streaks the gritty orange linoleum.

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This morning, I find myself a little empty: Jamie is gone. The comforter is tossed from her side, folded over where her body usually is. I sit up, surveying her possessions. Her phone—the screen helplessly cracked—is on the bedside table, her clothes are strewn across the room like normal, and her keys are sitting on a stack of untouched library books. Everything is weirdly ordinary except Jamie’s absence.

I sigh. She does this all the time. I’m used to it, but I’m still never able to predict it. I don’t entirely know where she goes. She probably wanders around downtown, shoplifting from chain stores and fraternizing with the homeless people. I’m pretty sure at night, Jamie comes back and sleeps on the couch, but she’s always gone by morning again.

I think she wants me to miss her. I do, in a way—she’s familiar. But I also feel a little free; I don’t need to take her into account when she’s away. Jamie craves attention, and of course I’m willing to give it to her, but deep down, it’s nice to have a break from her constant demands.

I grimace as I get out of bed—my side is still a little sore. In the wee hours of the morning, I woke up and crawled from the kitchen to the bed, where Jamie was asleep. Seeing her

breathe so gently in the yellow light from the street lamp outside, I forgave any hard feelings I had towards her. Besides, she was right about the money.

But now she's on one of her disappearing acts, so instead of staying home to keep her company, today I can go to class. I shower, eat some dry Golden Grahams, and show up to my Philosophy course for the first time in weeks.

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It has been two weeks and Jamie is still absent. She likes to play games, though. She left a note in the apartment for me a couple days ago, and today I noticed she moved around my ceramic pots. I used to work with clay, many years ago, and she knows my old pottery is important to me. I don't know—it's like a small part of me, from long ago. Jamie hates them because it reminds her of when I worked with clay, how I wouldn't let her watch me. But when you do your art, you just want some peace. She never understood that. We got into so many arguments because she'd take it personally, and eventually I just stopped working on them. I look at my hands now—I wonder if they could make anything anymore. They're frail with bulbous knuckles, so probably not.

Her note read, *I'm always here, whether you see me or not.*

Jamie and I have known each other for almost ten years. When I was eleven years old, she walked into Ms. Stewart's science class and changed my life—in a gradual way. She was drawn to me from the start, maybe because I was so lively, back then. Jamie didn't talk to anyone else but me. I liked her because she made me feel special. "You're not like the others," she always said. I used to think that was a good thing, but now I'm not sure.

At first, we only had sleepovers once or twice a month, but she quickly became a frequent guest at my house. She understood me in a different way, and her company was strange and exciting. When I was fifteen, we stole some of my mom's Vodka in the middle of the night and got drunk for the first time. My mom found us out—our breath gave it away the next morning—and even though it was Jamie's idea, I took the fall.

We used to argue, Jamie and I, a lot. We still argue, but it's more one-sided now. We used to go weeks or months without speaking, but we always made up because we both know our bond is undeniable.

Then, a couple days after I turned nineteen, we were smoking at our old high school playground after the sun had set. Jamie turned and said to me, "Amelia, we're right together, you know? We're comfortable together and it just makes sense."

"Are you making a move on me?" I asked, quickly glancing sideways at her before staring at my shoes.

“Of course I am, dork,” she said, and we moved in together the next month.

In all our years of friendship, I let go of everyone else, and parts of myself, too. She’s all I have. I’m nothing without her.

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Jamie returns after a few weeks while I am in the middle of typing an essay for College Writing at the kitchen table. She saunters in through the door and slowly approaches me. It worked: I am glad to feel her familiar presence. I look up at her and slightly smile. She pets my hair.

“How are you?” she asks gently.

“I’m losing steam,” I say. “These essays seem pointless.”

“Let’s take a nap,” she offers, and it sounds like medicine.

That night I get a black eye.

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“Hi Mom.”

“Oh, hey sweetie. How are you?”

“I’m... okay.”

The conversation is relatively dull. My mother describes some family updates: my cousin Heather is pregnant with her second child, Uncle Greg just had his knee replaced, Gammy Ellsworth is having Thanksgiving at her house this year. I outwait the small talk before unpacking the reason I called.

“What about you? What’s up in your life?”

“Not much.” I stop. “I mean, I’ve been... It’s just... Well, Jamie’s been getting kind of... intense lately.” I hold my breath.

“Wh—Oh, that. Right. Well, you know, everyone has their rough patches,” and with that, I know this phone call has been in vain. “Eventually, things will get better. Just gotta hang in there.”

“Mom...” I begin, but it simply peters out into nothing. I feel tears welling as my frustration builds. “She’s not letting me do anything. She controls my entire life. Every time I try to go somewhere, she manipulates me into staying home. She’s threatened me. Mom, she’s beaten me down. She’s physically beaten me down many times. I can’t take this abuse. Even

when she leaves, she always comes back, every time, and I think things will get better but they don't. I don't know what to do."

"Amelia, I don't know what to tell you. You can't let that stuff bother you." Her sentences are pointed; I know she is bored—I know she is sick of having this same conversation every time I call. "You just have to be more positive. You can't be so negative. Get some fresh air or something and you'll feel better."

"It's not like that, Mom. This is real."

"Honey, you've been running with this charade for too long. You need to get over this 'Jamie' nonsense. It's all in your head."

Her words feel like a sucker-punch. I can't take it. "Thanks. Bye, Mom," I say and drop the phone before she can say anything else. I walk to my bedroom, blinking hard.

Jamie's nested in the bed, cuddled up in a cocoon of blankets, watching a movie on her laptop. She looks up at me as I slouch into the room. "What's up?" she asks.

"I don't have anyone to talk to," I mumble, flopping myself onto the bed. I start crying.

"You can talk to me." She shuffles around, closing her laptop and extending her blanket cocoon to me. "Besides, I'm all you need."

I don't say anything, but I embrace the blankets and Jamie.

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She draws a bath for me. I can hardly remember anything from the past couple days. I step on fragments of my ceramic pots as Jamie guides me to the bathroom, but I don't feel anything.

She draws a bath for me. I blend into the dingy mustard yellow of the bathroom tile. I feel like my flesh is curdling on my sour bones. She softly takes off my flannel, and I sway, weak. She slips off my sweatpants with an effectual tug and I am left in underwear that sags loosely around my sharp hips. The surging of the filling tub slowly fills me, too. Its warm rumble invites me. I melt into the water. Jamie stands over me, stoic and unmoving, while my eyelids slowly close. The six—maybe seven, could be eight—shots of whiskey I had recently leave a lingering burn down my throat.

My body becomes submerged by the warm swamp and my chest tenses, my stifled lungs trying to bubble up for air while my iron heart drags them down like an anchor. Jamie looks so far away, a thousand leagues above me, so far away; my thoughts sharpen for a second but before I can sit up, hands crash through the water into my new realm and hold me down. I toss for an instant, and then I let go. The hands retract.

I hear a gunshot. I see a firework of red. Jamie thuds to the ground, and I feel a hole in my brain. I slip away. No one thought Jamie was real, but she was real enough to kill me.