

Life and Other Complications

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SAMPLE

The most authentic thing about us
is our capacity to create, to overcome, to endure,
to transform, to love and to be greater than our suffering.

-Ben Okri

Tuesday, May 10

My friend Caroline Reese lives in a hotel about five miles outside of town. It's a huge Victorian resort called the Ballentine. The first time I saw it, the Ballentine looked like Sleeping Beauty's castle, all covered in vines and thorns. Parts of the roof had caved in, and the interior was scorched. But where everyone else saw a ruin, Caroline's mother saw possibility. She bought the Ballentine and started the slow process of restoring it. Two years ago, the hotel reopened to guests. And this year, the renovations entered their final phase.

Caroline has taken advantage of the last of the construction chaos to commandeer a room in the north wing. She set up her espresso machine and dragged in some comfortable chairs. The space is eventually going to be repainted, so last month I decided to add some color to the walls. I painted bookcases full of leather volumes, curtains to frame the windows, and a ring of quotes about coffee just above the chair rail.

When Caroline's mother saw what I had done to her hotel, I expected her to tell me to paint over it. Which she did. But she also hired me to paint a mural in a room down the hall from Caroline's lair.

The mural room is huge. You can see where a chandelier used to hang and the remnants of crown molding. One wall clearly held a mural at some point. But the paint was so damaged by the fire that I couldn't make out the image. Another wall holds floor to ceiling windows. The last two make up one enormous canvas.

Mrs. Reese wants the whole north wing to house the children's activities, like it did before the fire. So she asked me for a child-friendly mural. Standing there that first day, the images were already taking shape in my mind. Rapunzel's tower would stand in the center, with Hogwarts off in the distance. Peter, from *The Snowy Day*, would need snowbanks to trek through, and Winnie-the-Pooh would want a honey tree.

I've spent the last two weeks planning and prepping the walls. And today after school, I finally got to add the first touches of color to my enormous canvas. I started with the night sky above Big Ben. Once it's dry, I'll be able to add the tiny figures of Peter Pan, Tinkerbell and the Darling siblings flying off towards Never Land.

"You were smart to keep Harry Potter away from Peter Pan and Wendy," Caroline said when she came into the room, her hands full of drinks. "A midair collision would have been unfortunate."

“I thought so.”

I climbed down off the ladder, and Caroline handed me the metal water bottle with “Aly” painted on the side. She kept the mug of espresso for herself.

“Thanks,” I said.

She nodded and then closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of the espresso before she took her first, slow sip.

I just watched this ceremony. “Most people drink espresso from small cups.”

Caroline opened her eyes. “Most people lack dedication.”

I smiled at her.

“Have you decided what to put in the corner?” she asked.

“Not yet.”

“What about the gingerbread house from Hansel and Gretel?”

I raised an eyebrow at her. “The witch tries to eat them.”

“You don’t have to show that part.”

“True.”

If my foster mother, Mrs. Miller, were telling the story, Hansel and Gretel would have been walking happily through the woods and met a kind old woman who fed them candy without any ulterior motives.

“A gingerbread house would be fun to make.”

Caroline’s eyes gleamed. “And you could cover the roof with espresso beans.”

“You have a problem.”

“I have many,” Caroline said. “But I am not addicted. Coffee and I are in a committed relationship.”

“Does Dylan know about this?”

“Dylan is very open-minded.”

“I guess he would have to be, if he’s willing to share you with a caffeinated beverage,” I said seconds before my phone rang.

It was Mrs. Miller calling in a tight voice. Her tone wasn’t that strange. It’s the same voice she uses when something has spilled and she’s trying to keep up her smile.

I hung up the phone and looked at Caroline. “I have to go.”

“What does she want now?”

“I don’t know. She just told me to come back to the house.”

“But we haven’t had time to hide Luke’s car yet.”

I hugged her. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I left the mural room, ducking under a heavy piece of plastic and maneuvering around work crews to reach the back parking lot. I’m not allowed to drive any of the Millers’ cars, and Caroline is grounded from driving for two weeks. Which left our friend Luke as my only way of getting to the hotel with paint supplies. He couldn’t drive me himself – he was helping his dad today. But he loaned me his car. So I drove carefully down off Caroline’s mountain and into town.

Trinity, New Hampshire is a small town, barely the size of a Boston neighborhood. Instead of high-rises, we’re surrounded by mountains and forests and the occasional field of cows. Most of the homes here are old farmhouses with wide porches and steeply pitched roofs. When it snows, Trinity looks like a Christmas card.

I parked Luke’s car outside his house and walked the three blocks to the Millers’. A dark blue sedan with Massachusetts plates was parked out front. The car belongs to Mrs. Peters, my social worker. So when I walked into the living room, I was expecting her. It was the man who surprised me. He had graying hair and wore a wrinkled suit.

“Hello, Alyson,” Mrs. Peters said. “Do you remember Mr. Raleigh, from the District Attorney’s office?”

My body froze. But my thoughts started crashing into each other.

Mr. Raleigh promising me that they were going to put Rick in jail.

Mr. Raleigh asking me questions I didn’t want to answer in front of cameras I didn’t want to see.

Mr. Raleigh telling me that the case had been dropped. *“I’m sorry, Alyson. We don’t have enough evidence to take this to trial.”*

My word hadn’t been enough.

“Have a seat,” Mr. Raleigh said, as if we were standing in his office, instead of my foster parents’ living room.

The Millers were sitting tight mouthed on the love seat. There was an empty chair next to Mr. Raleigh and a place on the couch next to Mrs. Peters. I chose the couch. Mrs. Peters reached over and patted my hand as I sat down.

The Miller girls, Hattie and Gabby, are eight and six, and were nowhere to be seen. They were probably upstairs watching a princess movie. Mrs. Miller is always careful to keep them segregated from the

messy parts of my life. I think she would ban messes of every kind if she could.

“Richard Wallace has been arrested, again,” Mr. Raleigh said.

I shouldn't have been surprised, not with Mr. Raleigh sitting there in the room with me. But it still took me a few seconds to manage a logical question. “For my case?”

“No. But we're going to need you to testify.”

I shook my head. “I don't know anything about another case.”

“We know. But we're trying to establish that Richard Wallace's actions toward this girl were part of a pattern of behavior. Your experiences with him can help.”

He wanted me to testify. And not just in depositions this time. He wanted me to go to court. To be cross-examined.

Mr. Raleigh leaned toward me. “I know that we're asking a lot. But if we add your testimony to that of other witnesses, we won't have to put the victim on the stand.”

He let those words sink in. If I testify, she won't have to.

If the world was fair, I would never have to see Rick ever again. But if the world was fair, this never would have happened to her in the first place.

In the end, Mr. Raleigh didn't have to use the subpoena I saw in his briefcase. I agreed to testify, the way he knew I would. And he gave me a schedule instead. The trial starts on July 5th. My first deposition is a week from Monday.

Across the room, my foster parents had cornered Mrs. Peters.

"We don't have time to take Alyson to Boston for depositions," Mr. Miller said.

"What are we supposed to tell our children?" Mrs. Miller said.

Mrs. Peters' expression was hard as she looked at my foster parents. "When the court gave you permission to take Alyson out of state, one of the conditions was that you would bring her back for all court-required activities. Testifying in a trial certainly meets that criteria." Her eyes moved from one Miller to the other. "As to what to tell your children, I would suggest the truth."

As if that was ever going to happen.

The Millers haven't even told their girls that I have HIV. Mrs. Miller always shoos them out of the room before she watches me take my pills. I don't know how she explains the fact that she won't let me touch anything sharp and makes me wash my hands three times before she lets me help in the kitchen. Maybe they just think I'm clumsy and dirty.

Clumsy I can live with.

Dirty is harder.

Before they left, I asked Mr. Raleigh, "What is the girl's name?"

"I'm sorry, Alyson. I can't tell you the victim's name. We have to protect her privacy."

I understand that. I do. But I also wonder how much our privacy leaves us isolated. This other girl could live next door to me, and I would never know. This isn't something people talk about. But that's what they want from me. They want me to talk about it, to tell the story.

Dear _____,

You don't know me, but I'm going to be testifying in the trial against Rick. He hurt me too, a long time ago.

I wish I could go back in time and save you from this.

But I can't. The only thing I can do for you is try and help Mr. Raleigh send Rick away for a very long time.

Will you be in the courtroom?

Part of me hopes you won't be there. That you won't have to ever be in a room with Rick again. That you won't have to listen to people talk about you as if you're too broken to ever be put back together.

And part of me wants to see you. To put a face to the fact that I'm not the only one. To know your name.

I hate not having a name for you. It makes it seem like you're not real.

So I'm going to call you Olivia, at least for now.

I don't want to do this, Olivia.

But it's not your fault.

None of it is your fault.

-Aly

Wednesday, May 11

Last night I couldn't sleep, because I couldn't stop thinking – about Rick, and the trial, and the girl, and my friends. Luke and Caroline don't know about any of this.

I tried to paint. But after hours of staring at a blank canvas, I gave up, put on running clothes, and left the house while the sky was barely gray.

There was no gradual warm-up to this run. I took off sprinting down the sidewalk. I pushed myself until my legs were asking if I had lost my mind, and my lungs were gasping for air. But it still wasn't enough to distract me. I could still see Rick, still smell his cologne, still hear him whispering in my ear.

The shape came out of nowhere.

One second there was nothing. The next there was a man practically on top of me. I pulled back. Or at least I tried to, but I tripped over my feet and fell, landing hard on the grass.

I was scrambling backwards, my heart trying to explode out of my chest, when a voice said, "Aly?"

I looked up, as he crouched down. Luke.

Luke has grown at least a foot and a half in the nine years that we've been friends. His shoulders are broader, and his face has lost its round edges. But he's still Luke.

I pulled in a ragged breath. "You surprised me."

"You're late, but I surprised you?" he said.

It's Wednesday. We always run on Wednesdays and Saturdays unless one of us is dying. I only felt like I was.

"I'm sorry," I said.

Luke dropped down to sit next to me in the grass. "You didn't do anything."

"Except make you think I'm losing my mind."

Luke smiled. "Well, it isn't the first time."

I love Luke's smile. It's warm and steady and reaches all the way up to his eyes. I love that he has no idea how gorgeous he is when he smiles. I love how much time he spends making other people smile.

My life would be considerably simpler if I loved fewer things about him. Because falling in love with your best friend, who looks at you like you're his sister, is a terrible idea. In my defense, I didn't plan it. It just happened.

“So what’s wrong?” he said.

“I didn’t sleep much last night.”

“Meds or Mrs. Miller’s cooking?”

“Both.” It wasn’t a lie. My drug protocol can cause insomnia and dinner was awful, the way it always is when Mrs. Miller is in a bad mood.

“Someday, they’re going to come up with an HIV med that doesn’t have side effects,” Luke said.

“And Mrs. Miller’s cooking?”

“I don’t think science can fix that one.”

I smiled at him.

Luke stood up and offered me a hand. “Come on. I’ll walk you home.”

I let him pull me up to my feet. But I didn’t want to go home and stand in the shower and think.

“We’re running.”

“Aly, you’re exhausted.”

He was right. But I started running anyway. It took him two driveways to catch up.

We've run together for so long that falling into step is almost second nature. I'm typically faster than he is. But today, he was rested, and I wasn't. I had to work to keep up with him. Which was good. I needed the distraction.

When we made it back to the Millers' house, Luke walked up the porch steps with me, the way he always does. But today, he didn't just tell me goodbye and walk away. He stood there, studying me. Usually, I do a pretty good job of covering my emotions. But this morning, I was exhausted, and he knows my face too well.

"You know you can talk to me about anything," Luke said.

And I nodded, wishing so hard that it was true.

Thursday, May 12

When we first moved to Trinity, Mrs. Miller hadn't planned to tell anyone that I have HIV. But my social worker insisted that she tell my school. Even then, my HIV-positive status was only supposed to be shared with the staff who needed to know. But my third-grade teacher confided in her sister, who told her best friend. Within two days, the whole town knew.

My classmates' parents all said it was fine, that it wouldn't be a problem. But they didn't want their kids sitting next to me in class or playing with me on the playground. Apparently, I looked like the kind of eight-year-old who might bleed spontaneously or start up a brothel in the reading corner.

One whispered secret and I was treated like a leper, while Mrs. Miller was elevated to the status of sainthood.

"You are so good to take her in," the women at church told her.

And Mrs. Miller always said, "We all have to do what we can."

It was one of those church members who suggested that I would benefit from the Children Living with Life Threatening Conditions Support Group at the regional hospital. I didn't want to go. But Mrs. Miller didn't

care. She was now playing the part of the devoted parent of a sick child, and sick children belonged in this group.

It didn't turn out that badly. Because on my first day of Group, I met Luke and Caroline.

Caroline's leukemia went into remission two years ago, and she dropped out of Group. (She likes to say that she flunked dying). But Luke and I are still here, and he drives me out to the hospital every Thursday afternoon after school.

The three of us met in the kids' group. But at age 13, you move up to the Teens Living with Life Threatening Conditions Support Group. The chairs are taller for the teen version and the language is harsher. But otherwise, it's the same. Kids still look like they've been blindsided the first time they come through the door. You don't have to be terminal to end up here, but something has to be working pretty hard to kill you. And you see it in their eyes, that hunted, desperate look.

If they last long enough, the new kids make it through what we call the three stages: crying uncontrollably, breaking things, and finally laughter. I guess that's our version of acceptance, when you can laugh at the thing that's trying to end you.

“Go ahead and take your seats so we can get started,” Dr. Klein said this afternoon.

So I sat down in my usual seat in the circle of blue plastic chairs. Luke sat on my right. The seat on my left has been empty since Caroline stopped coming.

“We have a new group member today,” Dr. Klein said. “So I want to go over the rules. We have two. What’s said in Group, stays in Group. And we tell the truth.”

Really, we only have one – we’re honest with each other. Or at least that’s the ideal.

Dr. Klein looked at the new girl to be sure she understood the guidelines, and then said, “Let’s go around the room. Tell us your name, age and diagnosis. Kyle, why don’t you start us off?”

He frowned. “Kyle, 16, smurfing osteosarcoma.”

The new girl looked confused.

Kyle lost most of his right arm to bone cancer and is still pretty irate about it. When he first came to us, every other word out of his mouth was an F-bomb. Dr. Klein explained that strong emotions were accepted in our group, but not cursing. You have to wait for adult Group for that. She gave

him the word Smurf to use for all of his cursing needs. It's a term he now throws down so often, I wonder if he ever slips up and uses it other places.

As much as Kyle complains, he's usually the first one here and the last to leave. In his own way, I think this group matters to him. None of the rest of us have lost an arm. But we're still the closest thing he has to people who understand.

Natalie was next.

"Natalie, 15, leukemia."

Natalie is our tiny resident romantic. She's always been little, but lately she's gotten so thin that her arms look like matchsticks. She won't be the first kid that we lose to cancer. But repetition doesn't make the process any easier.

The next girl said, "Josie, 16, thyroid cancer," and then started crying. Josie has been with us for three months. She cries a lot. We're not sure if it's because of the cancer or because she goes to Saint Margaret's, an all-girls school that could be the inspiration for every mean girl movie ever made.

Dr. Klein nodded to Ben to keep things moving as Natalie put an arm around Josie's shoulders.

"Ben, 17, cystic fibrosis."

Ben has a deep, almost raspy voice. When he first started coming to Group, we called him Batman. Natalie worried that the nickname would hurt his feelings – until he showed up in a t-shirt that said, *Always be yourself. Unless you can be Batman. Then always be Batman.* After that, Natalie relaxed.

The new girl's voice quivered. "Miranda, 14, neuroblastoma. It's a kind of brain cancer."

She looked like she just got hit by a truck. I think those first few times you say the words really are the hardest. Because saying something out loud makes it real.

Dr. Klein nodded to Luke.

"Luke, 18, inoperable brain aneurysm. I call it Larry."

Luke's is by far the most unusual diagnosis in the room. He has a huge inoperable brain aneurysm, a weak spot in one of the major blood vessels in his head. It's been slowly growing for years, stretching out like a balloon. When it bursts, Luke will die. No slow decline. He'll just be gone. It's a reality I don't like to think about.

The circle of faces all shifted to me, and Dr. Klein nodded. I hate this part. Maybe it would be different if I had cancer or a heart defect or

something. But I don't. I have HIV, a virus that attacks your immune system. It literally targets the body's defenses. Which is kind of brilliant and kind of wrong all at the same time. Machiavelli would have loved it. Personally, I'm not a fan. Eventually HIV progresses into AIDS. You get sick with something your body can't fight off, and you die. Death used to come fast, but now they have medications that help fight the virus. They can't kill it. But they can buy you time. Enough time to end up in a place like this.

But none of that is why I hate saying the words. I hate saying them, because HIV is a sexually transmitted disease. Sex isn't the only way to get it. But it's the most common, and the one people usually think of first. Which means HIV isn't exactly a comfortable thing to talk about.

But Dr. Klein gave me another look that told me to get on with my introduction.

As I spoke, I didn't look at Miranda. Because I knew that if she's like most people, she wouldn't be able to mask her reaction. I don't blame her. I just didn't want to see her face when I said, "Aly, 17, HIV."

I wasn't looking at her, but clearly my friends were because Kyle said, "Aly's not a slut."

Natalie jumped in. "She got HIV from her mom at birth, and then her mother died when Aly was seven."

"Oh," Miranda said. "That's awful."

I hated the way she was looking at me, with both pity and fear. It was a relief when the conversation moved on.

We finished the introductions, and Dr. Klein opened the floor. She usually lets us steer the conversation and then finds a way to tie it all back to what she calls *purposeful living*. The woman is masterful. She has managed to compare living intentionally to everything from baseball to calculus. Today, the conversation settled on prom. It was a cakewalk.

"It's easy to focus on how things aren't perfect," Dr. Klein said. "How the dress might show a procedure scar, or you don't have the energy to dance to all of the songs. But you can also see prom as a chance to embrace the now."

Agreeing with Dr. Klein is typically the easiest way to get her to move on. So lots of people nodded. I don't know if I didn't nod noticeably enough, or if I hadn't said much today, but Dr. Klein zeroed in on me.

"Aly, are you planning to go to prom?"

Everyone in the room was staring at me. "No."

“Why not?” Dr. Klein said.

Because I’m the girl with HIV.

But I couldn’t say that. So I threw out another truth. “I don’t have a date.”

Luke turned to face me. “I’ll take you to prom.”

I felt the flush in my cheeks.

Luke could go to prom with anyone, and the whole school knows it. If he took me, it wouldn’t just be a pity date. It would be a public pity date. And that is a humiliation that I don’t need.

“I don’t want to go, but thanks,” I said.

Dr. Klein looked disappointed in me but didn’t comment.

When we got out to the parking lot, I told Luke, “You should ask Madison.”

“She’s going with Troy.”

That was surprising. “I thought she had better taste.”

“So did I.”

“You could still ask someone else.”

“I know.” He unlocked the car. “And I asked you.”

“But I don’t want to go.”

Luke looked at me over the top of the car. "You're sure?"

"Positive."

And finally, he dropped it.

It's not that I'm against proms on general principle. It's that no one thinks of me as someone to date, and everyone knows it. Deadly, uncurable, sexually transmitted diseases are not romantic.

HIV isn't all bad. You can't give blood. So there's no pressure there.

And dating isn't everything. There are lots of other things to do. And you can still have amazing friends.

When Caroline started chemo, Luke and I decided to shave our heads as a sign of solidarity. Luke's parents helped him. Mrs. Miller almost killed me. But either way, if you could have seen Caroline's face the day we showed up in her hospital room bald – she knew we loved her.

Ironically, Caroline didn't lose her hair to chemo. For a while, she was the only one of the three of us who had hair. Then she decided to shave her head in support of us. So we were all bald together. I wish everyone had friends like that. Because I don't know what I would do without mine.

Friday, May 13

Today, when Luke picked me up for school, he waited until I had my seatbelt buckled and then handed me a piece of blue construction paper. Written on the small rectangle were the words: *Good for One Favor*, in my handwriting. It was from a pack of coupons I gave Luke as a birthday present when he turned ten. I couldn't believe that he had kept it for all these years, and that I hadn't thought to include expiration dates.

There isn't much I wouldn't do for him, just because he asked. Which meant that he wanted something big.

My face apparently matched my thoughts, because he said, "I'm not asking you to help me move a body."

"What are you asking?"

"I want to take you to prom."

I groaned. "Luke, I don't want a pity date."

"Where does pity come into this?" He backed out of the Millers' driveway. "We hang out all the time. All we're talking about is moving it to a new location with a more formal dress code."

"This isn't a fair use of a coupon."

Luke put the car in drive and looked over at me. "Life isn't fair, Your Highness. Anyone who says differently is selling something."

"And modified *Princess Bride* quotes do not apply to this situation."

"*The Princess Bride* always applies. The question is, are you going to honor your promise?"

That was low, and I told him that. But he didn't look the least bit remorseful.

"This'll be fun," he said.

"I'd rather move a body."

Luke grinned at me. "Maybe next time."

When Caroline got into the car, she didn't seem the least bit surprised that Luke had used an eight-year-old piece of construction paper to get me to go to prom with him.

"He's Luke," she said. "And tonight is Friday, the thirteenth."

"You want to watch horror movies," I said.

Caroline's eyes twinkled. "Yes."

I hate horror movies. But I love Caroline. "I'll ask Mrs. Miller."

"We can run tomorrow afternoon," Luke said.

“You don’t want to see us bright and early on a Saturday morning?”

Caroline asked him.

“You don’t do bright and early,” Luke said. “And Aly’s going to be in the same building as the mural. I’ll be lucky to see her before noon.”

“It’s like he knows us,” Caroline said to me.

Mrs. Miller said yes. So tonight, Caroline and I scrounged for dinner and then ended up in her bed eating ice cream while *Hacksaw House IV* played on mute in the background.

“You don’t want to go in there,” Caroline said to the three girls who were approaching the ridiculously creepy house.

“You know they aren’t going to listen.”

“I know. It’s as if they have no sense of self-preservation.”

The girls went into the house and explored, giving us plenty of time to build up our sense of dread before the shadow of a man wielding an ax appeared on the wall.

I pointed at the ax with my ice cream spoon. “You would think the ax would be a clue that it was time to leave.”

“No,” Caroline said. “They haven’t run yet. They have to run and scream and one of them has to sacrifice herself to try and give the others a chance to escape.”

“They could have just not gone into the house in the first place.”

“But then there wouldn’t be any blood or horrible acting.”

“They could have had horrible acting somewhere else.”

Caroline shook her head. “It wouldn’t be the same.”

On the screen, one girl got an ax to the stomach, and I had to look away. “That’s disgusting.”

Caroline looked from me to the girl whose guts were pouring out of her belly. “Then why are we watching this?”

“Because you like it.”

“Aww.” Caroline wrapped her arms around me. “You’re such a good friend. I would let myself get eviscerated for you.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“How about *Hacksaw III*? Everyone dies off-screen.”

“Sure,” I said.

Caroline switched movies, and we started again with three other girls approaching the ridiculously creepy house. The makers of the *Hacksaw*

series apparently don't believe in deviating too far from a theme.

Shockingly, they haven't won any Oscars yet.

Eventually, Caroline fell asleep. But I lay awake staring at the images on the screen.

I don't know why Luke and Caroline became my friends. I just know that I love them, and I don't want to lose them.

But the trial changes everything. They're going to find out about Rick, and what happened in Boston, and that I lied to them. That I've been lying to them since the day we met.

On the screen, a girl ran silently through the house. There was no escape. She couldn't change what was going to happen. All she could do was postpone the inevitable. But she kept running. Because she couldn't bring herself to let go.

Not yet.

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