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Young Adult Fiction Writing in the Classroom: Emily's Investigation and Insights

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Introduction

This project explores the field of young adult literature, while also discovering the creative writing process required to develop a young adult novel. As part of another course, I was required to write 50 pages of a young adult fiction novel. Expanding upon this assignment, I have researched the genre more deeply and documented my discoveries in the form of a diary throughout the writing process. I have chosen this topic to expand my own knowledge of the genre and the writing process involved in order to benefit my future career as a high school English Language Arts teacher. I hope to use some of these tools and techniques in my own classroom someday.

The project is organized into three separate parts. Part One focuses on young adult writers and the literature they create, along with the benefits of using these novels in a high school classroom. To benefit my future career as a future writing teacher, I researched the process required to write a fiction novel, specifically one in the young adult genre. Within this section, sources are cited such as experienced teachers and the scholarship on young adult literature. Part Two includes diary entries I kept as I wrote and developed my own young adult novel. These pages are comprised of my thoughts and discoveries not only as a writer, but as a future educator as well. For example, I found that certain tools I used to develop my own themes and characters could also be used in my future classroom as part of a writing workshop. This section also includes a series of major findings and insights I have learned through the writing process. Part Three contains an excerpt from the Young Adult novel I developed over the course of the Fall 2015 semester.

Overall, the research conducted in this project supports the writing process I discovered through my journal entries and own development of Young Adult literature. This project has the potential to be quite useful for my future career as an English teacher. It also has the power to be useful to other future educators wanting to learn more about the genre of young adult literature and the writing process that accompanies the development of its novels.

Part 1: Research

Nowadays, Young Adult literature is seen everywhere: commercials, movie theaters, bookstores, libraries, classrooms, and even grocery stores. However, this has not always been the case; according to Ashley Strickland, young adult literature is currently in its second “golden age.” It was during the 1960s that Young Adult literature really emerged, with the publication of S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. Not long after this release, the Young Adult Library Services Association coined the term “young adult,” in order to represent readers of this genre between the ages of 12 and 18 (Strickland). However, since then, the readers of Young Adult literature have expanded and now reach into their late 20s. For years, schools have been using Young Adult novels in order to educate middle school and high school students. Recently this trend has greatly increased, correlating with the increased popularity of Young Adult fiction in modern American culture. This paper will focus on the many aspects of Young Adult literature including its background and popularity, the writing process its writers go through, and the benefits it brings to high school classrooms in the 21st century.

In its first golden age, Young Adult literature hit the shelves with novels such as *The Outsiders* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume. These texts were considered ‘young adult’ literature because of their controversial content. Hinton and Blume dared to discuss realistic, young adult issues such as violence, sex, and families (Foster). For the

first time in American culture, teenagers were reading about matters that related to their own lives. According to expert Michael Cart, an author and the former president of the Young Adult Library Services Association, “The focus on culture and serious themes in young adult (hood) paved the way for authors to write with more candor about teen issues in the 1970s” (Strickland). During this time, authors began to focus on the idea of teens feeling misunderstood, along with the reality of high school secrets. Largely seen in *The Chocolate War* by Robert Cormier, issues arise such as peer pressure, psychological fear, and conformity. These issues seemed to emerge as trademark topics and themes in 1970s young adult texts. The next decade brought about a more extreme fiction to the young adult genre: horror. Strickland mentions R.L. Stine’s book series “Fear Street” as a staple of 80s young adult literature (Strickland). However, in the early 1990s, a lull emerged in the genre, as there was a lack of young adult readers because of the low birth rates in the 70s. As a result, few authors were interested in publishing (Strickland). Thankfully, the second golden age of the genre began in 2000 with the recent publication of titles such as *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* by Stephen Chbosky, *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson, and the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling.

Since the beginning of this second golden age, the Young Adult genre has expanded in so many different directions in today’s American culture. Its popularity has grown to an unbelievable level and continues to flourish each year. Almost every teenager in America is familiar with *The Hunger Games*, *Divergent*, *The Maze Runner*, and of course, best-selling author, John Green. However, many question how this genre has become so popular once again. Jennifer Lynn Barnes, a young adult author and cognitive science scholar, theorizes, “Just like adolescence is between childhood and adulthood, paranormal, or other, is between human and supernatural, teens are caught between two worlds, childhood and adulthood, and in YA, they

can navigate those two worlds and sometimes dualities of other worlds” (Pickett). Barnes captures the struggle adolescents encounter as they transition from childhood to adulthood. For many teens, Young Adult novels bring about a sense of community, understanding, and comfort. Connecting with a character or a plotline can make a teen feel understood and even empowered. This is the power of Young Adult texts and how their growing popularity can be explained. Along with this, a rising trend has appeared; more and more film directors are signing contracts with authors to film and produce movies based on Young Adult novels. This trend not only reaches readers of these novels, but movie viewers as well. The question remains though, “Why are we drawn to the same conventions recycled over and over again—the supernatural romances, the kids with cancer, the dystopian future action trilogies—and when will we tire of them?” (Pickett). The answer is simple for many, however; the simplicity and personal connections created in these storylines keep readers AND viewers coming back time after time. The writing style creating the connections pulls readers in and keeps them hooked.

This writing style that pulls readers in has a simple ‘formula’ in a way with specific details that must be included in order for a novel to be classified as Young Adult. Chuck Wendig, a novelist, screenwriter, and game designer, speaks on the features that must be a part of Young Adult literature. First and foremost, novels in this genre must feature a teen protagonist (Wendig). This may seem to go without saying, but this teen protagonist is the character that connects with its readers. It is this character that suffers from the relatable issues teens undergo. It is this character that becomes a source of hope for readers. Along with this, most Young Adult literature is written from the first-person point-of-view in the present tense. Wendig writes, “One could intuit reasons for this: first-person tends to be a faster and more forthright read, teenagers often embrace their own first-person narratives (from handwritten journals to, say, Tumblr), and

teens might be more inwardly-focused than adults” (Wendig). Many adolescents like to make connections to the literature they read, which can also be easier when it feels like someone is telling their own story. This connection helps to build that sense of community that is established through reading Young Adult novels. Another quite common feature is the presence of adults, but in two distinct ways. One features adults as supporting characters who act as mentors such as teachers, coaches, older siblings, and even parents. However, adults in this genre can also act as villains (Wendig). These characters often cause problems in the protagonist’s life and even lead the teen to question their morals and ideals. Lastly, these stories must consist of risky topics such as sex, drinking, drugs, abuse, and relationships. These topics are relatable for teens but they also offer insight on how to respond when one is placed in a similar situation. As much as teens do not want to be preached to when reading, these novels often bring about awareness and offer a deeper understanding of certain topics and situations.

While keeping these specific requirements in mind, Young Adult fiction writers also have to follow the general process in order to write a breakout novel. Sarah Davies, a successful author, agent, and publisher of Young Adult books, defines the breakout novel as, “...the story that gets you a deal, that creates buzz in the marketplace, that enables you to go on writing for a career; the story that is passed from hand to hand” (Aronson). This could not be truer when it comes to writing about Young Adult literature. Oftentimes, these books are “passed from hand to hand” because the writing is so relatable to teen readers. Even students who are not normally readers become interested in these books because of their easy-going writing style and significant message. Davies urges Young Adult fiction writers to start with an inspired idea. This can be done in many different ways. Writers should always keep their ears open to what is happening around them. Seemingly insignificant stories and minor details may be just the thing a

writer needs when trying to draft a unique idea. Joanna Penn, a best-selling author, suggests creating a Twitter account in order to stay up to date with current events and even sayings (Penn). By following pop culture accounts, along with individuals who influence teens in the media, current trends can be seen on a daily basis. This is an easy way to connect with adolescent culture through the same mediums they use constantly. The persistent question in a writer's mind should be, "Who am I writing this for?" The audience must be able to relate and make connections while at the same time constantly be rooting for, or at least intrigued by, the main character.

In most high school settings, the creative writing process used by Young Adult fiction writers can be used in the classroom as well. Because fiction is about creativity, so much can be done with the writing process with middle school and especially high school students. One of the Common Core state standards in the writing strand requires students to, "Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences" (National Governors Association). This standard calls teachers to develop lessons in which students are using their imagination and creativity to structure narratives. Just like Young Adult fiction writers, students are using the same creative writing process. To take this process a step further, teachers can simulate a genuine writing experience by allowing students to publish their creative works. Students can go through the editing process multiple times through self-reviewing and peer reviewing their drafts along with submitting multiple drafts and making changes through the process. Finally, students can be provided with the opportunity to 'publish' their work. Dr. Jill Olthouse, a professor at West Virginia University, encourages this process, as it, "...emphasizes finishing a complete work and producing a quality product..." and reminds students that, "...writing is a social process – an

exchange of ideas between authors and readers, not just a performance for the teachers” (Olthouse). Teachers around the nation use many different tools in order to promote publication. For example, classroom websites, blogs, and applications provide different mediums for students to share their work with the world. Simply printing stories and creating a whole-class collection provides students with a feeling of publishing accomplishment.

Along with the creative writing process, the use of Young Adult literature in the classroom is also greatly beneficial for middle school and high school students. However, many believe that Young Adult literature lacks the content and merit of classic works of literature. On the contrary, many teachers have found that Young Adult literature promotes enriching discussions on literature and life because of the text-to-text, text-to-self, and text-to-world connections many of these novels create. Along with this, these novels address issues in a way students can comprehend, while holding their attention. An article titled, “Young Adult Literature in the English Curriculum Today,” explains that these books can even be used as a stepping-stone to classic works, as they introduce students to literary concepts that may be difficult to comprehend at first. Along with this, the level of writing that usually appears in Young Adult novels tends to help struggling readers when it comes to length and comprehension (Gibbons). Oftentimes, because of the typically shorter lengths and manageable vocabulary, students who read these novels tend to enjoy the storyline and genuinely want to read more. This instills an appreciation for literature in them and creates a positive attitude toward reading. This can help the vibe in a Language Arts classroom in itself. Many students have a preconceived notion that reading is boring and the themes are not relatable to their lives. However, Young Adult literature is the answer to solving this problem. This genre is so relatable for students because, “It is written about characters with whom they can identify based on issues such as age,

conflicts, and world perceptions. It is fast-paced and will hold students' attention in a rapidly-increasing technological society where their world literally flashes before their eyes through television, video games, and computer images" (Gibbons, Dail, and Stallworth). If students are interested in what they are reading, the process of reading will become less of a hassle and more of a pleasure. By starting the year with a Young Adult novel, it can set the tone for the rest of the year's reading curriculum.

There are many fun and valuable activities that can go along with teaching a Young Adult novel. For example, reading workshops can be a great way for students to have a choice in what they are reading, while still staying on track with state standard requirements as far as theme and language. This is a very manageable option with Young Adult fiction. Selecting books with similar themes creates a unified direction for the unit, while still giving students options when it comes to what exactly they are reading. Giving students options will increase their engagement in the class alone. In order to take the analysis of a novel a step further, incorporating the film adaptation of a story is greatly beneficial in the classroom. Oftentimes, there are stark differences between the novel and its film version. Main events, characters, and ideas are sometimes left out or not translated entirely correctly when it comes to the big screen. Students could provide examples from the film to demonstrate their comprehension of the novel and awareness of the differences. This also aligns with one of the Common Core state standards in the literature strand that encourages students to, "Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text" (National Governors Association). This can lead to rich class discussions along with an opportunity to formatively assess students' comprehension as they recognize similarities and differences between the two versions.

Young Adult literature is clearly a growing genre in the 21st century for many, well-qualified reasons. Its appeal to adolescents and adults into their twenties stems from the relatable characters and plotlines the authors create, and continue to create, novel after novel. There is no doubt the genre's second golden age has exploded into American society on an unbelievable level. Not only are people hyped about the novels themselves, but also the film adaptations that accompany the stories. This excitement translates nicely into the middle school and high school classrooms, as pop culture has started incorporating many of these characters and plot lines into the media. Along with the themes and ideas within the novels themselves, the writing process the authors followed to produce their stories can also be explored and utilized in the classroom.

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Part 2: Diary**October 1, 2015:**

Today, I started brainstorming for my young adult novel, *Testing Waters*. Parts of this beginning stage were particularly easy while others were more of a struggle. Coming up with the story line was not easy for me. I spent many hours bouncing ideas off my family and friends until I came up with an idea I really connected with. I have decided to use flashbacks in my story. I think incorporating these into my novel will be a unique aspect that can bring the story full circle in the end.

Coming up with characters and names was the fun part for me. I actually created my main character, Theo Waters, before I knew the storyline. This may even be why creating the general plot was a struggle because I was trying to fit my main character, which was already so developed at this point, into a story. In my mind, this was a reversed process. I think it would be easier to create a plot and then develop characters that mesh well into the storyline. However, it all seems to be working out. I love my main character and I think his role in the story is very fitting for his personality.

October 3, 2015:

Reflecting on how I started my process of writing, I believe many students may start their writing process in a very similar way. Because of this, I would try, as a teacher, to encourage students to brainstorm in any way they would like. I believe this reassurance would be an important part in a creative writing class. Because of the nature of creative writing, there can be no right or wrong answers. Students should feel free to develop their characters and plot in any way that appeals to them personally. This will be a goal of mine – to make sure students are

comfortable and confident in the writing process. Some may struggle with letting go and giving this unstructured process a chance. However, it is a part of creative writing and students must know that mistakes are allowed. The point of a creative writing class should be to foster creativity and form students into better writers.

October 10, 2015:

Yesterday, I finished a detailed outline for Chapter one of my novel. I can guarantee this process will be the most beneficial piece of work I do when writing this novel, just like in a formal paper. Outlines guide your work and allow you to see where you are headed. This created a sense of comfort for me. Once the outline was completed, I felt like a huge weight was lifted off my shoulders. The panic and anxiety of coming up with a plot, for the time being, was laid out before me and I knew what was next: writing.

October 11, 2015:

I must get started with actually writing Chapter one. I know where I am headed because of the outline, but I cannot motivate myself to write the first sentence. I think I am doubting my abilities to write an excerpt this long. I am intimidated by the idea of coming up with something that is completely my own. It puts me in a very vulnerable state. I must remember that everyone puts himself or herself out there when they start writing. Especially when it comes to creative writing, I think the initial start-up may be scary. However, my goal is to finish Chapter one by Tuesday, which is two days away. I know where the plot is heading, I just need to get it all on paper.

October 11, 2015:

Reflecting on my entry this morning, I have realized that many students may feel this way too when they start a creative writing piece. It takes a lot of courage to write something that is so open-ended and creative. I believe that in a creative writing class, it would be important to start with small tasks, such a sentence or paragraph length stories, to introduce students to each other and the feeling of vulnerability. This can create a sense of community in a classroom and build up their courage for riskier projects to come throughout the semester.

October 13, 2015:

I have met my personal deadline! It is now Tuesday night and I have completed Chapter one of my novel. It was actually fun to see where my writing went once I started. Of course, I knew generally where the plot was going, but conversations and details were still unknown when I initially started writing. It was so fun to create conversations by thinking about what would hypothetically be said in these situations. I read the dialogue out loud with my brother, taking turns with different characters, to see how it sounded when spoken. This helped me to see if words appeared too proper for a casual conversation.

However, although adding details about atmosphere and setting was fun, it was quite a challenge for me. I know how I pictured these scenes in my head, but describing them in detail in order to portray these visions to my readers was difficult. I believe that if I were to teach setting writing in a high school classroom, I would make sure to prepare students for a bigger assignment with smaller learning tasks that involve descriptive writing. For example, looking at pictures of landscapes and scenes in a setting, students could practice their descriptive writing by using detailed sentences that portray the images.

October 18, 2015:

I am sitting down to start Chapter 2 of my excerpt and the plot line is holding me back. I'm not sure exactly where I want to head with this, so I have decided to take my time set aside today to work on an outline for the entire novel. I need to know where the plot is heading so I have a sense of direction. Once I get this done, I can focus on the details of the characters, dialogue, description and setting in each chapter. This attention to detail is what makes a great novel, in my opinion. Having the plot outlined will allow me to focus my attention on what is most important – after having a great plot.

October 24, 2015:

So, my next struggle has arisen: emotions. I obviously know how my characters feel and what they are going through, but I am having a hard time relaying this through my dialogue. My readers may not get a clear idea of these emotions and therefore, will not feel a strong connection to my characters. I need my readers to empathize with my characters, especially Theo, which is my main character. It is helpful that the story is written with a limited omniscient point of view, so the reader gets to know the inner thoughts of Theo. This reveals to the reader some of the important thoughts and feelings of this character. Having a discussion about point of view with students in a creative writing class or even just during a creative writing unit would be crucial in the writing process. It may also help to have students look at examples of different stories with varying points of view in order to see which appeals the most to them as the author and matches the style and plot of their novel or story.

October 31, 2015:

As I continue writing, I am beginning to discover the benefits of peer editing and reviewing for feedback. There have been multiple times in my writing process that I have asked friends for their opinions on my plot and even a section of my writing. I know that in my class, we will be working on peer reviews later in the semester. However, I need some feedback as I go for reassurance on my ideas. I think this will be beneficial for high school students as well. As mentioned before, it takes great courage to write something that exposes one as a writer. I believe that having feedback from those around you will build this courage up and provide encouragement, especially in a classroom setting.

November 11, 2015:

I have discovered another beneficial tool to use in the classroom. Yesterday, I started to look up examples of creative writing dialogues between adolescent characters. Seeing these examples gave me somewhat of a formula to follow along with examples of words other than 'said.' Oftentimes, just seeing an example may spark ideas in one's mind. This may really help students, especially when they are unsure where to begin or if what they are doing is correct.

November 17, 2015:

Today, I read a classmate's first chapter as part of the peer reviewing process. WOW. This plotline is so different than my own. It is set in a utopian society and features a set of twins that are polar opposites. I love the plot because it is so different. Seeing the ideas that are out there is inspirational. I would love to see what high school students could come up with when given an assignment with such freedom and creativity involved.

November 18, 2015:

Today, I discovered an article that gave some great pointers for writing a Young Adult novel. It suggested getting input from real teenagers. Not only does this author suggest having teens read pieces of your novel, he also suggests spending time observing teens and how they speak and interact with one another. I found this quote and am currently using it as inspiration for my own writing: “I think if you’re a writer, you do your research and do your due diligence. It sounds funny to listen to teenagers as research.”

November 29, 2015:

So far, my actual writing has been going fairly well. I have been consistently writing about a chapter a week and have stuck to my personal schedule I set in the beginning of the semester in order to complete my excerpt in plenty of time. However, I wrote three chapters this week. I just couldn’t stop. The ideas were flowing freely and my outline of the plot was being expanded so easily. I wish all of my chapters came this effortlessly. I believe this happened at this point in my novel because the plot was really becoming intense for the reader. Theo is at a moment of desperation when his parents are forcing him to come home, which makes him feel that he is abandoning his best friend. The high level of emotions in this section was easy to create and convey. The dialogue and inner thoughts in Theo’s mind are detailed and exactly the way I pictured in my own mind. I am happy with this excerpt and I am hoping the last chapter goes just as well.

December 2, 2015:

Today, I am finished my LAST chapter of this excerpt. It is such a sign of relief knowing that my novel is ‘complete’ for this semester. I decided to skip forward in the book somewhat to provide my reader with the ending details of my novel. I wanted people to gain a sense of closure from my story. As a requirement for my class, peers are required to read my excerpt, as I will theirs, over the next two weeks. I didn’t want to leave anyone hanging. I am happy with my ending. I think it ends on a positive note, which I personally enjoy when reading. I know that all young adults may not be looking for a happy ending when they pick up a novel, but mine consists of such heartache and turmoil throughout the story that I felt it fitting to end positively.

One aspect of this class that I really admire is the requirement to provide the professor with a projected completion plan that we create to finish our novel. I believe this is important for any assignment that is left ‘incomplete.’ Although we met the requirement of the class, a 50-page excerpt of a young adult fiction novel of our own, the entire story is not finished. Understandably, this requirement was fitting for a 15-week semester. However, I appreciate the fact that our professor wanted to see a completion plan for the novel. These 50-pages would simply be a waste if they are not completed into a full-length novel. I hope to stick to this plan and complete my novel, eventually.

December 6, 2015:

Editing – my favorite process. I hope my sarcasm is sensed here... Anyway, the editing process, which is twofold, is excruciating. My personal editing process is going well; I have spent hours reading each chapter multiple times, making grammar corrections and rewording sentences and phrases that were originally awkward. However, the peer editing process is

another story. Obviously, authors need feedback and I appreciate this, to an extent. Some feedback was just rude while other feedback was useless. On the other hand, I had two peer reviews, which were very useful. Some suggestions included deepening the dialogue between characters. Some of my conversations appeared somewhat superficial, which I completely agreed with. I made these changes and hope they are evident to my readers. Another suggestion urged me to SHOW situations more than simply TELLING them. It is more exciting for a reader to make connections through presented information, rather than the author coming out and making the connections for them. This is something I am working to improve currently.

December 14, 2015:

Today, I turned my final draft in – finally. I believe the projected completion schedule is realistic for me. I would like to stick to this and try to complete my novel. I do not want my hard work put forth in this excerpt to go to waste. There is a great feeling of accomplishment as I complete this last diary entry. I doubted myself at the start of this process, but am proud of the courage and strength I exhibited throughout this entire project.

Part 3: Young Adult Novel (excerpt)*Testing Waters*

By: Emily Westfall

Chapter 1

As I stare out the tall windows across the tiny room, I notice it's been four days. Four days since I've talked to my best friend Jackson. The sun shines in brightly, almost blinding me, and brings me back to reality. I look down at Jackson, his still body laying in the hospital bed that seems just a bit too small for him. I wish he would open his eyes and laugh his crazy laugh. I wish we could go back to Hartford. What I would even give to be back at school, sitting in geometry with Jack. But four days ago, everything changed and now he's in a coma.

I want to scream or cry or something, but I need to stay strong. I guess I should start from the beginning so you know how this all started. First of all, I'm Theodore Waters but everyone just calls me Theo. I have known Jackson Pemberly since we were both six and he moved in three doors down. For as long as I can remember, it's always been Jackson and me. Everyone around Hartford, that's our town by the way, pretty much thinks of us as a package deal. And we like it that way. Well, when we were little, we loved going on adventures together. When we were 12, we mapped out a cross-country road trip that we promised we would take together. Sometimes, Jack's mom would send us on scavenger hunts all around the town square and when we got a little older, these adventures turned into double dates and Friday night football games.

But June started the summer of change. One of our good friends, Rick Swenson, killed himself. He's been playing football with us since we started in second grade. He was one of the nicest kids you would ever meet and everyone loved him. But last year, Rick came out and told everyone he was gay. Which was a real shocker, because he used to be a womanizer just two

years ago. After that day though, when he posted a picture expressing who he really is, people from school started ignoring Rick. Not just this, people started making fun of him. Worst of all, some kids even said they wished he would die. Of course, we have all heard of cyber bullying and how it can lead to life-threatening issues, but this summer, Hartford saw the effects of it firsthand. Not only where kids bullying him at school and around town, they were posting comments all over social media and some even created websites, attacking Rick and his ‘lifestyle.’ Now, I don’t mean to dwell on this situation, but it impacted Hartford in a way I have never seen before. Our small, kind, innocent, family-centered hometown is in shambles. All because of how hurtful spoken words, and now words on a screen, can be.

So, a month later, I had to get out of town. I needed to leave this blame-filled, dark, haunted place. It was then that I remembered the road trip Jackson and I planned when we were little. After much editing, we decided it was time to take this trip. Following many, “Come on mom, I’m going to be a SENIOR in a few months!” and “Theo’s parents said he can go, you have to let me,” our parents gave in. But Hartford, Texas is almost smack-dab in the middle of the country, so we decided to just head East for the beach. Maybe we will see the West side of the country next summer... if Jackson ever wakes up.

* * *

Nine days ago, Jackson and I packed up his red Chevy pickup and we started out early in the morning. Heading East, we planned on stopping in each state to do a little exploring, find some good eats, and stay a few nights along the way before getting to the beach. In Louisiana, we stopped at a bar that made tons of different kinds of hushpuppies. I’m talking crab, Mexican, sweet potato, onion, cheese, and even apple cider hushpuppies. Well, while we were eating our samplers, we met this really cool kid, Lewis, from Rapides, Louisiana.

“I see you guys play football,” Lewis said to us.

Jackson and I looked at each other thinking, ‘who is this kid and how does he know that?’

Like he was reading our minds, he said, “You’re both wearing hats that say ‘Hartford Football’ so I just kinda guessed.”

Laughing and finally catching on, we said, “Yeah, you play too?”

“Of course,” he said, “My teammates and I are actually looking for a few more guys to play in our pick up game tonight if you guys are interested. We are going to be playing at the high school, which is about 10 minutes from here. Wait, where are you guys from anyway? I’ve never heard of Hartford.”

“It’s in Texas,” I said. “We are on a road trip to North Carolina for a few days, we just had to get out of town for awhile.”

Jackson spoke up, “But we’d love to play with you guys tonight. We’re always up for some football. We could use some time throwing the ball around anyway.”

“What time are you thinking?” I asked him. “I’m Theo by the way, and this is my friend Jackson.”

“I’m Lewis, it’s real nice to meet you guys. I knew by your hats we would get along. But I gotta run, I’m going to be late for my shift at the farmer’s market down the road. Oh, and we will probably start playing around 7. Meet at Rapides High School, it’s on the other side of town. See ya guys later!” And he was off.

“Whoa, he was really nice. Like way nicer than anyone from home. He didn’t even ask for our numbers or anything. He just trusts we will be there,” said Jackson.

Later that day, we did meet Lewis and his teammates for a pick up game of football and ended up hanging out with them the rest of the night. What a difference from back home. Not

one of them posted a status or tweeted about the game. They just hung out and really talked with each other. It was actually kind of nice for a change. I'm glad we met them. And I'm glad I remembered to get Lewis' number before we left.

That night, I said, "Lewis seems really cool. I wonder what he would think of Hartford..."

But now, I really wonder what Lewis would think of our situation. I bet he'd be here at the hospital if he knew about Jackson. And he only hung out with us for a day.

* * *

The next morning, we stopped for a swim in the Mississippi River, just to say we did, even though it was really gross. Plus, we needed to get a picture of us in the River to share so the rest of Hartford could see us. All the guys on the team were jealous of our trip out of town. Anyway, then headed to Georgia for the best peach pie I've ever had. The whole time, I kept thinking about how different Rapides seemed compared to Hartford. No phones. Hmmm... kinda weird. Hey, maybe our town would be better off that way. Maybe Rick would still be here. But we can't just get rid of social media. Jackson and I have to stay connected to everyone back home even if we are a few states away. Everyone loves seeing what the two of us do. We are the dynamic duo, remember?

Anyway, after waking up the following morning in a motel near the Boone Hill Plantation we visited the day before in South Carolina, we packed up and came across this little diner called Mama Pearl's. After having breakfast, we headed north on U.S. Route 17 for North Carolina.

"I can't wait to get to the beach man, throw the football around, maybe even meet a few girls," said Jackson.

"Hey, what about Ellie?" I said.

Ellie is a super smart girl in our grade who Jack has had a crush on all summer. Ever since junior year ended, it's all he can talk about and the week before we left, they just started hanging out. Although she is a really nice girl, I don't know if I see Jack with someone like Ellie. She's different compared to most of the girls Jackson is usually interested in. He tends to go for girls who are a mirror image of him. Being the captain of our football team, the Hartford Tigers, Jackson usually dates a cheerleader. But, Ellie is different. She is smart and cute. But not like fake, lots of makeup, phony personality, blonde, cheerleader cute. She's innocent and really pretty. She hangs out with the girls from all of her classes, which are all honors and AP. Clearly, we don't have class with Ellie and her friends. But I had study hall with her once and noticed her helping some underclassman with their math homework. None of Jackson's old girlfriends would ever do that. Although she doesn't seem like Jack's type, I kind of want him to date her. I think Ellie would be good for him. Ellie is different in a good way.

"Well, she's back home. And it's not even official yet," said Jackson.

Those are the last words I remember hearing Jack say before the accident.

Chapter 2

Although things got a little jumbled for me, I do remember what happened for the most part. We were driving in the far left lane on U.S. 17 when a bright blue semi-truck, next to us, started merging over into our lane without seeing us. Later on, I learned it was a Sherwin-Williams semi. I'm pretty sure the guy walked away unharmed. Anyway, this literally pushed us into the median and our truck flipped over the divider.

I remember feeling like everything was in slow motion. Time almost stood still. I felt weightless, like I was floating up into the clouds or something crazy like that. I mean, we were

flying in the air, no joke. But really, in that moment, my mind did have a second to register what was happening and I thought, for sure, that this was the end. I was preparing to see the light. I remember thinking, *I feel like one of those people you see in the videos they show at driving school, meant to scare the shit out of you. Well, maybe they aren't even real life situations involving real people. Maybe they are just actors. But not me, I'm one of the real life examples. Maybe someone caught this on video and I'll be shown in a driving school class someday.* I swear, I remember thinking these things while Jack's truck was flipping over the median.

Then we landed. Hard. The truck was lying on its left side. Smoke was everywhere and the smell of gunpowder from the airbags surrounded us. Or maybe it's more like rotten eggs. But I remember coughing, really hard, and I couldn't catch my breath but finally, I whispered, "Jack...?"

Silence.

Correction. I heard sirens in the distance, it seemed, almost as soon as we landed and some guy was screaming outside of our truck.

"HELP! HELP!! QUICK! OVER HERE!" was all I could make out.

I was afraid to move, but I didn't hear anything from Jack so I leaned over to shake his arm. Nothing. Surprisingly, I didn't feel any major pain. My head was spinning and I could already feel a headache coming on and my arm felt really weird, but I could move. Once I was able to get a good look at Jackson, I knew something was wrong. Blood was streaming down near his right temple and he was unconscious. I could see a pool of red forming on the broken and shattered glass as the blood ran down his face and neck. I was helpless but I knew we needed help. And quick. Before I could really process what just happened, an ambulance and a fire truck arrived, followed by a few cop cars and another ambulance.

As soon as they came over to the truck, I started screaming hysterically, “Jack needs help! He needs help first! I’m fine, help Jack! I don’t know what’s wrong with him!”

“Hi, I’m Lewis and I’m here to help you. What’s your name?” one of the rescue guys said.

“Theo. My name is Theo but you need to help my friend Jack right now. Something is wrong and HE’S NOT MOVING!!!” I start to scream at Lewis. In my defense, my ears were ringing and everything seemed so clouded and distant.

“Theo, you need to stay calm for me. We are going to get you both out of here right now. I promise,” Lewis reassured me.

Unfortunately, because of the way the truck landed and Jack’s unconscious state, they had to pull me out first. They didn’t want to make any rapid movements by shifting the truck because he clearly had a head injury.

After what seemed like forever, they pulled me out and put me on a stretcher. Apparently, my head was bleeding too and my arm was broken. I still swear I didn’t feel anything at that point. But the whole time, I kept screaming, “Jack!” All I knew was that my lifelong, best friend was in serious trouble. And there was nothing I could do.

I’m not sure how they got him out of the truck because they put me in the ambulance to check my vital signs. Before they closed the door, I saw Jack on the stretcher but he still wasn’t awake or moving.

For the first time, in a long time, I prayed to God. I remember repeating, “Please, God, watch over Jack and bring him back to me.” I said this over and over until we arrived at the hospital.

I don't remember much once we got to the hospital because they had to give me a sedative to calm me down. Once they stitched up my head and set my arm, I started asking questions.

"Where is Jackson?"

"When can I see him?"

"Have you called our parents?"

Finally, I received word that both Jackson's parents and mine were on their way. I found out we were at Mayville Hospital just across the border in North Carolina. Here, everyone is really helpful and nice. They are putting up with my mood quite well. But, because I'm not technically family, the nurses wouldn't give me any information on Jackson until they found out I was the only person here for him.

"Theo, your friend's in a coma..." That's all I heard. After that, everything came crashing down on me and reality hit me in the face.

Chapter 3

The next thing I knew, my parents were running into my room. My mom was frantic and my dad looked sick.

"Thank God you are alright. They didn't even tell us what was wrong with you boys. They just called and said you two were brought here after an accident and that we should come right away," said my mom. Hugging me, or should I say suffocating me, my mom was overcome with relief.

Then, I asked, "What's going on with Jack?" In return, I got blank stares. They had no idea. "Mom! He is in a coma. You need to go find him for me. Are his parents here?"

At that, my mom ran out of the room to find Jack's parents, John and Wendy. Dad just stood there, looking like he didn't know what to do. If someone didn't know what really happened, they would think he was the one who just got in an accident, not me. I've never seen him look like that.

After what seemed like an eternity, my mom came back and told me the doctors still don't know if Jack is going to make it. He hadn't shown any signs of improvement...

"A mother should never have to see her child like this," my mom said quietly, shaking her head.

By then, it was nighttime. Our parents drove more than 14 hours to get to the hospital because storms were delaying flights out of Texas. Although we had left home to get away from Hartford for a while, I was so relieved my parents were with me. I couldn't have made it through the past few days without them.

The next morning, I was allowed to go see Jack.

When I walked in, I just completely broke down again. Seeing him lying there, lifeless and hooked up to so many tubes and machines, took me back to the accident and how in one moment, our lives were turned upside down. Immediately, I ran over to Jack.

"Come on, Jack, you have to wake up. You just have to, I don't remember life without you and now, more than ever, I need you."

For the next three days, I sat by Jackson's side; Giving his hand a tight squeeze here and there, praying for a miracle, and asking the doctors a million questions. The worst part of it all was the response I got.

Nothing.

The doctors just kept saying, “All we can do is wait... Jackson needs time to heal... We won’t know how extensive his injuries are until he wakes up.”

But one doctor in particular, Dr. Williams, gave me hope. “Pray. And hold onto the memories you have of your years together. This hope could be the thing that brings Jack back.”

Yet, I felt like time stood still. The minutes passed into hours, which passed into days. Day turned into night but I didn’t notice any of it. Nothing seemed real until *now*. Jack is coughing because of the tube in his throat.

“HELP, HELP!” I scream, “He’s up! Someone, hurry, hurry!”

Almost instantly, nurses start to swarm around him and Dr. Williams runs in. After they take him off the respirator, the nurses leave the room and it is just Dr. Williams and me. We are waiting for his eyes to open, he still seems groggy and out of it.

Before anything else happens, Dr. Williams pats me on the back and says, “See Theo, hope works. You need to stay hopeful, no matter what happens next.”

A moment later, Jackson’s eyes start fluttering and they finally open up. He starts looking around, like he has no idea what is going on, and then he starts to panic.

“Where am I? What’s going on?” he starts screaming.

Then he looks right at me, straight into my eyes, and says, “Who are you?”

At this moment, I know something is wrong. Jack doesn’t know who I am. He doesn’t even recognize me. “I’M YOUR BEST FRIEND!” I want to scream, but I don’t. I just sink back into the corner and stare at Jack, unaware that his parents are standing in the doorway. They have just witnessed Jack ask who I am. I can tell by the look on his mom’s face that she knows Jackson is in trouble. She slowly walks in and tries to take his hand, but he pulls it away and says, “Get away from me!”

This causes a reaction in Jack's mom that I've never witnessed before. She literally crumpled to the floor and started crying, hysterically. Jackson's dad ran over to pick her up and they sat down on the couch together. It must've been almost 10 minutes before she calmed down to allow Dr. Williams to speak.

Finally, he said, "Although this isn't the outcome we were hoping for, there *is* still hope. Many times, when patients wake up from a coma, they cannot remember anything for a while. This may last only a few hours but it could take up to a few months. I don't want to give you false hope, because sometimes, patients never come back. But I can tell you, truthfully, that many patients do come back to us. It may just take some time. Now, I know this is hard to hear, and extremely difficult to process, but we will do everything in our power to make this process as easy as possible for you all. Now that Jackson is up though, we are able to run some tests to determine how severe his injuries are." Looking at Jack's parents, he said, "Is it alright if we take him up for a thorough assessment now?"

I don't even know what Jack's parents said to Dr. Williams. I slowly start to walk out of the room, feeling numb and afraid to look back at Jackson. Down the hall and around the corner, I lean back against the wall and slide down until I hit the ground. Again, reality hits me in the face as I think, "Jackson may never come back... Jackson may *never* come back."

But in that instant, I remember Dr. Williams and his advice on hope. He was right before, the hope and positivity we surrounded Jack with the past four days led him to wake up. I need to keep hope.

"Jackson is going to come back. I am going to bring him back. I am going to make him remember."