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Word Count: 5500

Echoes

Hilary had been spending a great deal of time in the bathroom stall over the past few months. She'd become intimately familiar with the spot just to the right of her feet where the square floor tiles were a slightly darker shade of gray than the others, with the broken toilet paper dispenser that would never surrender an inch of paper unless it was tugged at just the right angle, and with the various scratches on the cold and flimsy walls where the dark pink paint was worn away. So, she almost immediately noticed the new piece of graffiti.

I'm alone. That's what it read, scrawled across the left wall in black ink. Hilary caught it out the corner of her eye as she began eating the peanut butter and jelly sandwich that her mom had packed for her. Whoever wrote it would have had to twist her body awkwardly to the left in the toilet seat, knees pressed against the wall's oddly bumpy, uneven surface. It was written in a neat and economical hand, taking up no more than a few inches of space, with few of the limber flourishes that one would expect in the penmanship of a teenage girl. It was precise and unambiguous in its meaning, like a needle. No melodramatic song lyrics or vague melancholic statements that ended in a stupid ellipsis – Hilary saw one the other day on the back of a seat on her school bus seat that read *If im the only one that cares, than whats the point...* - just three chilly, deliberate syllables. It was, without a doubt, the most purposeful piece of graffiti that Hilary had ever seen.

Footsteps echoed on the tiles near the entrance to the bathroom, and Hilary started for a moment before snatching up her brown bag from the floor, cringing as the rough paper made a few crisp rustles; tucked away in the far corner of the 2nd floor corridor next to the band room, she wasn't used to getting many visitors during lunch hours. Most students who left the cafeteria when they were finished eating either went to the computer lab to waste some time on Myspace or to some discreet corner outside to smoke (the bathrooms had detectors installed). While the bathrooms on the first floor might be frequented by girls who spent ridiculous amounts of time in front of the mirrors applying and reapplying makeup and making sure their hair looked perfect and then messing it up a little because it looked too perfect, all while chatting away about penis sizes and who hooked up with who in shrill banshee voices, this one was usually empty. It felt secret and disguised, tucked away in the shadows, and the fact that a thousand little lives were making their way through the halls below her feet, completely oblivious to Hilary's location, completely unaware of her existence, gave her a perverse sort of comfort.

The door of the stall next to her clicked open, and Hilary looked down to watch a pair of black and white Converse sneakers enter. Hilary herself was wearing a pair of worn, pink and white Nike sneakers that had begun to cramp her toes. She quietly swallowed the bite of the sandwich she held in her mouth, feeling peanut butter stick stubbornly to the back of her throat, and waited. Listening to the peal of urine against water, the clutter of a toilet paper roll rotating on its spindle, the rush of water pouring from a faucet. Seeing the girl through the small crack in the door's frame, a girl from Hilary's history class who had short and glossy dark hair that fell across one of her heavily shadowed eyes, a shapely frame despite her petite size, a girl named Lida or

something unique like that. As the girl washed her face in the sink, her eye met Hilary's through the crack. Hilary immediately looked down – could she have possibly been caught staring? The faucet turned off, then the echo of steps once again, and eventually the hum of silence.

Hilary set her lunch bag in her lap and took a pen from the pocket of her loose fitting blue jeans. She shifted on the toilet seat, leaning her face close to the wall and squinting, putting her pen to a spot below the new piece of graffiti and writing slowly, with the concentration of an artist. When finished her message read, in a hand that elongated and compacted erratically, *No you're not. I'm here too.*

The hands worked their way through Hilary's light brown, limp hair, separating it into three strands, sharp fingernails occasionally stabbing and scratching at her scalp. She was sitting in her living room on the plush settee embroidered with the soft pastel floral patterns, tugging at the thread fringes of a throw pillow. The television endlessly babbled to itself in the tone of melodrama, alternating valleys and peaks of plastic emotion. Hilary's mom watched her soap operas religiously.

"I don't know why you don't take better care of it. It really would look gorgeous if you just made some effort." A sharp tug as Hilary's mom began weaving the plait, stretching the skin of Hilary's forehead, making her cringe.

"I don't know what the big deal is. It's just hair."

Her mom's knee jutted into the small of Hilary's back as she scooted closer to her daughter. "Come on, don't you want to impress the guys?"

Hilary's eyes wandered over to the far wall, resting on a picture of her mom and dad at their wedding. Her mom's lithe figure, encased in vibrant white lace, was tucked in the crook of her dad's large arm. Her veil pulled back over her smooth chestnut hair, her face smiling a dimpled smile so wide that it seemed that it must have hurt. Hilary wondered how genuine photographs really were.

"Don't you, Hil?" her mom said. As some sort of evasive response formed in Hilary's throat, her mom interrupted her. "Uck. That's so disgusting."

Hilary heard some muffled moans and wet sucking sounds emanating from the television, underscored by a self-consciously sentimental piano melody. Looking up she saw two women in a dimly lit corner of an ornate room. They were in each other's arms, mouths closed over one another's, hands anxiously exploring each other's bodies. The strap of a cream dress slipped over a shoulder, exposing soft freckled flesh. Hilary felt something within her stir, trying to find a means of escape. Her fingers tugged harder at the pillow's fringes. She lowered her eyes to the floor and felt her face go hot, her mother's fingers still moving through her hair, tugging sharply.

During lunch the next day, her brown bag tucked under the fold of her jacket for fear that she'd encounter one of her classmates in her journey down the hall and pique their suspicion, Hilary retreated to her sanctuary. Pushing open the heavy wood door (a plastic square displaying a round-headed white figure wearing a triangular dress nailed to its center), she walked along the hard tiles towards the stall.

She, by chance, glanced into the dirty, rectangular mirror above the pink-hued sinks. Then she found herself walking towards it hesitantly. Her light brown hair

streamed down both sides of her face, unstyled, nearly absent of the healthy gleam that was so common in most of the other fourteen year old girls in her class. Her skin was pale and perpetually shiny, a solitary pimple poking its head out from the skin below her lip. And her slim figure, despite the endless stream of form-fitting clothes that her mom brought home for her, was hidden beneath the folds of a loose sweat shirt and jeans.

Times like this, staring at the uncertain eyes of her reflection, she could almost understand her mom's barely concealed frustration: she could, just maybe, be attractive if she put forth the effort. The architecture of her face, though the conceit of the thought made her frown, had a sharp, angular elegance to it. It silently irritated her, really, that a girl was expected to put forth some sort of effort in order to be considered beautiful, but she also counted it as a blessing. Her lack of interest in her appearance at least deflected the attention of most boys, with their idiot stares, a moist film of fresh lust covering their eyes. A year ago, when the curves of her body started being defined by some invisible and intruding hand, when she first started to become aware of all those stares directed at her, she felt nothing but a squirming irritation.

She hated that time of her life. It was when The Feeling began. The Feeling was like the first few seconds of waking up in a hotel room on a family vacation, or when her dad had decided to take her and her mom along on one of his business trips, those first few seconds when she expected to find herself protected by the warm star-patterned covers of her own bed only to find herself somewhere alien. The puzzlement and near-panic flooded her before a simple and anti-climactic "Oh yeah, duh" pulled her back to reality, soaking her in relief. Except it had been about two years now, and the "Oh yeah, duh" still hadn't arrived. She still wasn't entirely sure where she was. She'd become

extremely uncomfortable around other girls her age, The Feeling telling her that she was different, that she wouldn't be accepted, that everyone noticed her sitting silently at the edge of the lunch table by herself, that each of her cracks and flaws were perfectly visible to everyone. And, try as she might, spending long hours in bed staring at her ceiling, she just couldn't understand it.

Hilary recalled the last hug she and her best friend shared before the big move to the west coast, back when Hilary actually *had* friends. Standing there at the airport gate, the sting of tears in her eyes, the warmth of the embrace, her heightened awareness of their chests pressing together, the playful smell of Sara's thick auburn hair, the newfound awkwardness that pulsed below the surface, the reluctance to let go.

Hilary suddenly felt dirty. She'd recently been encountering these spells of sudden dirtiness more frequently, and feared it might be the onset of OCD or something weird like that, which would be a nice and exotic problem to add to her collection. She twisted the right tap of the sink, it letting out an abrasive squeak, and let the cool water run over her hands before splashing a bit on her face. She took a last look at herself, her tired eyes, then turned around and walked into the bathroom stall, turning the lock with a soft click. Letting out a deep breath, taking comfort in the dullness of the fading pink walls.

She began unpacking her lunch when a spark of memory flicked in her mind, and she quickly turned to her left. A smiley face greeted her, drawn with heartbreaking care just below the message that Hilary left the day before. It had upturned semicircles for eyes. She felt herself smiling back at it. Next to it, there was a message: *Who are you?*

Hilary's smile faded, her lips growing thin with thought. She moved her fingernail up and down across the smiley face, as if affectionately petting it. As far as she knew, there wasn't any other girl in her class named Hilary. Of course, there was a chance that this person was an upperclassman, people whose careless and loud voices in the hallway always made her uneasy when she made the trip to her locker, people who always seemed to carry themselves with a graceful and thoughtless air of superiority. Could a sullen girl who wrote depressing messages to no one in a bathroom stall be hiding among them?

It was certainly possible – Hilary was convinced that there were plenty of freshmen who were unaware of her existence, despite the fact that the school was nearing the end of its first semester and the cliques had already grown tight, their boundaries becoming clearly defined, the social auras surrounding every student sitting at a desk in her homeroom becoming so thick that it was becoming more and more difficult to see the individual and not the label – but she doubted it. If a girl managed to go that far through high school without finding her place, Hilary thought, she would have had to have learned how to make herself invisible in order to survive. She would have given up on reaching out for help a long time ago.

Hilary felt a tingle at the back of her neck, and she scratched at it with her nail. She took her pen out from the pocket of her jeans, her brow gently furrowed, and put its tip to the wall.

“So how did it go today?” Hilary's mom stabbed at a piece of broccoli, the fork scratching against the plate with a sound that reminded Hilary of getting her teeth cleaned at the dentist's.

“Oh, I think it went alright.” Hilary put another piece of food into her mouth, swallowing quickly. The broccoli was covered in a heavy cream sauce that was too sharp, flecked with little tan bits of something that had the consistency and flavor of woodchips. She felt the sting of its taste all through her sinuses whenever a piece touched her tongue, which she, with skillful manipulation of her fork and quick swallowing reflexes, was doing her best to avoid. This new interest in cooking was one of the many hobbies that her mom had taken up in the past two years.

“I saw your light on. You were up studying for awhile, Hil.” The way her mom always tagged “Hil” onto the end of little sentences like that secretly irritated her. There was no one else in the house; what was the point on even using names? “I saw in the bulletin that you guys are having that winter dance this weekend.”

Hilary stuffed more of the gross food into her mouth, making a wordless sound in response. Her mom began rhythmlessly tapping her fork on her plate, chewing her own food longer than necessary, looking down at her freshly manicured nails. The grandfather clock in the front hallway, something that was passed down through the generations on her father’s side, ticked to itself with what Hilary thought sounded like self-satisfaction. The little sounds echoed.

“Are you going?” It was inevitable.

Hilary shrugged. “With who? You know how my friends are. They don’t do that kinda thing.”

“No, Hil, I don’t know how your friends are.” Her mom’s tone was still conversational, but each of the words were as fully formed as a stone. Hilary looked down at her plate, toying with her food purposelessly.

That night, laying in bed waiting for sleep to come, Hilary recalled a conversation she had with her mom when she was about five or six years old. They were sitting on the lavender couch of their old house back in New Hampshire, Hilary's chubby legs companionably resting against her mom's. They were flipping through a photo album with a light pink cover, a flower-laden vine drawn down the side of its spine, an image that Hilary's childhood mind latched onto for no particular reason.

"Yeah, that's Mommy," Hilary's mom said with a vein of pride running below the sing-song voice that she always addressed Hilary with when she was younger, pointing out a photo of herself in her bridal gown. At the time, Hilary thought the woman in that picture had to be one of the most beautiful in the world, on par with one of the princesses in her Disney movies.

"Why don't you always dress so pretty?" Hilary asked.

"Because you only wear something like that on your wedding day. Because it's a special day. The happiest in your life."

"So, you're not as happy now as you used to be?"

Her mom only laughed, a manic sound, wrapping her arm around Hilary and squeezing tight. So tight that it hurt Hilary's shoulders. In the future Hilary would experience sleep paralysis infrequently, but whenever it struck - whenever she woke up in some limbo gray realm of consciousness, convinced that her body was unable to move - she'd feel a sensation similar to that suffocating hug. It didn't bother her much when she woke up: she'd come to think of dreams in her teenage years, unlike those stupid girls who based their lives around horoscopes, as random explosions of thought, a mind

careening out of control with no one in the driver's seat. But in the dawn of some early mornings, those paralyzing, phantom hugs would still come.

“If I didn't get married, you wouldn't be here right now, honey,” her mom said, running her fingers through Hilary's hair. The response didn't entirely set her mind at ease.

“Did you and Daddy have to get married?”

Hilary's mom looked lost for a barely noticeable instant, her eyes far away. She responded simply: “Yes.” She looked back down at Hilary and smiled, the lines at the sides of her lips thin and dark. “That's what women do when they find someone they love. They get married. One day you're going to find a man that makes you happy, and you're going to get to wear a beautiful dress like the one Mommy's wearing in the picture. You're going to look even prettier.”

Hilary looked at the picture, her mom's smile so bright that the lustrous white gown seemed a natural extension of it. Even at that young age, wondering.

Hilary rested her forehead against the glass of the window, staring at a gray, blankly pregnant sky, smears of brown and green scenery racing below it. She felt sick. There were some murmurs from the back of the bus, only a few snatches of conversation – “James always eats it” and “You can't even fit more than two pieces of ham inside of it” were two of the more interesting ones she picked up – discernable over the hum of the bus's engine.

There was no reply on the stall wall that day, which disappointed and upset Hilary, sending a flurry of questions racing through her mind – Had she done the right

thing by potentially revealing herself? Had the girl who'd started their brief correspondence seen Hilary's name, wrinkled her face in disgust, and walked away? Was she even right now telling her friends about the psycho girl who ate lunch alone in the bathroom because she didn't have any friends? It sounded like some ridiculous urban legend when Hilary thought about it like that, and the fact that she actually *was* the girl that hid in the bathroom during lunch made her skin crawl. She could picture a whole disgusting mythology springing up around her:

 ("I heard she talks to the broken toilet paper dispenser because she thinks it's her only friend.")

 "Yeah? I heard she collects the used tampons that she finds in there, and then uses them in these weird rituals.")

A wave of laughter from the back of the bus brought her out of her worrying. She'd gotten into the habit of sitting in one of the non-descript middle seats. The ones in the back were always taken up by upperclassmen that she was secretly terrified of, and the ones in the front were usually filled by the younger kids from the elementary school. She always sat at an uncomfortable angle, half-reclined across the seat with the screws of the steel wall below the window pressing fiercely into her left arm. She did this so that her head would be hidden below the back of her seat, so that she could avoid being noticed by the other students, sink into her own world, become invisible. She closed her eyes.

While Hilary didn't receive a written reply from her anonymous pen pal, her lunch period in the stall wasn't entirely uneventful. The girl from a couple of days ago – Lida (?) – made another stop in the bathroom. Hilary heard her footsteps, quickly and

silently gathered up her brown bag before they came too close, and then waited, looking at the tiled floor beneath the door. A shadow fell across it, then two black and white Converse sneakers came into view. Then the stall door shook on its hinges, as the girl attempted to open it, and Hilary forgot to breathe. The girl immediately apologized – a sound that was distant yet musical, like a drop of water falling in a cavern – and moved to a stall a few doors down. Hilary, silent the whole time, began breathing again. And, of course, as she listened to the tiny splashes of water from the nearby toilet, she made the obvious deductions. It was a possibility, sure, Hilary thought as she cautiously watched Lida, through the crack, make her way over to the sink and begin wringing her hands.

But then, as she'd learned over the past few years, there were lots of possibilities in the world. There was a possibility that you could wake up one morning with something inside of you that you hated and didn't understand. But there was also the possibility that you could wake up the next morning and find everything just as it should be. Sure, maybe she was on her way to becoming a terrible urban legend, but maybe she was on her way to becoming – well, something else. She didn't know what, but she knew it would be better than what she was right now.

And as the bus stopped outside of Hilary's house, as she stood up and walked down the aisle without thinking, for once, that the scornful giggles from the back of the bus were meant for her, as she entered her home with the hint of a smile at the corners of her lips, she held onto that possibility.

“Hil.” Her mom's voice. She was sitting alone in the living room listening to an old record – The Beach Boys or something that sounded like it, Hilary had trouble telling

all those early artists apart from each other – on her dad’s stereo. The sunny ballads came out of the speakers distantly. The lavender shades of the window were drawn, a few scented candles flickering on the glass face of a nearby table. The dancing light lit the liquid in her mom’s glass an autumn red and brushed across her face, defining in dark shadow little leathery crevasses and fissures that were usually covered by creams and powders. She looked gross, Hilary thought. “You doing anything tonight?”

From the slight up-and-down quavering of her voice, Hilary could tell she’d been drinking for awhile. Another one of her newer hobbies. “Nah. Mrs. Yander gave us a ton of study questions tonight.”

“Yander. She’s your...”

“History.”

Her mom’s eyes looked her up and down from her reclining position on the couch. They seemed set back further than usual in their sockets. “You’re ok?”

Hilary scratched at the pimple on her face gently. “What do you mean?”

“Just making sure you’re happy, Hil. I mean...”

Hilary’s voice caught in her throat for a second before she let out a weak laugh. “Of course I’m happy.” She paused for moment. “I think I might be going to the mall this weekend actually. With one of my friends. This girl named Lida.”

“Oh. Really?” Suddenly, it seemed, life came back into her face. “I can give you guys a ride if you need one.”

Hilary smiled thinly and nodded. “Thanks mom.” Her mom smiled back at her. A moment of silence passed, and Hilary thought: I did that. The only reason she’s happy

right now is because of me. Then a bit of guilt tugged at her insides, and she moved to walk out of the room. “I’d better get started on all my stuff.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard,” her mom called after her.

As she walked upstairs to her room, Hilary heard the music grow louder. She lay down on her bed, listening to the melodies as her thoughts swam towards sleep.

(She was in the bathroom with the other girls, all of them lined up in front of the large mirror in their expensive dresses, reapplying their makeup and adjusting their perfectly set hair with practiced motions while talking about the typical things. The conversation was a constant, enveloping sound, a heavy wind heard from within a house. Hilary’s reflection kept wavering in front of the mirror annoyingly, as if it were beneath the surface of a rippling pond, every time she attempted to pay attention to what they were talking about. She tried to maintain her focus, but whenever her attention was drawn to a single sensation – an elbow rubbing against her bare arm, one of the girls giving a gleeful retelling of what her and one of the boys did last night, the weight of bundled up hair at the back of her head – the rest of the world would fade into foggy white noise. And as it dawned on her that she’d never be able to focus on everything at once, that her mind could only stretch itself so far, she felt her breath quicken and a wave of electric heat pass through her. Her consciousness started to leap chaotically around, dizzying her, giving a quick succession of flashbulb sensations – the dark counterfeit shadow around a white eye, a high-pitched squeal, fingernails running through her soft hair with intense purpose, scratching her scalp harder and harder. The echoing rustles of a brown paper bag from the stall behind her, ringing and ringing in her) -

“Hilary, would you read that passage for us?”

Hilary’s head jerked up as if smacked. Her teacher was standing in the front of the room behind the podium, wrinkled face looking down at a textbook, waiting in expectant silence. A few eyes in the classroom looked disinterestedly in Hilary’s direction. Hilary lowered her eyes to her book, flitting around the page hopelessly, then seizing on a prominent-seeming block of text.

She began in a too quick and unsteady voice, barely pausing between sentences: “Sparta was above all a militarist state and emphasis on military fitness began virtually at birth, Shortly after birth the mother of the child bathed it in wine to see whether or not the child was strong, If the child survived it was br-“

“Robert, help Hilary out and read the correct passage.”

A scattering of quiet chuckles filled the classroom, an awkward baritone voice began droning on, and Hilary looked around the room quickly as if searching for a means of escape, feeling herself go so hot that she thought she would burst into sweat.

Then her gaze came upon a face that calmed her, a face whose eyes peaked out from a thick, dark shadow. The girl whose name sounded like Lida but probably wasn’t Lida. There was a look on that girl’s face that made Hilary’s breath catch, a look that was pitying and understanding, a look that said, “It’s ok, I understand.” Hilary felt something well inside her. She had a sudden desire to be touched, held.

Hilary stared at the scratches on the stall wall, scratches that crisscrossed this way and that, intersecting each other with seemingly deliberate purpose. She could just barely make out the curled tail of the “y” in her name at the scratches’ edge. The name that she

wrote on the wall, with naïve hope, just a few short days ago. For some time she stared, aware of nothing but the minute sensations of her body, the tickle of the air in her nose, her butt settling numbly into the rim of the porcelain toilet seat. She touched the rough, chaotically ragged white surface where her fleeting exchange with a nameless girl in a bathroom stall used to be, rubbing it pointlessly with her finger. Then she felt moisture sting her eyes.

Sure, it was stupid. It could have been anyone who defaced her precious piece of graffiti. But it was thinking back on how excited she was about that pathetic little, distanced conversation that suddenly hit her. How she'd nursed some hope that it would somehow solve her problems. It would have somehow eradicated The Feeling, and she'd have suddenly come to her senses and realize exactly where she was, and know that she was exactly where she should be.

She felt a droplet of snot dangle from the tip of her nose and she swiped at it with her hand, smearing the warm and slick mucus along her arm. She tore off a square of toilet paper and wiped at it frantically. It seeped through the thin tissue, Hilary feeling its warm, disgusting wetness on her fingers. She bent over and let out a thin sob, reflexively tossing her hair out of her face with her hand, feeling the mucus stick in it. Always so dirty.

She breathed deeply, sniffing, trying to calm herself. Her throat ached and her vision was soft, a formless cloudy mass of color spread before her eyes. She closed them. A fragment of the melody of the old song she'd heard last night looped in her mind wordlessly and pointlessly.

The door in front of her rattled on its hinges. Hilary's eyes flew open. A voice from the other side: "Oops, sorry." She looked down, at the space below the door, and saw black and white Converse sneakers.

It was her, Hilary thought. Lida. She sniffed her nose, wiped her eyes.

The sneakers began to walk away, and Hilary called out, "Wait."

"What?" Lida's voice echoed over the tiles.

Hilary hesitated. She saw, with sudden clarity, that moments like these were the only ones that mattered in life. Hilary could open the door right now. She could meet Lida face-to-face and, after awkwardly dancing around the subject for a few moments, she'd admit that, yes, she was the one that writing messages to Hilary and, no, she had no idea what bitch decided to scratch out their conversation. They'd both talk and then laugh, a lot, because neither of them had ever felt so much relief in their lives. They'd both start sharing their problems with each other. Hilary would talk about how lonely she was and, just maybe, Lida would know exactly what Hilary was talking about. They'd share stories about The Feeling, and how it was screwing up their lives, and that even though neither of them understood what was happening to them, it felt so much better to know that someone else was going through the same exact thing. Maybe they could solve the problem together. And, maybe, Lida would enter Hilary's stall and close the door behind her. Maybe she'd slide into Hilary's lap, wrap her arms around her, press her lips against hers. And, maybe, it would be warm.

And, after that moment, Hilary would be on the road to becoming a different, better person. All because she decided to open the door to a bathroom stall right at that crucial moment when she knew she was supposed to. When it came down to it, the series

of events the led to her being born started with something as simple as a smile. The same smile that was frozen in the photograph hanging in Hilary's living room.

She thought of her mom in her gleaming wedding dress. Her screaming white teeth. A fragment of remembered conversation came to her: "You're going to look even prettier." And that's what made her falter.

"Oh, um, nevermind. I thought you were someone else."

The sneakers vanished from her sight, steps echoing further and further away until she heard nothing but the sound of her own breathing. With another glance at the white scratches on the wall, she began unpacking her lunch. She was alone again, and her only company was the echoes of the sounds that she, herself, made. She coughed, and the sound traveled back and forth along the cool tiles frantically, as if searching for something, before it became hollow. Then, nothing.

