9-22-2017

Saving Max

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Artist Statement

Throughout the semester, my professor, Dr. Ann Pancake, continually encouraged the class to become writers “on whom nothing is lost,” to quote author Henry James. I’ve always been interested in the mystery of a metaphysical world, but in a more innocent and child-like form, hence the concept of an imaginary friend with a very real heart and soul. As I built the story, I noticed a correlation between an imaginary friend and adolescence. The carefree innocence of youth is often interrupted by tragic loss, bitter struggle, or, in this case, disease and mental illness, but it shouldn’t be forgotten entirely. The imaginary friend represented remnant childhood memories that didn’t die but continued developing alongside his person.

This story encouraged me to dig deeper into serious themes and to write intentionally, using my work to confront real issues. I got to experience firsthand readers’ reactions to my writing in a full-class workshop and hear their opinions and advice. The entire writing process has inspired me to continue writing and honing my skills in storytelling as I endeavor to become an author on whom nothing is lost.

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them enough to lift it. Finally, his mother picks up the trophy and sets it on the desk behind Max.

“Oh, Max,” she whispers and pulls her son into an embrace.

“You’re gonna be okay, buddy,” I say even though Max can’t see or hear me. It’s not that he’s blind or deaf; I’m just invisible. Forgotten.

I don’t remember much about the first time I met Max, but I do know that right away, we were inseparable. He called me Davie and made me promise to never leave him.

“You can’t die,” he had said earnestly. “Not like Daddy. He got sick and had the shakes. It was so scary.” He paused, and then turned to me eagerly. “But you’re different, Davie. I can tell. You’re the coolest.”

I knew all his secrets and fears. His mother couldn’t see me and said I wasn’t real. She frowned and spoke to Max’s doctor. The doctor told her not to worry because I was only imaginary, just a phase that every kid went through. Maybe he was right. As Max got older, he talked and listened to me less and started listening to his friends and playing soccer more.

But I’m still here. It’s been ten years, and I’ve kept my promise to Max, even though I’m afraid he’s forgotten me for good. He’s always had an extraordinary imagination, and sometimes I feel so alive, I believe I can reach out and touch the real world.

I rouse myself from my thoughts. Max’s mother is still trying to comfort him, but it’s Max who seems to be doing most of the comforting.

“I’m fine, Mom, really,” he reassures her, grinning. “That thing’s heavy anyway.” He flexes his muscles for her and laughs, but I know it’s forced.

“Well, if you’re sure you’re alright,” she replies. “I’ll be back later than usual tonight. Don’t wait up for me. Did you finish your homework?”

“Yes,” Max says, but I glance at his backpack hanging on the doorknob, untouched since he came home from school this afternoon. “I love you, Mom. Always.” He struggles to his feet and gives her another hug. She looks surprised, but returns the embrace.

“I love you too, son. Call if you need anything.” She leaves the room, and I hear the front door slam. As soon as she’s gone, Max’s demeanor changes. His smile vanishes, and he slumps down on his bed, suddenly looking far older than his sixteen years. He stares at his hands, balling them into fists and trying to clench them tightly like the exercises his therapist makes him do, but his hands only tremble and he gives up with a curse of frustration.

Parkinson’s. That’s what took Max down and stole his dreams, just as it stole his dad’s. It started last year at the start of his sophomore year of high school. At first, he just seemed clumsy, tripping in the halls and bumping into desks. Everybody said it was simply fatigue that came with the reputation of being a promising, All-American soccer player. Then Max stumbled during the championship game and slammed into a goalpost, snapping his leg. At the hospital, he said he just lost his balance, but the doctors had their suspicions and ran some tests. That’s when they discovered the chronic nerve breakdown in his body. Max has had to drop soccer altogether, start medication, and attend physical therapy regularly, but the tremor has continued in his leg and a new one started in his fingertips. He used to work on his prized possession, a novel about a time-traveling psychic superhero called The Clairvoyant, but he hasn’t written in months since the tremors started in his hands. His grades have plummeted, and I wonder if his mother realizes that it’s not because he’s “trying to adjust” as he claims, but because he just doesn’t see the point anymore.

“I already know what’s going to happen to me,” Max said once. “I saw it happen with Dad. It terrified me seeing him with the shakes. I don’t want to become that.”

His mother and all his doctors insist that he can live a normal, happy life, but I wonder if they know that depression is a common side effect of Parkinson’s. It worries me how much Max has changed from carefree to burdened so young in life.

Max sits on his bed for a long time then gets to his feet with sudden resolve. He goes into his closet and pulls on a jacket, then hobbles out of his room.

“Hey, where are you going, Max?” I call and follow him as he walks out the front door. I slip out behind him before he closes and locks it. Outside, the leaves from the maple trees are golden orange. The sun is surrendering the last of its rays for today, and the wind flows around us in chilly gusts.

“Going for a walk?” I ask. Max keeps his eyes on the ground, hands jammed into his jacket pockets. “Are you sure that’s the best idea? It’s going to get cold fast. Hey, wait up!”

A block from his house, Max cuts through the woods onto Miller’s Road, a cracked asphalt lane sheltered by tall trees.

“Seriously, Max, where are you going?” I call out as
he rounds a bend and reaches Miller’s Bridge, a worn wood structure that spans a river fifty feet below. The recent rains have made the river frothy, and a strong current pulls the churning brown water along.

Max walks onto the middle of the bridge and leans against the rail, looking out. I follow his lead.

“It’s gonna get dark real soon,” I say, staring at the river. “Hey, Max, what’s the matter?”

I stare at Max. Tears are rolling down his face, and his chest heaves. “I’m never going to get better,” he whispers to himself. “Never.”

“That’s not true,” I said even though I’m not certain.

“How could this happen to me?” Max cries angrily. “I can’t pick up things right, I can’t walk right—and the medicine cures nothing. It only delays the future.” He watches the water far below and then, to my horror, starts to struggle to pull himself up on the rail.

“Whoa, whoa, Max, what’s going on here?” I say, alarmed. “Get down from there now, come on, you’re scaring me.” Max manages to crouch unsteadily on the rail. He teeters as he holds tightly to it, never taking his eyes off the river just as I can’t take my eyes off of him. I’m unable to process that this is truly happening.

“Max, come on, let’s just get down from there,” I plead. “You don’t want to do this, buddy, seriously.”

“I can’t… I can’t…” Max whispers to himself between sobs. “I-I can’t, I can’t…” The way he talks sounds like he’s been thinking about this for some time. If he’s planned this then he must be completely and utterly serious.

I don’t have time to curse myself for not noticing before that he was this hopeless.

I have to act. Now.

“Don’t!” I shout, panic rising in my voice. I feel so helpless, unable to make a difference. I climb the rail myself. I can’t tackle him to the ground, but I can talk, and I do. “Don’t do it, Max! Please! Forget about this and get down. You have your whole life ahead of you. You have so much to do… like finishing your story, Max! Your story! That was your dream!”

Instead, Max squeezes his eyes shut.

“This is Davie, Max!” I yell again. “And I’m saying to get down. Stop, just think about this!”

Max shakes his head from side to side like an Etch-A-Sketch as if he’s trying to clear all his thoughts. I see it before it happens.

He takes a deep breath.
He leans forward.
He leaps.

“Max!” My feet leave the rail a split second before his does. Time grinds to a halt as I lean out to grab him. Then inexplicably—impossibly—my hands make contact with Max’s jacket. I don’t know how it happens, but I feel the cotton straining out of my grip. I pull with all my might, yanking him back toward the bridge. I hear Max cry out in surprise and fall backwards, and I let him go to steady myself, but I’ve leaned too far out. I’m lunging forward, then hurtling down. The river is suddenly so close, its roar suddenly so loud, and then I’m plunged into darkness.

I can’t die. I can’t leave Max. I won’t die.

I open my eyes, and I’m looking at the night sky. Stars wink high above me, and all I hear is rushing water. I’m lying on the riverbank, dazed. I sit on the bank to reorient myself and get to my feet. Miller’s Bridge is only a short climb from the bank, and I make my way back up only to find the bridge deserted. Max is gone. My heart skips a beat, and I hurry to look over the bridge but it’s too dark to see the river so I stand in the cold night, fearing the worst.

Finally, I stumble back through the woods. There’s nothing else I can do. When I reach Max’s house, the lights are on at the front door. I step inside and a tidal wave of relief rushes over me. Max is in the living room with his mother. She’s crying and hugging him tightly while he sits on the sofa, stunned.

“I can’t explain it, Mom,” Max was saying. “I was standing on the bridge, and someone—or something, I don’t know—pulled me back when I jumped. I don’t know how it happened. I could have sworn I heard someone yell at me. I…I just don’t know. But I just went home after. I still don’t know really know how it happened.”

Max and his mom stay up all night talking in a much-needed conversation.

The sun is rising when Max’s mother gets up and leaves the room, returning with a spiral bound notebook in her hand.

“Take this,” she says gently. “Write your thoughts in here. Like what we talked about, what you want, don’t want…” She draws Max nearer. “We’ll get through this. Together. Okay?” Max nods and accepts the notebook then struggles to his feet.

“I love you,” he tells his mother and she repeats it before he quietly heads off to his bedroom.

An hour later, I approach Max’s room and hear a clacking noise coming from beyond the half-closed door. I step carefully inside and find him sitting at his desk, the
notebook lying beside him ignored. Instead, he’s on his laptop, and he’s resumed writing “The Clairvoyant.” His eyes seem brighter. Determined. I lean closer to get a better look, and my heart skips a beat. Max has just finished writing a sidekick for the mighty Clairvoyant. They seem inseparable. And it may be just a coincidence, but Max has just given the sidekick a name I believed had been locked out of his memory forever. Davie.