

## Empty Space

First things first, my brother is nothing like me. At first glance, the word 'identical' might come to mind. But we are nothing alike. EreK has our mother's bright blue eyes, whereas mine are the color of slate. My hair is slightly darker than his, my build less muscular and there is something about him that makes everyone like him. Why?

There are two brothers, but why does everyone like the older?

"You know I'm only older than you by like three seconds Ev," I hear. I lift my head up from the floor of the bus and look at him questioningly.

"You asked me why everyone likes the older brother," he says.

"I did?"

He nods. I guess I had been thinking out loud.

Speaking of loud, how was I even thinking with this noise?! The people on the bus were so loud; I couldn't even hear the obnoxious sound of the bus motor as it comes to a stop at a light.

But I can always hear EreK's laughing voice above it all.

Calling him popular is not the correct adjective. 'Popular' kids get into fights, they do illegal things, they go to parties, and they're just downright mean. EreK is a straight A student. He is nice to everyone. He helps others. He is a model student. He is not popular, he is reputable.

I feel his hand on my shoulder, something he does to comfort me.

"Your new class will be fine, Ev. Don't worry about it. Just, don't make Dad upset,"

"I am not a 'problem child'," I say.

"The class isn't for 'problem children'," he says. "It's for... special learners,"

"I am not *'special'*,"

"Ev," his voice is more serious now. "You're failing all your classes. You never pay attention. Everyone's worried about you."

That, I knew for a fact, was not true. Every other student in this school wasn't worried about me. Our forever-drunken father could care less about me. I hate all those people. All those people fail to acknowledge my existence.

The bus comes to a screeching stop, lurching everyone forward in their seats. The doors open, and everyone files out of the bus. Time to go to the hell they call school.

"Room 203," the front desk lady says. "Down the hall and to the left."

I nod at her and leave the office.

"Where is it?" EreK asks.

"203," I reply.

"Oh. My class is upstairs, so I guess I'll see you at lunch then?"

I nod.

"Cool then. See you soon, Ev!" He waves then turns to leave.

I run to my class. I don't want anyone to see me going there.

Room 203 has 9 desks and a big one at the front for a teacher. It was smaller than a normal classroom, and no one was in the room when I ran in.

I choose the seat in the back left away from the window and sit.

Where is everyone?

A few seconds later the bell rings and woman who looked too young to be a teacher runs in the room.

"Sorry I'm late!" She says while flipping through a clipboard. "You must be... Ever Paige?" She looks up at me.

I nod at her and look down at the desk.

I hear her sit in the chair next to me.

"I'm Ms. Aine. I'll be your teacher for the rest of the year. Is that ok?"

I nod.

"Before we can actually start learning, I need to know something about you. If you could maybe look at me, that would be a great start."

I glance up. She *did* look too young to be a teacher. Maybe it was just her long blonde hair that made her seem younger, or her dark mascara and big eyes. She looked fresh out of college, maybe still in it.

"Hi, Ever."

Should I say something? There is something about her that makes me feel like I can trust her, maybe just for now.

"Why am I here?" I ask.

"All your teachers recommend you be placed here. They say you never pay attention or participate in class. You're here so I can help you learn." She slips something on my desk. My report card.

And guess what?

F, F, F, F, F, F, F.

"Now you tell *me*, Ever, why are you here?"

The question took me by surprise. What came out of my mouth surprised me too.

"I'm the lesser of two. My brother is a prodigy. I am nobody. I'm blamed for something I didn't mean to do. I have no friends, hardly any caring family, and not enough soul left to care about what's going on."

There is silence for a moment, and then Ms. Aine speaks up.

"What were you blamed for?"

I'm about to tell this woman that I've known for not even five minutes something that's been haunting me ever since I was born.

"My father blames me for my mother's death. She passed just after I came, three seconds after my twin. My father hates me."

More silence. Ms. Aine puts her hand on my shoulder, a gesture all too familiar to me.

"I'm so sorry, Ever. If there's anything I can do to help, I'm right here."

I shake my head and look down. I will not cry in front of her, that would be embarrassing.

"I think we're done here for now." She says.

I hear her get up and walk back to her desk.

A few moments later, a full bag of potato chips is set on my desk.

"Want some?" Ms. Aine asks with a full mouth.

I look at her like she was crazy. After a while, I take a chip and eat it. The taste of salt and grease fills my mouth and somehow cheers me up.

I look up. I've never seen a teacher with a mouthful of chips before.

And for the first time in as long as I can remember, I smile.

I hear a crash in the kitchen as we walk through the door. Swear words bounce off the walls and something else hits the floor. EreK crouches and begins to sneak to our room. I do the same.

I didn't realize my backpack was unzipped until it was too late.

Binders, folders, books, everything falls out and hits the floor in a crash of ruffled paper on tile. The noise in the kitchen comes to a halt.

"You boys home already?!" Our father yells from the kitchen. EreK rushes towards me and we scramble to pick up all the fallen papers. I can hear my father's footsteps as he kicks some of my papers.

"You," he points at me. "You made this damn mess, didn't you?!" He hiccups. His words were slurred.

My father was drunk. Again.

I see my report card out of the corner of my eye. I try to grab it in one swift move, but my father's foot slams down on the paper, taking my fingers with it. I cry out in pain.

"What is this?!" He yells at me, picking up the card.

"N..nothing!" EreK stutters, trying to cover for me. I look at him and shake my head. This is my battle.

I stand up slowly, trying to look him in the eye. Trying to stand up for myself. Trying to maybe face him for once.

The glare in his eyes cut off my sense of confidence entirely. They told a thousand unspoken words.

*You're worthless,* they screamed.

*You're a murderer,* they screamed.

*I hate you,* they screamed.

Father rolls the paper up in his hands and whacks me across the face with it. It didn't hurt, but the message it sent made me cower in fear. I back into the wall while my father screams words at me that should not be repeated.

I ignore him. I close my eyes and go to my empty space, my space where nobody can harm me. I am safe there.

Or so I think. As soon as I open my eyes, my father's fist finds a resting place right below my rib cage. I make a sound somewhere between a sob and a scream and wrap my arms around my stomach. All my breath was knocked out of me. I struggle to regain it, but the hits continue. I crumple to the ground, with no choice but to endure the pain.

Above my own screams I could hear EreK's, yelling at Father to stop. The fear in his voice only made me suffer more.

*Don't worry about me,* I wanted to yell at him, but all that came out were the results of another hit to the stomach. Each hit seems to be stronger than the last.

*Empty space, please, just get me away from this pain.*

But it would not answer. You can't get out of physical pain with mental strength.

I don't know when the beatings stopped, but eventually they did. But I still was on the ground, my body fighting for air. How long I lay there, I do not know. Ten, fifteen minutes? An hour? Time seemed to blur by.

Erek stayed with me the whole time, comforting me between sobs.

I finally gathered enough strength to make my way to our bedroom, each step a tiny victory. As soon as we were inside, I collapse onto my bed.

"I'm so sorry, Ev. I'm so sorry," Erek whispers.

He holds me, and we cry together.

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Days passed by and the leaves begin to fall off the trees. The bruises Father gave me faded, but their memories lasted. I never told anyone about the abuse, and no one ever asked. To my surprise, I tried harder in Ms. Aine's class. I started to actually get better. I smile more, knowing I had Erek by my side if something bad ever happened.

Today is a little different, however. It's cold and raining, and I'm staring out the back window of Father's truck when Erek noticed something was up.

"What's wrong?" He asks.

"Your friends hate me," I say.

"Cheer up, Ev. That was two days ago. It's Sunday."

Yes, Sunday. The only day we actually get out of the house, but all we do is sit in Father's truck while he buys food and such. Today was no different.

"Besides, they're not my friends anymore," he takes off his seatbelt and scoots closer to me, placing his hand on my shoulder. "I'm always here for you, Ev." It was true. When his so called 'friends' made fun of me, he left them and sat with me.

The truck door opens then slams closed as my father slides into the front seat. He places a lone bag in the front seat with him. Liquor, probably. He doesn't acknowledge us, we don't acknowledge him. It's the way things work now. He starts the truck and immediately pushes down on the gas. We fly out of the parking lot.

Erek jerks forward and we grab onto each other to steady ourselves. The truck swerves suddenly to the right, throwing Erek into me.

*Oh no.*

I peer at the bag in the front seat. It was, indeed, alcohol.

The bottle was nearly empty.

"Erek! Seatbelt!" I yell. He looks over at me, and I could see the fear in his eyes. Is that what I looked like?

He begins to scoot over, gripping my shoulder like a lifeline.

"Erek?"

"Don't worry about me, Ev. I'll be fine," he half-whispers.

And just as he is reaching for the seatbelt, we're thrown forward.

I hear the most horrible sound I've ever heard.

I slam against the seat in front of me, twisting my neck.

Then, darkness.

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Bright, white light.

Am I dead?

I open my eyes and turn my head, ignoring the pain that shot up my spine.

A hospital. I'm in a hospital.

I try to remember what happened to get me here.

Truck. Father. Liquor.

Add those things up, and you get chaos.

"Ever Paige? You're awake!" A bright and bubbly nurse bounces in.  
"I just have to take your blood pressure, sweetie. That crash really shook you."  
I sit up and look around some more.  
"Where is Ereka?" I ask.  
The nurse loses her smile. She sighs deeply.  
"I'm so sorry, Ever."  
*No.*  
Tears sting my eyes in realization.  
*Ereka.*  
I let out a sob. Thoughts burn in the back of my head.  
*Ereka. No. No. No. Not now. Please, not him.*  
My face is streaked with tears. It feels like I'm being stabbed with a knife.  
*Don't worry about me, Ev.*  
I take the pillow that was behind me and bury my face in it. I begin to sob.  
*I'll be fine.*

...

It hasn't even been a week, and my father made me go to school. I suffered the whole way there.  
I sat alone.  
I walked through the hallways. Alone.  
I could feel the eyes of people around me. I bet they feel sorry for me. I can't bear to look up at them, no matter how sincere they are.  
As soon as I get to Ms. Aine's classroom, she pulls me in a tight hug. I could tell that she'd been crying, too.  
"Oh my God, Ev, I thought I lost you," she said.  
I cry. It felt okay to cry in front of her. I felt safe.  
We didn't speak the whole day. Just knowing that she was with me said enough.  
It got worse. The speck of hope Ms. Aine gave me during the day only faded in the night. Father, who wasn't phased at all by the crash, continued to beat me. I killed my brother, he said.  
There were bullies too. Not the kiddy bullies, like the ones who would call you names, but real, mean, bullies. They shoved me against the wall when nobody was looking. They teased me about failing my classes. They threatened to hurt me. Sometimes they did.  
And if I told anyone, they would hurt me even more.  
More often than not, I felt like a failure. I couldn't do anything right. What Father screamed at me in the night was true. I killed my mother. I killed Ereka. Who else's life would end in my hands?

Today is December second, a Tuesday. Chilled wind blew outside and hot breath blew on my face.  
"Looks like your brother can't save you now!" Yells the boy who held me against the wall. Tears swell in my eyes.  
"Aww look, the baby is crying," mimics another. "What are you gonna do, call your mommy?"  
They laugh. Insults float around me.

*You're worthless.*

*You should kill yourself.*

*Not even your father likes you.*

I shove the boy off me and bolt for a side door. I hear their evil laughs as I run out the school.

Their hearts are as cold as the air outside.

I don't care if school had already started, I don't care if running away was illegal, it wouldn't matter anyway. I continued to run without stopping. I ran to the bridge. Cars crossed it without noticing me. This bridge was really high up, one of the tallest in the world. The winter sky made the water look silver. The breeze blows my hair into my face. I was aware of every detail around me.

I climb the rail.

My heart beats twice as fast. My knuckles turn white as I hold on to the railing, now on the other side.

The third life I take will be my own.

*Don't worry about me, Ev. I'll be fine.*

I begin to cry. Not for my own life, but for Erek.

*Maybe now I can be with him...*

"EVER!" I hear a scream. It's not important.

"EVER! NO!!"

Ms. Aine.

"EVER! DON'T!!" She screams.

I turn to look at her. She was running full speed towards me, shoes in her hand. I look back at the water.

*I could be with him...*

She grips my arm.

"Ever, please," she sobs. "Tell me what happened, Ever. I can help you. Please, don't,"

*Erek.*

I loosen my grip on the rails.

"EVER!! NO! There are people who love you, Ever! You're not alone in this world! I can help you!"

I look down at the water one last time. I look at Ms. Aine.

I swing my leg over the rails and land on the cement.

Ms. Aine wraps her arms around me.

"Don't do this to me, Ever," she whispers.

I crack. Finally. I tell her everything, from the first time Father beat me, to the crash, and the bullies. I tell her how I felt. I told her what I thought. I poured myself out to her, shaking with the feeling that I could've jumped, I could've died, and I wouldn't have known that someone still cared.

*She saved my life.*

Police units soon arrived, and I told them my story. They told me they would arrest my Father.

"We'll work something out," says Ms. Aine. "I'll adopt you if I have to. You are never going to feel unsafe again." She hugs me tight. "Fill the empty space with Erek's soul."

I did. As I head into the police car, I remember his words.

*Don't worry about me, Ev. I'll be fine.*

*I'll be fine.*