

Writing: 6-8th Grade. Honorable Mention.

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I'm Sorry

"Hello!"

The sounds of heavy shoes landing on the sidewalk and an unfamiliar voice caught me off guard. I first assumed that I was not the person's target.

"Excuse me! Red coat girl!"

I stopped in my tracks and whipped my head around, staring at the silhouette getting larger. I finally got a good look at her. Her hair flew in the wind as she accelerated her pace. She came to an abrupt stop and quickly stuck her right hand out while tucking a strand of chestnut hair behind her ear with the other. She seemed nervous as she brought her left hand back down to side.

"My name's Elise. I just moved here and I noticed that you lived next door. We have a few classes together too, don't we?" Her smile was crooked and her chocolate eyes shone brightly but you could almost see the sweat running down her face.

"I think so. I'm Ava. I hope you like it here." I returned the gesture and gladly took her hand in mine, giving it a firm shake. Her face burned a rosy color and she quickly released my hand.

"I haven't made any friends yet so when I saw you I got excited."

Silence. We both stood there for what felt like an eternity before I hastily made a gesture as I began to move forward.

"Do you want to walk with me? I wouldn't want us to be late."

It didn't take long before Elise and I had gotten to know each other better and became good friends. It seemed as if we were fated to be together. She liked the same books as I

did, enjoyed the same movies, and listened to the same music. It was like we were the same person!

Aside for one detail.

I remember going the sleepover. We had arrived together and I didn't know anyone aside from her and the hostess. The conversation had derailed from interests to boys we liked. Familiar names were being thrown around.

"I have gym with Silas Matthews and he's just so strong!"

"Lucas Lohsnedal is really cute!"

"There's this guy, I don't know his name, but we have English together and he's the hottest guy ever!"

"I really like this pretty girl named Miranda. She's in my math class."

You could feel the tension as the words left Elise's mouth. Everyone stared in disbelief at her words. They all looked so uncomfortable during the rest of the night. No one tried to start a conversation with Elise, and if they had to speak to her, it was usually a single word answer.

I could remember the Monday after so vividly. It felt like an ordinary day as we walked to school like we would every day. The air felt thick as we stepped onto campus as everyone sneered at us. But she didn't pay any mind to them and seemed like her usual self, grinning and chatting with me about the new band she had started listening to. It was as if it didn't matter. Until we saw her locker. I could see the way her smiled faltered and the hurt in her eyes.

Littering the metal door were slurs.

"Let's get to class."

I tried to pull her away but she didn't move a muscle as her eyes scanned every last word on her locker over and over again. She might have even stopped breathing.

Elise was absent the next day. I had gone to her house the next morning and her mother told me she was sick. I walked to school alone. No one glared at me or even paid me any mind as I walked to my homeroom. I was just another face in the sea of teens.

She was back the following week and it was back to dirty looks and gay jokes. Elise seemed to be back to her usual self.

"Why do you hang out with that lesbo? She'll turn you gay."

I couldn't find the words to say. Every sentence I tried to form got stuck in my throat as I stared at her. She twirled a strand of hair around her index finger. The bell rang.

"So are you like, a dyke too?"

I can remember the way his laugh burned my ears as he turned around in his chair to look at me. He sounded so proud of his words.

I've tried to move on but there was one image that haunts me. It was the look of betrayal as I walked to the other side of the cafeteria. I sat across from May, who greeted me warmly.

"You're so smart for leaving her."

If I close my eyes and think hard enough, I can picture the way she looked. She said she needed to speak to a teacher and told me to go home without her. I still walked with her but made up excuses to preserve my reputation. I had a million reasons why I should wait for her but I complied for the most part.

I remember watching it with my own eyes. Elise was outnumbered and had no chance of surviving without serious injuries. I witnessed most of it before rushing home. I went to her house the next morning. She had a black eye and several bruises. She moved away soon after.

If only I had stood up for her. How could I call myself her friend? I could only imagine where she is now and what or how she's doing. In a world like ours, she could be killed for

who she is. For something she couldn't change and it is unfair. There some cruel people in the world who aren't too fond of people who aren't like them. And it wasn't just sexuality. So many lives have been lost because of race, religion, gender. All because no one would stand up for them. She was one life I could have helped.

I'm sorry Elise. For everything.