

Haley Moore

But Of The Living

Shelby colored in the white squares of her checkerboard slip-on Vans one by one with a neon green paint pen. She didn't really care for the shoes, in fact, when she first saw them, she thought they were hideous. Then one day Erin Thermot showed up wearing the same shoes and all of a sudden they seemed... cool. So Shelby saved up all her money to buy a pair. She also didn't understand why she was coloring in the white squares with a neon green paint pen. It was 2006, and it seemed like something that teenagers would've done at the time. Shelby didn't understand a lot of the reasons why she did the things that she did. Her taste in music was weird and eclectic, but not the cool kind of eclectic, more like a mish-mash junk drawer of odd songs that she had heard and decided to love and listen to over and over again, like "Wuthering Heights" by Kate Bush, or "Take the Long Way Home" by Supertramp, or an odd Matchbox 20 song here or a Greenday song there. Shelby was not a fully formed human being, neither in style, nor taste, not even in posture. She always looked down when she walked, and she was a bit tall, so this caused her shoulders to slump, and the back of her neck always ached just a little bit, and she could never figure out why.

"That green looks cool. You should do hot pink on the next row." Lindsey was Shelby's best friend. They sat outside in the commons area of Joyce High School before the first bell rang. Shelby shrugged her

shoulders. She never would've considered green and pink to go together, but after Lindsey suggested it, she decided she liked it. Shelby was impressionable, to an almost annoying extent, but Shelby was at least aware of this. Shelby was 18, and very sponge-like in her perceptions. In maybe a year or so she'd become more decisive in her preferences, and expressions, but as of right now, she just kind of liked... everything.

Lindsey looked at Shelby. "Today's Wednesday, are you excited?"

Shelby shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I'm pretty sure if we keep infiltrating their club, they're gonna ask us to give a testimony or something."

"No no no. That's not how it works. They want normies like us to come, because they think they're witnessing to awful sinners. It boosts their egos."

Lindsey was referring to the Christian Youth Club that met every Wednesday during lunch in the speech lab. Shelby and Lindsey started making a habit out of attending the club meetings once they realized that Mr. Wang's Chicken was being provided to the attendees of the meeting, free of charge. Shelby wasn't religious, but for some reason she felt bad about attending every Wednesday, and she couldn't quite place her finger on why. Still, Mr. Wang's Chicken was the best fast food in the whole county, and it was enough of a reason to dull any sort of bad feeling that she might have had due to her insincere reasons for attendance.

Shelby hunched forward so that she could color in another square.



Shelby lived with her mother and her grandparents in a lower-income neighborhood right off of one of the main highways. Her grandfather was a World War II veteran and Purple Heart recipient, and even though he was in his eighties, he was very capable of taking care of himself. He'd wake himself up at around four every morning, eat a bowl of cereal or grits or oatmeal, and sit in his comfy recliner and watch the news

before the sun came up, after which he'd shuffle outside and work in his garden until lunch. He was a man of routine, as was his wife, Shelby's grandmother, and it was probably this strict routine that would keep them alive well into their nineties.

Shelby's mother was a different story, and her unreliability was part of the reason why Shelby lived with her grandparents. Sometimes Shelby's mother would stay for months at a time, sometimes she would disappear without a hint as to where she was going. When she would come back, her mood would be unpredictable. One day she brought Shelby a bag full of gifts: clothes and makeup and art supplies, even though Shelby's interest in art was apprehensive at best. Another day Shelby's mother showed up and slept on the couch for a day and a half. Shelby didn't hate her mother, Shelby didn't really know what to think of her mom, because her mom never acted in a way that was maternal towards Shelby. Shelby couldn't grieve for the loss of a feeling that she never experienced to begin with. Her mother simply orbited her atmosphere, never affected by Shelby's gravity. At least that's how Shelby saw it.

Shelby was finishing coloring in the white squares of her checkerboard slip-on Vans neon pink when she heard the front door open. She knew it wasn't either grandparent coming through the front door, because the Wheel was on TV, and they were both definitely going to be in the sitting room. It must be her mother coming home.

She could tell by the intensity of the way in which the door slammed shut that her mom was probably in a mood. She blew on her shoes, to dry the paint pen ink. Her mom appeared at her bedroom door. "The fuck are you doing?"

"Huh?" Shelby asked.

“Those shoes. I bought you those shoes.” Shelby’s mom gestured towards the Vans, the white squares now completely covered in either green or pink. Shelby looked up at her mom with cool indifference, the bones in her neck crunching back as her shoulders slouched forward. Shelby, used to dealing with her mom’s behavior by now, did not let this affect her at all. “No you didn’t. I bought these myself with money I got from my job. You know. My ‘fun money.’”

Shelby’s mom didn’t like her tone, and that’s all that mattered at this point. “You are not going to talk to me like that under my roof, you hear me?”

“Your roof?” This was a poor choice of words on Shelby’s part.

Shelby’s mother bent down, grabbed the slip-on Vans, and stormed out of the room. Now affected, Shelby followed her mother, who was making her way outside, passing Shelby’s grandparents, who sat in the sitting room, taking notice of the two-person parade as it stomped by them. Shelby’s mother pushed open the screen door and headed towards the large garbage can, where she tossed the shoes. Shelby looked on dejectedly. “Come on, Mom. Please don’t do that.”

Shelby’s mom seemed very proud of herself. “If you’re going to treat your clothes like trash, then they’re trash. I raised you to be more respectful than that.”

Shelby scrunched up her face, because she didn’t know how to respond to that. Her mother didn’t raise her, period. There was no sense in trying to talk rationally with an irrational person, so Shelby said nothing. She let her mother believe that she had “won,” and her mother went inside. Shelby stayed outside for a while and waited for a minute or two before attempting to fish her shoes out of the garbage can. Once she got the second shoe, her grandpa opened the screen door and came out.

“Is the Wheel over already?” Shelby asked him, smiling.

“Yep yep. No big winner this time. I swear, the puzzles are getting weirder the older I get.”

“That’s not just you, Pop, they really are getting dumb.”

“Yeah, I thought so.” He smiled to himself, and looked at the shoes in Shelby’s hands. He thought for a second before talking. He eventually said, “She didn’t always used to be like this.”

“I know,” Shelby said.

Her grandpa nodded. He looked at the sun, which was getting very close to setting, and he sighed. He waddled back inside.



Shelby wasn’t proud of her job at the gas station, but her uncle was the manager and so looking for a job anywhere else didn’t seem like an option. Luckily it was situated on the very edge of town, so most of the kids from school didn’t come by on a normal basis, at least during her shift, which was a weekend graveyard shift. She was sacrificing her free time to work, free time that could’ve been spent at the movies, or at parties, or at concerts, but of course Shelby never went to any of these things. Shelby’s only friend was Lindsey, and all they ever did together was hang out at Lindsey’s house, or sometimes they’d go to the park, or to Wal-Mart, or to Mr. Wang’s Chicken.

Shelby was very much caught off guard when Claire Washburn, class valedictorian, walked into the convenience store that she worked at around midnight on a Saturday. Shelby had known Claire all of her life, they were even in the same Kindergarten class together. They were never friends, but they’d always seemed to exist around each other. Everyone knew Claire. She was recently voted as the “Most Likely to Succeed.” Even Shelby wrote Claire’s name on the ballot, it was an irrefutable fact: Claire would succeed. Shelby wasn’t voted as anything, of course. Most people didn’t know Shelby’s name.

Shelby accidentally made eye contact with Claire, then said an obligatory, “Hi, Claire.”

Claire looked up and stared at Shelby for what felt like a little too long. Shelby recognized the look. That slight squinting of the eyes, the gears turning as Claire’s mind tried to figure out what Shelby’s name was, even Claire’s mouth was forming a kind of “sh” shape as if she had an idea of Shelby’s name but didn’t... quite... know. Shelby knew her own face was forgettable. She decided to act compassionately.

“It’s Shelby.”

“I knew that.” Claire grinned smugly. At least it looked smug. Shelby had a habit of reading everyone’s signals as negative, but it was something that she was aware of, and something that she was trying to correct. Shelby told herself that maybe that’s just the way that Claire smiles, and smiled back. “We were in Ms. Parker’s third grade together. And Mrs. Tabor’s fourth grade. And Mr. Amoroso’s fifth grade.”

“Right. I know,” Claire said.

“What are you doing all the way out here?”

“Oh, you know,” Claire said, but Shelby had no idea what she was talking about. “Getting some midnight snacks.”

Shelby grinned, imagining that maybe she and Claire weren’t so different after all. Maybe here, in the privacy of this empty convenience store, she could let her guard down around Claire Washburn and pal around, as the kids are known to do.

“Got the munchies, huh?” Shelby winked at Claire. Claire’s face face dropped so fast it was terrifying. Shelby immediately started to backpedal. “I’m kidding!” Shelby said, and pointed to the middle aisle.

“Snacks are over there.”

Claire disappeared into the aisles while Shelby ducked away behind the register. As an eighteen-year-old, the sensation of embarrassment was probably the most tactile of emotions. Shelby felt extremely present in her own body, which sucked especially hard, because of all times to feel present, times of intense embarrassment were the moments she wanted to escape the most. Her face felt flushed, she could feel the redness literally coming off of her skin like a sunburn. She retreated within herself and thought about Claire, telling all of her friends about the stupid comment Shelby made at her stupid job and how she must be a stupid stoner with a sad, stupid life—

There was a dull *thud* as Claire dumped her candy and soda onto the counter for Shelby to ring up. Her muscle memory kicked in, and she rang up the items. Shelby wasn't here. Claire wasn't here. Maybe if she pretended that this moment wasn't happening, the two of them would just vanish into the ether. Or at least one of them. Is it possible to erase memories? Can you think someone out of existence?

Claire was turning to leave when the bell on the door *dinged!* to signal the fact that someone else was entering the convenience store.

Shelby never really understood what “suicidal ideations” were; she thought it was something that everyone did. Sometimes she would consider stepping in front of an oncoming car, or off of the bleachers at the football field, but they'd probably only put her in a wheelchair if she fell from them. The giant circular saw in Coach Olinde's woodshop class was especially appealing, but she didn't take woodshop, and could only admire the spinning blade from afar.

But on this Saturday night, death came and asked Shelby, personally, out on a date.

A stranger, wearing a balaclava, pointed his gun first at Shelby, who instinctively raised her arms above her head. Her uncle had told her in these situations to just hand over the money in the register, and

don't fight or argue. Nothing is worth being shot over. The intruder then pointed the gun at Claire, who dropped her candy and soda everywhere. The noise was loud and startling. Shelby felt weirdly jealous of Claire, having a gun pointed at her, the stranger's focus now on Claire instead of Shelby. *Claire gets all of the attention*, Shelby thought. Claire was furious.

"Why are you pointing that thing at me?" Claire shouted at the intruder. She then pointed an accusatory finger at Shelby, which caught Shelby by surprise, and it felt strange, but it also felt nice, and Shelby basked in it. For probably the first time in her life, Shelby felt her her diaphragm contract, and her breathing grew stronger and deeper; she felt more relaxed, and so she stood up a little straighter. "She's the person working behind the register," Claire continued, "shouldn't you be waving that in her face? I'm just a witness and I already don't know what you look like!"

The stranger looked at Shelby again. Shelby wasn't used to having this much attention focused on her, and she realized, deep down, that what she wanted most was to have that gun pointed at her face again. She felt a longing for it. An attraction to it. She needed the stranger to point his weapon in her direction but she didn't know how to do it, or what to say, so the only thing that came out of her mouth was the word, "What."

The intruder seemed to make up his mind, however, and with a mind-altering blast, Claire crumpled to the ground as Shelby watched.

The rest of the night was a blur. The man said, "You're welcome," after he took the money in the register, all \$140 of it. Shelby didn't know if the "you're welcome" was in regards to not murdering her, or for taking out an assertive personality like Claire Washburn. Either way, Shelby didn't feel gratitude. All she felt was inconvenienced. She still had an entire weekend's worth of homework to do, only now she was a witness

to Claire Washburn's murder, and that was really going to botch up her schedule. She looked down at the floor, which was covered in Claire's blood and soda. Someone was going to have to clean that up. Her neck ached.



Shelby and Claire were in Mr. Amoroso's fifth grade class together in 1998. That year, the entire fifth grade put on a Christmas pageant. The pageant at Joyce Elementary was a yearly fixture, and the parts were always the same: some students would put on a small nativity scene, some would put on a short version of *The Nutcracker*, some would just dress up like gingerbread people or snowflakes and stand on stage so that their parents could take pictures of them. The best singer would play the archangel Gabriel, who tells the teenage Mary that she will give birth to Jesus Christ.

Claire Washburn didn't need to audition for Gabriel, but of course she got the part anyway.

The character of Gabriel has this beautiful song that is undoubtedly the show-stopping number. Shelby had practiced singing it in her room for days leading up to the audition. She imagined singing it in front of the giant auditorium full of people. She knew it note for note, every slight nuance within the song was committed to memory.

When Claire got the part, Shelby felt discouraged, but at the same time, she wasn't surprised at all. It was always going to be Claire's part, there was no way around this. Shelby ended up getting the part of Candy Cane Number 2.

When Claire got sick on the night of the pageant, however, Shelby was asked to stand in for the role of Gabriel, which she accepted enthusiastically.

Shelby's mother attended the performance. She helped her daughter put on makeup backstage. She had never seemed so proud of Shelby. She applied a layer of shimmery pink lipstick onto Shelby's lips, then showed Shelby how to kiss a tissue to even it out. "Like this!" she said, giving the Kleenex and big smack. Shelby imitated her mother. "I'm so impressed," said Shelby's mom. "I never thought you'd ever get such a big role. I'm looking forward to hearing your beautiful voice so much." Shelby grinned and looked down.

Even at ten, Shelby was extremely self-aware. She understood that she was ungrateful, and she didn't like it. She understood that even though she had the biggest part in the school play, it meant nothing, because it was never hers to begin with. She didn't win the audition, Claire did. The audience wanted to hear Claire, not her. The compliments she'd receive after her performance would mean nothing to her, because she didn't earn that role, and she hated that she couldn't appreciate it. It filled her with an empty hole, a vacuum, even, that needed to be filled.



The news of Claire's murder spread like a wildfire. The Monday after the event was treated as a day of mourning, and if any seniors didn't show up for class they were given excused absences. The school counselor reminded everyone during the morning announcements that if they needed to come talk to him about what happened, his door would be open all day. Shelby didn't know the extent of everyone's knowledge regarding her involvement in Claire's death. She assumed that it was most likely that they knew she was there, and chose not to talk to her about it. What if everyone thought that she was responsible? In a way, Shelby kind of felt that she was. But it felt worse knowing that everyone was thinking their thoughts and coming to their own conclusions instead of asking her what really happened.

Even in death, Claire was the real angel, and Shelby was ungrateful.

At least Lindsey knew Shelby's truth. She might not have understood Shelby, but she listened to Shelby and let Shelby vent. On Wednesday, Lindsey asked Shelby if she wanted to attend the Christian Youth Club meeting in the speech lab again. Shelby's answer was simply an expression of tired bewilderment. Lindsey didn't understand Shelby's response, so she said, "What? Why wouldn't we? It's Mr. Wang's Chicken. It should cheer you up."

"I just feel like... I'm definitely going to hell. If I step foot in that meeting. They'll definitely know I'm not a Christian. I shouldn't go to those meetings. I'm not one of them."

"First of all," Lindsey said, "You didn't kill Claire Washburn." She paused, and looked at Shelby. "Did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"Okay. You're not a murderer, you're not evil, and your skin won't burn away once you step into that room. Those meetings are just feel good meetings so people who think they're better than everyone else can eat food that's fancier than cafeteria food and talk about how great they are. So I think we should go to that meeting and feel good and eat some chicken and then make fun of them afterwards because it'll make you feel better. Please?" Lindsey looked at Shelby, hoping for a smile. Shelby kind of smiled, almost.

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The meeting was a real downer. Everyone was still sad about Claire, so this meeting in particular was spent talking about how great she was. One by one, a student would come up to the front of the classroom and talk about their relationship with Claire, and what a wonderful witness to Christ she was.

After about ten minutes, Shelby started to feel extremely uncomfortable, and whispered to Lindsey that she was going to try and escape out the door in the back. In her attempt to leave, however, the leader of the club, Joseph, mistook her movement for an effort to come forward and talk about Claire.

“Shelby? It’s Shelby, isn’t it?”

Shelby froze where she stood.

“Did you want to say a few words about Claire?”

“Um...” Shelby pushed her chair under the desk with a loud *SQUAWK* sound. Instead of moving towards the front of the room, she just stood rooted into the ground, situated in the back of the room. Everyone turned in her direction, as if a huge spotlight were focused on her.

“I uh. I just think it’s messed up, is all,” Shelby started, not really planning any of the words that started to tumble out of her mouth. “You know when you see someone like Claire get killed in front of you—” she could hear a muffled cry from the other side of the room “—sorry, I guess I mean pass away in front of you, all you can think about is, why her? As in, why not me?” This was met with pitying glances from the other students in the room. “If a loving God exists, why would he let someone like Claire Washburn die? We all knew her, we all knew that she was destined to do great things. But now she’s gone, and we’re all left to fill in this massive space that she left behind. I mean, look at Beth...” everyone unintentionally glanced over at Bethany Wilcox, who returned their looks with extreme unease. “Beth’s the valedictorian now, but she wouldn’t have been if Claire hadn’t died. I’m not saying that that’s a bad thing, I... I don’t know what I’m saying. I’ve been coming to these meetings since the start of this year for the food and honestly, I don’t think I believe in this God that you guys are crazy about, but I can’t help but feel like this whole event was a huge sign.”

Somewhere in the room Erin Thermot could be heard muttering, “What the fuck is wrong with you.”

Shelby continued, standing up a little straighter. “All this time I felt rejected by religion, but that’s just not true. If Claire’s death proves anything, it’s that God definitely exists, and He loves us.” Shelby could feel dozens of angry and confused sets of eyes staring back at her, swollen with tears. She wasn’t trying to instigate a fight with the Christian Youths, but she felt brave, from the bottom of her dirty Vans to the crown of her head, which had finally aligned itself with her spine. She took a nice deep breath in and relaxed her shoulders. Lindsey, still sitting, tapped Shelby on the side.

“Are we going?”

Everyone in the room was still looking at Shelby.

“No,” Shelby said. “I know what I want. I will stay right here.” She didn’t sit down.

