

Dear Sam,

4.4.12

The bed is still there.

It stands tall with its grand headrest and golden lion paws, and in the face of all this absurdity that has become our lives, the normalcy of those pillows and linen sheets is almost unsettling. It's weird too, because it stands like a single island of old in an entire sea of new. The walls have been painted and all the furniture has been removed and replaced. The old rocking chair by the window was thrown away, and in its place is a big white dresser that seems to sneer at me every time I walk past it, its garish yellow hardware clashing with the rest of the room. The flowery pink curtains that Mom loved so much were ripped away from the windows, replaced by plantation shutters that apparently "raise the value of the house exponentially," according to Mr. Dunley.

Oh, Mr. Dunley. I haven't told you about him yet, have I? He's the real-estate agent they assigned to our house, a small, plump man with a thick head of hair that I thought was real until he removed it once on a sweaty day. He reminds me of a hawk, always watching over me and making sure everything is in its place, perfect and pristine for the precious buyers that come and go, all of them sniffing around our house in hopes of stealing it, and all our memories, away from us. They're perfect though, those families. A lot of them seem so happy, with two smiling parents and siblings that fight and laugh and even dogs that rarely bark. Even their dogs are perfect, Sam, they don't even bark.

Sometimes I wish we had been one of those families. The kind that goes out to lunch on weekends and catches the matinee show at the local theater, the ones that send out yearly Christmas cards with photos of them all posing in white t-shirts in their perfectly manicured back lawn. We used to make fun of those families, remember? We used to laugh at them when they walked by and tease those kids at school, we always thought we were somehow better than them, that our hardships made us stronger. We weren't any stronger though, Sam, we just became harder.

The new families that I've been meeting are a little like that, actually. They're all from the east side, with fancy cars and nice bags and some weird sense of charity that makes them want to take me in. I'm just the poor, broken girl to them, the piteous charity case that they're all trying to fix. Later, when I've become the poster child for good Christian values, they'll name a building after me or start a charity organization for "kids like me," and everyone will dig deep in their bottomless pockets and donate generously to settle that uneasy feeling in their stomach that makes them feel empty.

You know how it is, Sam, they don't look at us like people, they just look at us like problems they want to fix.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

5.7.12

They sold the house today.

Mr. Dunley made me pack up all of my things (he looked at me with pity and some sort of disgust when all my things only came up to one tiny suitcase) and stand outside while he showed the new family around, and when the younger daughter asked who I was, he just chuckled nervously and pushed her along. They were perfect of course, only a perfect family can live in a perfect house like ours. There's a mom and a dad and two older brothers and one younger daughter, and I bet they have a lifetime supply of perfectly lit and professionally photographed Christmas cards.

It's been a month now since my last letter to you, and since then I've watched as our house was sold away to the highest bidder, and I watched as this new family ripped out our vegetable garden, the one we made with Mom two Easter's ago. I watched as they painted over the wall next to the fridge, the one with Mom's loopy handwriting all over it marking our height through childhood. The first one read "Sam - 3 ft 7 in - 11/3/99" just a month before your 4th birthday, and even though I wasn't born yet, I can picture Mom's smile as she wrote that down, her pride beaming through that her little 3-year-old was taller than most. You were always her favorite, Sam, and everyone knew it. I used to wonder why that fact didn't bother me, but I've figure it out now. You needed each other. It wasn't a matter of favorites or who played the better child, it was a simple, desperate need for each other. She needed you like she needed to breathe, and you needed her warmth and smiles and encouragement in every aspect of your life. She was your best friend, and you were God's gift to her in the hell that had become her life. I couldn't be jealous of that, I could only watch it in awe.

You were each other's air.

I live in a group home now, and in many ways, it's similar to where Dad lives. The walls are cinder block and there are bars on the windows and absolutely no one trusts each other. The House Parent is a lot like the security guards at the prison, but the only difference is that she doesn't have a gun on her belt. The beds have wiry metal frames and the sheets are thin and stained and I feel like it's not only Dad who's living in a prison, it's me too. I hate everyone here, Sam, and every minute that I'm here feels like a minute closer to joining you wherever you are.

There's one girl though, and she's been in the system all her life, so she's been showing me the ropes. She's big and a lot older and when the other girls pick on me for only being 12-years-old, she steps up and everyone scurries away after one look at her. Her name's Bellamie, and I like her. She never asks questions and ignores the scars on my wrists and always saves some of her dessert to bring up to me when I'm too tired or broken to come down to dinner. We don't really talk much, I'm not sure she even speaks English, but her name is Bellamie, and I like her.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

9.1.12

Happy Birthday.

You're 17 today. I haven't written in a while, things have been crazy, but when I wrote down the date at the top of my paper in English class today, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I hope you're happy Sam, wherever you are.

A lot has happened since my last letter, but at the same time, I feel like nothing's changed at all. I live with a foster family now, and while the food and bed spreads are better here than in the group home, I miss Bellamie and don't feel welcome. The mom and dad have barely even made eye contact with me since I got here four months ago, and the other two kids, the biological children, obviously resent me for the place I've taken up in their lives. They're twins, and because the house only has three bedrooms, I've been sharing a room with the girl. Her name's Karen, and she hates me. She rips off my sheets in the middle of the night and pulls my hair when I don't do what she says. She's always complaining to her parents about how I take up too much space in the room, but they're too busy waiting for the monthly foster check to notice how uncomfortable we are. The dad, John Kering, is a little nicer than the mom, and often comes in our room in the middle of the night to check on us. He usually just goes over to Karen's side and sits with her for a while before he leaves, but recently he's been sitting by me as well. I don't know how I feel about him, whether I like him or need to stay away from him, and it's at times like these when I wish with all my heart that you were here with me, Sam. You would know what to do, you always did.

I've been going to school, though, since I moved into the Kerings' house, and I think I'm doing really well, Sam. My English teacher is probably my favorite person in the whole world, right after you and Mom. She's gentle and kind and when she smiles it's so genuine and bright that her eyes light up, just like Mom's used to. She never pushes me too hard but she's not afraid to yell if I'm slacking off, and in a lot of ways I think maybe she's who God sent me as an apology for taking Mom. Just like you were Mom's salvation, Ms. Woodrie is mine. I've made some friends and even joined the soccer team, and no one here knows who I am. I feel just like I did before everything got bad, before I marked up my wrists, before Dad went to jail, before Mom disappeared. I feel like the girl who used to have friends and write killer English essays and score goals in soccer games. I'm starting to feel a little more like Mary.

I drove by our old house yesterday, on the way home from an away game we had at the high school on our old street. The porch is now painted a hunter green instead of the pastel yellow it used to be, and the lawn has gone dry and patchy. I watched as we drove away, as it got smaller and smaller, and at the last moment, just as I was about to turn away, I swear I saw you and Mom. I saw you knee deep in dirt, holding up one of the carrots from our vegetable garden, and I saw Mom smiling that big smile of hers and ruffling your hair. I miss you Sam, everyday.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

1.2.13

Everyone's been looking at me weird all day.

I know exactly why, but I don't want to acknowledge it. I ignored Ms. Woodrie when she asked me how I was doing, and I sat down in math class and absolutely did not write the date on the top of my paper. I did everything I could to block it out and I most definitely did not talk about it with anyone, because if I did I would lose control, probably start ripping my own hair out or something crazy like that. If there was anyone in this entire world that I would talk to about this day, it would be you, Sam. But you're not here and I'm not wherever you are, and so this letter will have to do.

I've been remembering. I've been remembering her smile an awful lot today. I see it everywhere I go, in every unmarked spot of beauty that I come across. While I'm walking down the street and see that new couple, holding hands and sneaking glances at each other, I see her smile. When I notice the two best friends doubled over in laughter, one of them snorting out her water and making them both laugh even harder, I remember the way her smile lit up her eyes and creased the skin by the sides of her lips. When I walk by the park and see all the new mothers taking their "Mommy and Me" dance classes, the toddlers wobbling around on their pudgy feet, I can almost hear the sound of her laugh, see the way her nostrils used to flare when she was amused. I see her everywhere, Sam, and never once do I see her without you by her side.

It's been one year. One year since a blue sedan with a drunk driver ran over Mom in the middle of the night. One year since I filed a missing person's report, worried sick about the one person in our lives that made our worlds turn. One year since Mom's death was declared a hit-and-run, and 50 weeks since it was declared a lost cause to try and find the person who did this to us, who took her from us. All we had were the remnants of the blue paint smeared on her forehead and the tire marks that came from a sedan. That and the smell of Jack Daniels whiskey lingering around her broken body, and the cracked bottle that lay a few feet from her battered limbs.

I want to cry, Sam. I want to cry and scream and stomp and hit and fight and die. I want to die. I want to find the person who did this to us and spit in their face. I want them to know what it feels like to have the life sucked out of you at 4 pm on a Wednesday afternoon. I want them to sit in a police station and listen as an officer with a cold stare and disinterested voice explains to them the happenings of the night their mother was taken from them, every single detail except for the one that matters the most. And I know, Sam, I know you'd be yelling at me if you were here, screaming about how revenge never solves anything. But that doesn't matter, does it? Because you're not here. You're nowhere. You are everywhere and nowhere and I need you like I need water and I miss you like I miss my Mother. But you are not here. Please come back, Sam.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

8.3.13

Bellamie has come to stay with us, and it's the happiest I've been since my 12th birthday.

Bellamie is 16 now, and they've been trying to get the older girls out of the group homes, so when she was looking for a real foster home to be placed in, the Kering's house was the first to show up. When she showed up on the doorstep with her ratty carry-on and worn converse I thought I was dreaming. The house has become more and more depressing since the last time I wrote, and it's been a while since I had something good to write about. Some good things have happened though.

Bellamie has come to stay. We're inseparable, and it's almost like how Mom used to call the two of us, "two peas in a pod." Never the same obviously, it'll never be with her the way it was with you, it'll never be with *anyone* the way it was with you, but it's the closest I've come to it since all the bad stuff. Because there's three girls now, one of us has to sleep downstairs on the couch. At first we all thought it was going to be Bellamie, seeing as she's the newest and all, or maybe even me since they haven't so much as acknowledged my existence since I moved in, but last night at the dinner table, the unthinkable happened. John told everyone that Karen would be sleeping downstairs on the couch. Can you believe it? Me and Bellamie didn't want to say anything on account of hurting Karen's feelings or making John change his mind, but we grabbed each other's hands under the table and squeezed hard enough to convey all the emotion we couldn't show on our faces. After the initial shock, I looked over at Karen. She looked pale and drained, almost like she was helplessly lost but not the least bit surprised or angry. It was sad to look at, and I did feel bad for her, but in the joy of being able to share a room with Bellamie, and *only* Bellamie, it just got swept under the rug. Nowadays me and Bellamie stay up way past lights out and whisper under the sheets for hours on end, talking about absolutely nothing and basically everything; so different from how it used to be back at the group home. We talk past the point of sense and logic, until our eyes are burning and our lids are shutting, and when that happens, we both roll over and fall asleep with smiles on our faces knowing we'll be able to wake and talk some more. It's just like the movies, Sam, she's my best friend. That's the first good thing that's happened. The very best thing that's happened.

The next isn't as amazing, but it's a good thing nonetheless. I got pulled aside a couple weeks ago in English class by Ms. Woodrie, and at first I thought it was bad. I thought the driver of the blue sedan had taken another victim, and for a second I didn't even want to know. But then Ms. Woodrie opened her mouth and none of her words were drunk or blue or Jack Daniels and when I finally calmed down, I realized she was offering me a spot on the school newspaper. It doesn't seem like much, but I'm doing what I love and meeting new people and I feel so, so normal, Sam. It would be better if you were here, everything would be better if you were here, but this is good.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

2.5.14

Something's wrong.

Something is wrong and I can feel it the way I could feel that Mom wasn't alive anymore. I hate thinking about it though, so I don't.

I've thrown myself into the newspaper and it's the most fun I've had in awhile. The other day we had to do a story on the new aquarium that opened up in town, the one across the street from Grandpa Grant's Farmer's Market. It's hard to walk by the places in this town and not remember when we went there as a family, the happiest we ever were when we were together. I couldn't stop looking over at the market all day, picturing the three of us walking down the aisles, stopping to look at even the most ridiculous stalls. It's hard to let go of something that consumed you so completely in the past.

I told Bellamie about our family, and she told me about her's. She told me she got put in the foster system after both her parents had to go to jail for cooking something illegal in their basement. I don't understand how a food can be illegal, Sam, but I guess adults have their own rules about things. We try to include Karen in our conversations sometimes, because despite the cold welcome, we feel bad for her now. She's constantly moping and carries a dark cloud around with her wherever she goes, and I don't know what's wrong but I hope for her sake that it gets better soon.

Last night, after Bellamie had fallen asleep, I heard Karen coughing up a storm downstairs. It's happened before, but usually her parents rush to her side as soon as it begins. Last night was different. She continued coughing for what seemed like forever, and after waiting another couple minutes for her parents to help her, I decided to go get her a glass of water. When I got downstairs, she was laying on her side, her small body heaving with each cough. I remember that the closer I got, the louder the coughs seemed, until I was standing right next to her watching as they racked through her lungs and throat. It was scary, and I was scared, so when I saw the garage door wide open for the first time since I'd moved in, I didn't think much of it. When I saw the packet of water bottles right inside the garage, I didn't think about it, I just walked in to get one.

But, when I flipped the light switch on to find a blue sedan parked in the garage, I did think about it. I thought about a lot actually. I thought about Mom's smile and her eyes and her long brown hair and the way she used to squeeze us so tight when she hugged us. I thought about her voice and her clothes and how they all smelled one certain way, a mixture of her perfume and her shampoo and her body. I thought about how that smell had mixed with the smell of alcohol when I was called in to identify the body, and I thought about how I could barely recognize her amidst all the blood.

I called 911.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

6.5.14

People are talking.

Everyone is talking. Everyone is whispering every time I walk into a room or sit down at a table. Everyone is always discussing, and I know exactly what they're discussing about.

I didn't believe them, at first. Of course I didn't believe them, because how could I? I could never believe something like that, something so cruel and wrong. What they were trying to tell me was cruel and wrong, it was disgusting, and it was about you. So for a long time, I fought them. I fought what they were saying so hard that they took me out of the Kering's house, moved me into the mental health wing of a hospital, and that's where I am now. That is where this letter is coming from.

Pretty soon, things started to fall into place. Everything the lawyers and doctors and social workers were saying were starting to make sense and fit together like little puzzle pieces. They were answering every question I had, but with none of the answers I wanted. I wanted John to be the drunk driver, but he wasn't. I wanted his blue sedan to be *the* blue sedan, but it wasn't. I wanted Mom to be alive, but she wasn't. I wanted you to be here with me, but you weren't. And even though everything they were saying was so sensical, so strongly backed by logic, I couldn't believe them. For two months I sat in a bed that was harder than the one at the group home and colder than the stares of the police officers the night of the accident, for two months I sat in that bed and refused to comprehend anything they were saying, because *they were not the answers I wanted to hear*.

Until one night, a month ago, I was laying in that same bed, and thinking about how different it was from the one at home. The one with the golden lion paws and a grand headrest and the softest, fluffiest pillows I ever rested my head on. And as I was thinking about the bed, I started thinking about the times we spent on that bed, cuddled up next to Mom and giggling about scary stories. I thought about the way she looked at us and the way we looked at her, and specifically about the way you looked at her, the way you needed her. You needed her to *breathe*, Sam, you needed her to exist. You said it all the time, she was your best friend, and you were her's. And what kind of best friend would you be, Sam, if you didn't come for her when she was hurt? But you didn't, you never came. I filed the missing person's report on my own, I identified the body all by myself, I visited her grave *alone*.

And in that moment, that moment right there, it all fell into place for me. Like falling dominos or a ticking bomb, it became clear to me in a way that made it ludicrous that I had ever forgotten. I could have listened to the best doctors in the world or the most skilled investigators in the system, but I would not have believed it until that very moment. Once I came to that moment, everything else came at a lightspeed. I was being hurled through a live movie of memories and trauma and pain, and I remembered each scene perfectly.

The first scene: You, getting ready to go to your final football game of high school. You're all dressed except for your shoes, and she's bending down and tying them for you like she always does, no matter how many times you insist on doing it on your own. She's rambling about how football is a dangerous enough game without you tripping over your shoelaces, and I'm sitting on the couch in the corner, laughing.

The second scene: Me and Mom are watching a movie, snuggled up under a mountain of blankets to fight away the frigid air in the house. The picture on the screen shows a boy and girl holding hands as they walk through school together, and both of us are smiling when we get the call. Mom answers it, and her face quickly goes pale, her lips pursing together and her hands starting to shake. I don't know what's going on, but as soon as she hangs up she grabs me and pulls me down the stairs, screaming about how she's going to ground you forever when she sees you.

The third scene: We're walking up to the house in our pajamas, freezing without anything to cover us up, when we see you get in the car. There's loud music and people spilling out into the lawn, and it's definitely the most high school party I've ever been to. You're stumbling along and almost slam the door on your foot, but eventually you get in the car and start to reverse your way down the long driveway that leads up to the house. You're going a little fast, a little too fast, and I may not know much about driving, but I know you're not supposed to be going that fast when you're in reverse.

The fourth scene: Mom is screaming now, screaming for you to stop. You're scratching all the cars parked along the road, and you're still in reverse. She pushes me off to the side and tells me to wait there no matter what, and continues to stand in the driveway, waving her arms and hollering for you to stop. I can see your face now, and I know you're not looking over your shoulder like you should be, and you're not slowing down either, you're just speeding up.

The fifth scene: You hit her. You drive the car right into her going at 45 miles an hour, and I watch in horror as her body, covered in her bubblegum pink cotton pajamas, goes flying across the lawn and lands with a sickening thud on the road. I'm so shocked I can't even scream, I can't breathe, I can't do anything but look over at you. You're looking over your shoulder now, shaking, shaking at what you've done to the person that makes our world turn.

The sixth scene: The car was a blue sedan. Your hand slips down to the gear again, and I see you switch it to drive. I can sense what's about to happen but I'm on the floor, unable to move, to scream, to do anything. We make eye contact. I'm pleading with my eyes for you to stay, for you to stay with me and take care of me, but you look away. The next thing I know you've wrapped the car around a tree and people are calling the cops and there is blood everywhere and I am so, so cold.

I hate you, Sam.

Dear Sam,

9.5.15

There's a new family.

They are kind. They are good to me. They throw me huge birthday parties and shower me with gifts and come in and say goodnight to me every night. They are happy, and they make me happy. They have one other daughter, Lilly, who they also adopted a couple years ago. She's 2-years-old now, and her face lights up when she sees me. They're respectful of my space and never push for answers, but they're there when I need them. One night 6 months ago I broke down after my millionth nightmare about a blue sedan, and they sat with me until dawn and rubbed my back and wiped my tears. They are kind, and they are good to me.

But until recently, I couldn't accept them. They were a good family, a great one, but they were not *mine*. They smile all the time and take me out to lunch on the weekends and sometimes we catch the matinee show at the local theater, but until recently, they did not feel like mine.

It's been one year, two months and 19 days since I last wrote a letter to you. I stopped writing for a lot of reasons, but mainly because I was angry. I was furious. I had so much heat and madness in my body all the time, constantly, that I thought eventually it would start to singe my intestines away. I was angry that you had taken so much from me: my mother, my life, my happiness. You took all that from me, and then you took yourself. You left me, even when I begged you to stay. And you can't say I didn't beg, Sam, because I remember it clear as day. I was laying on the cold ground in my pajamas and begging you, pouring every ounce of my soul into that one look we shared. I was asking you to stay here with me, I was telling you that I forgave you for what you had just done, I was screaming at you to never leave me. I couldn't talk, but I swear, Sam, I was saying all those things and I knew you were hearing them. But you ignored me. You looked away, and then you put your foot on the acceleration and ended not one, but two lives that night. So for a long time, I was angry.

Then came the sadness, the bone-crushing depression that hit me when I realized that I had not only lost my mother and brother in one night, but that I had also blocked it out for three full years. When I finally remembered, everyone looked at me with joy, with relief, and for the life of me I couldn't understand why. They kept throwing words at me, words like P.T.S.D., and fugue state and repressed memories, but I didn't care. I didn't care at all because this was ruining me, it was tearing me apart. For a long time, I wished I hadn't remembered. I wished I could've kept living in my dream of an unknown driver and a dead mother and a missing brother. It took awhile to come out of it, but I did eventually. My new family helped, and I realized that I had to accept them, to love them, because that's what you and Mom would've wanted me to do. One day I will.

Just not today.

Love, Mary

Dear Sam,

3.1.16

I've forgiven you.

Hating you was never going to get me anywhere, so I stopped. Now I think about the smiles. I think about your hair and how Mom was always on you to cut it, but you refused to because you thought it looked cool (it didn't). You were always the calm one, Sam, the one that taught me not to shove the bully back, but to walk away with dignity. One drunken night after a state championship win shouldn't define how I feel about you for the rest of my life. You taught me what dignity was, you *radiated* it, and I don't believe for a second that it's been stripped away after one bad decision. I hate what you did, Sam, but I don't hate you.

Things have gotten so exponentially better. Bellamie was adopted a little while after me by a family that loves her just as much as she loves them. The Kerings are doing well and visit some times, and John told me he'd have to sell the blue sedan if I apologized even one more time for falsely accusing him. Karen is sick and she's not going to get better, but they've come to terms with it, and now spend almost every day taking her out on new adventures with her brother. She seems the happiest she's ever been.

You and Mom died four years ago today, but for the first time, I am not facing this day alone. My parents, Arian and Rachel, are by my side, just like they have been every moment for the past year and a half. I started calling Arian Dad a couple months ago, and the first time I used the word he teared up and quickly walked away after hugging me almost as tightly as Mom used to hug us. To me, the word Mom still represents a loud laugh and a big smile and bubblegum pink pajamas, and I think Rachel understands that because later that week she told me she wouldn't care even if I never used the word. I love them both a lot, Sam.

Ten months ago I wrote an article in the school newspaper. I wrote about us. A lot of people liked it, and it went from a local paper to The New York Times. Dad and Rachel are so excited, and the fridge at home is now an embarrassing collage of a million newspaper clippings with my name at the bottom. A lot of people said it helped them, and it got me thinking. Four months later, I decided to start a campaign to raise awareness about drunk drivers, and even more, help those that they left behind. Writing these letters to you helped me accept my loss in a way that nothing else could have; it was intimate, personal, and the perfect way to keep a little part of you and Mom with me. I asked people to write letters to those they've lost in drunk driving accidents, and submit them to a website that displays them anonymously. The website and campaign have gained a lot of attention, and I hope with all my heart that reading the letters on the website will cause people to think twice before they put their foot on the acceleration.

I have lived through beautiful moments and survived through terrible ones, and you and Mom have been in the back of my mind through every single one. I love my family. I am happy. I laugh and I smile and I play soccer and I babysit Lilly. But if I could save anyone even a single moment of feeling the way I do, missing someone so much it feels like missing a part of yourself, I would do whatever it takes.

And I'm going to start with dearsam.org

Love, Mary.