

Madeline (Maddy) Rainwater

Grade: 6th

Title: In The Dark I See

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I roll over in the hard bed to face the door as the floorboards creak beneath light footsteps. My back scrapes against the rough wood of the cabin wall, dim light illuminating a shadowy figure. I cough, my throat screaming against the feeling, my entire chest a dull ache. This is how I know him: shadows, rough wood, immunity. He is never affected by my sickness, despite his close proximity to me nearly every day. When everyone else abandoned me, he remained by my side, comforting me through the pain.

"Hello," he whispers, kneeling on the solid floor and taking my small hand in his rough, large one. Once everyone left me in the dark, my eyes and ears became very sensitive, so he must always whisper. I don't usually speak, as it hurts my throat so badly.

"Hi." But I always greet him. My voice sounds crackly and hoarse, as if I haven't said a word in days. But I spoke to him only yesterday. I can see his face well enough in the dark to know that he is smiling.

"Your voice sounds better." I shake my head even as he speaks. It never does.

"No, really!" he protests loudly, and when I wince, he winces, too, correcting himself. "Really, though. I told you this wouldn't last forever." But I shake my head again. My eyes begin to burn, in addition to the rest of my body, and I can't take it. The tiny tears welling up in my soft, pale, blue eyes pour down my face, rolling over my lips and dragging across our hands, linked against my chin. I know I will die. And so did everyone else. That's why they left me. A sob wracks my frail body, and he moves to comfort me; puts his arm over my bony shoulder.

"It'll be okay. No, scratch that. *You'll* be okay." I sigh softly, squeezing his hand.

"Easy for you to... to say," I choke out, salt water dripping into my mouth. He shakes his head at me, but not in disagreement; in disapproval.

"I brought you food," he says, falsely cheerful. He doesn't usually bother with food, since I never want to eat. When I make no motion of dissent, he reaches for the sack he had dropped on the floor when he entered. "Chicken noodle soup," he says, waving it in my face. I chuckle, and he instantly looks elated. "I insist on meeting every cliché I can," he laughs, trying to make me laugh with him; trying to make me forget. But how I can I *forget* my death sentence? How, if my body is one huge ache, everywhere? How, when I am struggling to breathe, even now? I reach out frail arms for the Styrofoam container. Pulling it close, I heave it onto the bed.

"Weight?" I croak, breathing heavily after such physical exertion. He immediately understands my not-sentence.

"Barely a pound and a half," he says, looking away. I, too, look away, shaking my head at myself for asking. I fight with the lid for a while, struggling to get it off of the container, until he reaches for it without a word, and slips it off easily, handing me the white container. I bring it close to my nose, inhaling the salty smell. It's odd after smelling only wood and myself for so many months. I can smell the chicken, carrots, celery. The noodles don't have much of a smell, but I can smell them, too, a soft smell that is difficult to describe. None of it is particularly unpleasant, but nonetheless, I set the cup on the floor, turn away, and heave into the corner. Of course, there is nothing in my stomach to throw up, and I just heave and heave for what feels like forever. When I am finally done, I grimace at him and roll over despite how rude I know this is. I don't want him to have to see me cry any more than he already has to. I reach an arm out behind me, and again, no communication is required. He hands me a bottle of water, and I take it and guzzle the whole thing, handing it back to him. All this crying and not being able to throw up really takes it out of a girl. I scrub my face against the pillows, too tired to lift my hands so I could wipe my face clean. Rolling over, I see that he hasn't moved. Not an inch. He is just sitting there,

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and has been for the past ten minutes.

"Leads?" I ask, sounding slightly less like I'm on my death bed. Though I am no further away than I was yesterday.

"Nope. Other than that your immune system was so screwed up for no apparent reason that you caught just about every sickness *ever*, nothing really should have done this. You show symptoms of the common cold gone horribly wrong, particularly bad flu symptoms, chickenpox *and* measles symptoms, even malaria, according to the tests, plus a bunch more that I don't even remember. But the thing with your bones... They just don't know," he sighs. My bones began snapping every time I moved about a month after my sickness began. I blamed my overall weakness from lack of nutrition, but the doctors said that that shouldn't have affected my bones, at least not so quickly. Eventually, it might compromise the marrow, or one of my many diseases would have, but not within a month. I nod silently, dark hair brushing against the pillow. I yawn, inciting a half-disapproving, half-concerned look from him, and I sigh yet again.

"If you were tired, you should have told me."

"Not tired," I mumble through another yawn.

"Of course you are, you're yawning. Just go to sleep, I don't mind," he murmurs. He is just my friend, but I can only wish we were more. Sixteen is a normal time to fall in love. Sixteen and on your deathbed is not. Of course, I figured out I was in love with him a while ago. Only now can I even consider telling him, but it still seems impossible. He doesn't love me like that. I allow my eyelids to flutter down, but not far enough to block out my vision, and stare at his frosty blue eyes. His hair, eyes, and skin form a perfect contrast: Dark, light, and lighter. His a very, very dark brown, his eyes a frosty pale blue, and his skin perfectly white. I smile at this.

"What?" he asks, surprised but happy to see me smiling. The fog of sleep has begun to cloud my mind.

"I was just thinking... you remind me of a vampire," I giggle. He *is* pretty vampire-ish. He laughs as well, a low chuckle that lulls to me sleep as I replay it in my mind.

I dreamed that I told him I loved him, and that as soon as I told him, I was immediately cured. But, upon awakening, I see that there was no such luck. He appears to be sleeping against the wall, but his eyes snap open and the thin blankets rustle on top of me. My dream has supplied me with a false hope. A hope that I can escape the growing darkness around the corners of my vision. Slowly but surely, death is claiming me. The gnawing pain of hunger stopped long ago, the exhaustion becoming normal. I reach my hand out to him, smiling thinly. I won't die just yet.

"Hi," I whisper.

"Hi," he laughs back. I smile again, a real smile this time. If I died right now, I would be fine with it. I can at least pretend we're more than friends, holding hands and everything. "How are you?" he asks, his face telling me that he immediately thought it was a stupid question.

"Better. At least, a little," I grin yet again. I'm very smiley this... morning? Afternoon? "What time is it?"

"Uh... around three," he says, checking his watch. "PM. Why do you feel better?" Suddenly he is excited.

"Because. I... I won't have to deal with this anymore." I can see the pain register on his face. Could I tell him? Could I admit that I love him?

"No! No, you're... you're gonna live!" I can see two twin tears drip down his cheeks. I reach out and wipe them away.

"Don't cry. We both knew this would happen. Death is inevitable," I say, trying to sound as

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soothing as possible.

"No! No, no, no! You shouldn't die at sixteen! You're not going to die now! You're gonna get old and have gray hair and lots of grandkids! This will all be a sad story someday!" he shouts. More tears come, pouring down his face in streams.

"No. I can't. I'm so tired now, I can barely see you! *You* keep going. Live life for me. If I die, you can live for two. Have twice the fun!" I try to shout, but it comes out so feebly, I wonder that he can hear me.

"And twice the pain."

"Shh. You'll live through the pain."

"No, I won't. I can't."

"You can!" A sudden strength grabs hold of me and I reach out, shaking his shoulders. "*Promise* me that you'll make it!"

"I- I can't promise that. Lyte, I can't promise that I'll keep going without you."

"Don't call me that. I told you, it'll only make it harder. Look, I can't keep arguing with you!" I shake his shoulders even harder. "Promise! Promise me that one thing! As my final wish," I murmur the last part, half of me wishing he didn't hear.

"I promise! I promise you I'll keep going!" He is full-on sobbing now. Lost all dignity.

"Good! I... I have something to tell you, Adam."

"Don't call me that. It'll only make it harder," he mimics through the tears.

"I- I... lo-... I don't know if I can do this. Not now!" Now *I'm* crying. I was trying not to, for his sake, but I'm on my godforsaken deathbed and I can't even tell a boy I love him? I'm sixteen for God's sake!

"I didn't think we needed to say it," he says, stroking my hair. "Go to sleep. Don't suffer through this." With that, he lies down on the floor, facing me, and closes his eyes. Perhaps I had one last bought of strength in me, or maybe I just didn't care about the consequences anymore. Whatever the reason, I push back the blankets, cold enveloping me. My tiny feet slide off the bed and onto the cold, hard, rough wooden floor. As I stand up, all the blood rushes to my head, and I have to sit down again. I cough. And cough, and cough, and cough. A few tiny drops of blood spatter onto my hand, and a sharp pain sears through one of my more recently healed ribs. We can add whooping cough to my list of diseases. When I can finally stand up again, my hand is a bloody mess and I am bent over in pain, clutching my rib. I immediately kneel back down on the floor, scootching close to him on my knees. The scent of blood and the salty smell of sweat fill my nose, and I grimace, covering it with my left hand. After a forever of painful crawling, I reach him. I simply fall over onto my side, not caring about the pain anymore. As my final act, I wiggle as close to him as I can get, curling up into his side. Surrounded by his warmth, and the imagined pain of life, I allow the darkness to fill my vision. It's just like falling asleep. I feel like I'm floating... finding peace. If I died right now, I would be perfectly okay with it.