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BIOGRAPHY:

Brook Schmid is a current senior at Garnet Valley High School. She is a dual citizen of Switzerland with a passion for travel and a love for service. Although she has not yet chosen where she will be attending college yet, she plans to pursue a degree in biomedical engineering on the pre-med track, and hopes to continue her international pursuits with a French minor and time spent studying abroad. She is an avid nature enthusiast and dog lover who seeks adventure in every aspect of her being, trying to make the most out of the one life that she was given.

The Monsters We Cannot See

“Have you ever had a dream so palpable that you couldn’t imagine anything else held as much truth, that maybe the dismal everyday that those around you call reality is in fact just the hallucinogenic effects of a rare brain tumor or maybe even a dream in itself?”

A tall middle aged brunette, seated stiffly in the mahogany chair in front of me, patronizingly peered over her round brown spectacles, replying, “that doesn’t answer my question, you are going to have to confront what happened eventually.”

Rolling my eyes, I sunk deeper into the manila colored couch which had become my state mandated prison once a month. “It’s been years, I’m fine, I have friends, I’m doing well in school, I’m not sure why I still have to come here.”

“You know why you’re here and you will continue to be here until you start talking to me.” She started to tap her foot in the mind numbingly annoying fashion that had become the

underlying tune of the past seven years, then continued. “Since we first met each other you have not once brought up the incident, and until you do, we will continue to sit here and stare at each other like idiots.”

A slight breeze wafted from the lonely, tiny window at the top of the far wall. You’d think that if they wanted people to open up they’d make the room a little more comfortable, maybe put in some grand windows, allow some natural light into this dingy, cramped room. But then again, God forbid I jump, God forbid another orphan doesn’t make it out of our state systems. I closed my eyes in frustration. There was a strong humming sound coming from a vent in the ceiling, as if the mildew smell wasn’t enough, and combined with Dr. Gallo’s tapping I could feel a splitting headache forming. I honed in on the one thing that gave me comfort: the sound of the tacky old grandfather clock in the corner, ticking the seconds away. I have spent 168 painful hours in this office; that is over 10,000 minutes, 600,000 seconds of my life that have been wasted staring at the crumbling popcorn ceiling of this rundown ‘counseling’ office in the South side of Chicago.

We sat there for the next twenty minutes, in silence, until twiddling my thumbs and picking at my cuticles became tiresome and uninteresting. Dr. Gallo’s once unyielding stare was replaced by the slight sinking and fluttering of the eyelids. Tick, Tick, Tick. Someone was moving furniture in the upstairs apartment, scraping legs against the poorly insulated hardwood. TICK, TICK, TICK. Eyes completely shut, and chin resting on her hand, Dr Gallo’s pale elbow started slowly sinking closer to the edge of the armrest. TICK, TI- “have you ever heard of the monster of Lake Cottage Grove?”

Jumping at the foreign sound of a human voice, Dr. Gallo's eyes widened, she shook the sleep out of her face and repositioned herself into her regular condescending stature before responding, "no, but if you're not going to talk to me about serious things I might as well be entertained."

I lay back for a minute, surprised at her compliance with my shenanigans, and tried to think up the non-existent story I had just mentioned. Finally I started, "Once upon a time there lived two young boys: Jace and Parker. Jace was an idealistic seven year old with deep brown hair and eyes that matched. Parker on the other hand was nine, quick witted, and strong willed with emerald eyes and black curls. Despite their differences, it was a rarity to see one without the other close behind."

* * *

Parker shut the tattered screen door behind him and stepped out into the blazing heat of the July midday sun. Jace was already waiting on the sidewalk, towel in hand, with a smile as wide as the cloudless sky stretching across his face.

"Come on Parker lets go"—he hopped around impatiently—"we don't have much time!"

The day before, while chasing an abnormally fast toad, they stumbled upon a small lake in the woods near their house. On the way back, Parker pulled out the rusty swiss army knife he found in the junkyard at the beginning of the summer and marked any large trees they passed with an X so they could return.

Parker hopped down the steps and joined Jace, sprinting and laughing towards the woods until his lungs were on fire. They reached the first X and began to precariously cut their way through the jungle of vines before them, ducking under branches and hopping over fallen stumps

until suddenly they reached a small clearing and a slight slope that hid the wondrous crystal clear lake from view. Jace ran ahead, pulling off his shirt, shoes and socks on the way before leaping with all his might into the crisp refreshing water. Parker, close behind, landed mere milliseconds after his friend, pushing him deeper towards the bottom. They emerged, breathless, at the same time, splashing and tackling each other playfully. Parker bent down, cupping his hands full of water in preparation for his next attack, but when he looked at his target he was shocked to see him standing, eyes wide in awe, mouth open, slowly turning his head in a grand arc, staring at his surroundings. For the first time since he re-emerged from the lake Parker also looked up. To his surprise, before him, great geometrical trees of all different colors replaced the drab oaks that were there before, tiny bugs who shined like precious gemstones walked in lines from the tallest down to the edge of the water, a purple frog hopped by, right in front of his face, each leap flying a great distance into the air. Suddenly, he heard angelic voices coming from the trees and when he looked up thousands of colorful parrots were perched on the top branches singing a melodic tune in harmony. His mouth dropped open and he looked at Jace in wonder.

“Wh-, How, Wh-Where are we?” Sputtered Parker.

Jace was clearly in shock but was snapped out of it by Parker’s fragmented words and he responded, “I-I I don’t know.” He leaped out of the lake determined to pursue a sapphire beetle. “C’mon Parker, who knows how long this is going to last”—his eyes filled with excitement and warmth flowed into his face—“let’s explore!”

Still shaken from the insanity of it all Parker dragged himself out of the water did a quick 360 degree turn, trying to take it all in, and followed Jace who, skipping down a path three feet ahead, was ready to take on this new world.

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Dr. Gallo's throaty voice broke me from my storytelling trance, "I'm sorry to interrupt, I just need to grab some water, my daughter's a bit sick and I think I may be catching it. Would you like some?"

"No thanks." I said automatically.

With that, she slowly got up from her chair and crept her way over to the old Brita filter pitcher she had on the counter, pouring herself a tall glass of water while asking, "So, how'd you hear about this story, a friend?"

"No, I made it up"

She sat on that for a second in the way most therapists do, as if every little piece of information was the key to unlocking my soul. "So, this Jace character, he seems familiar to me, does he seem familiar to you? How did you think him up?"

Annoyed at the interruption and attempted psychoanalysis, I begrudgingly responded, "Um I don't know, he was just the first thing to come to mind, anyways..."

* * *

Jace and Parker ventured through the colorful maze, constantly pointing out new fascinating creatures to each other until they stumbled upon the largest tree of them all. It had a pink and green speckled trunk with limbs as thick as the boys themselves, broad fuschia leaves and tips that reached into the heavens and hell simultaneously.

Craning his neck, Parker squinted his eyes against the sun and leaned ever so slightly to Jace on his left, whispering under his breath, "This is it, this is the place, this is our new home." The sun was starting to sink in the sky leaving an auburn glow around the cotton candy clouds;

the boys hurried back to their crystal portal and jumped in, coming up to the faded light of reality and their normal world. Sprinting, so they wouldn't get in trouble, they raced back to their houses, reluctantly parting ways and dreadful of what awaited them behind their worn doors, wishing they could stay in the exciting alternate universe they had just discovered.

* * *

Dr Gallo cleared her throat, "Why did the kids dread going home?"

"I'm not sure, why wouldn't they want to stay in their new colorful world?"

To my frustration she continued her interrogation, "Did you ever dread going home like they did?"

"That isn't relevant. Do you want to hear the end of the story or not?"

* * *

For the next three weeks, every waking second of daylight they could, Jace and Parker were in the world beneath the surface. The tall tree that they found did in fact become their home base; they used fallen vines and branches to create a ramshackle two room tree house, one for 'sleeping' and one as a lookout for pretend raids on their mighty castle. They explored far out into the wilderness, finding new caves or waterfalls to conquer almost every day. Using tall triangular grass as swords, they braved mountains and deserts, stalking down the figurative mighty dragons and fair maidens of their dreams; however, every night they grumpily trodded back to their dim houses, counting down the minutes until they could return.

One blazing August day stood out from the rest and changed the course of the boys lives forever. As they had so many times before they maneuvered their way to the secret entrance, however this time they carried backpacks filled with clothes and toys from their houses. They

had decided that they would stay; going back at night every day was becoming harder and harder. Eager to get out of the sun's unforgiving rays and delve into their new project, they left without looking into the icy waters. They did not see the brown fungus growing on the far side of the pond, they did not see the shadow lurking in the water, and when they crossed over and ran for home base, they did not see the evil eyes watching their little legs hop from rock to rock.

Once they reached the makeshift tree house, they realized that they had made a fatal error; there was barely enough room to stand up, much less room for two growing boys to sleep. Looking around at the dimly lit room, Parker sighed, "We have a lot of work to do today Jace, we better get a move on." So they set off, on the hunt for building materials and vines to tie it all together. They had been traveling for ten minutes, following a trail where they had found large stashes of aqua branches two days earlier. Suddenly, Jace stopped dead in his tracks in the clearing a few feet ahead of Parker and asked, "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" replied Parker.

Jace nervously whipped his head from side to side, wide eyed, "Crunching and rustling in the trees, it sounds like something big"

"You're hearing things, it's probably just a frog." But, as soon as the last words left his mouth, he too heard a crunch, this time booming not ten feet away from them. He was just about to say, 'wait Jace, I heard one too' when suddenly Jace let out an earth shattering scream and was swooped off the ground by an invisible force holding him by his backpack and whipping him around like a chew toy in a dog's mouth. Without hesitation, Parker let out a war cry and charged towards Jace full force, but two feet away from him, he hit something that felt like a concrete wall. Dazed and confused, he punched at the air around him, seemingly landing blows on the

unseen creature which had his good friend in his grasp, all the while screaming “Let him go! Let him go!” Parker was flung towards the nearest tree, hitting so hard that the wind was knocked out of him. He drew himself up, coughing and limping a little, and looked on in despair as Jace’s face became bloody with scratches from nearby tree limbs. Just when he thought that it could go on no longer and all hope was lost, Jace slipped out of his backpack straps, fell to the ground and started screaming at Parker.

“RUN, RUN, RUN, GET BACK TO THE LAKE!” They both started sprinting, faster than they have ever run before, faster than anyone has run before, the wind whipping at their faces, their bodies in overdrive. The monster was close behind, they could hear it leveling all living creatures, nipping right at their ankles.

“Keep going,” yelled Parker, “We’re so close!” They could see the water now, the crystalline still surface that had brought them so much joy, their salvation. They dove, launching through the air, cannonballing deep into the depths of the cool water. Everything went dark.

Parker squinted his eyes against the blinding sun, all he could see was white. There was an intense pounding in his head and he winced. Blinking a few times, objects began to take shape around him; it was clear that he was back to the real world; the grey trees made a bleak backdrop. His fingertips reached out, exploring his surroundings, the dry cracked earth beneath him. He jolted up. Where was the lake?

“Jace, Jace, where are you?” He searched around desperately, shouting at the top of his lungs, but Jace, his best friend, his brother, was nowhere to be found.

* * *

Dr. Gallo leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath. “What happened to Jace, what really happened?”

“I’m not sure.”

“What happened to him?”

“I don’t know,” I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes and a lump forming at the back of my throat, I could feel all my frustration and emotion from the past seven years coming to the surface.

“What happened to him, what happened to Jace, what happened?”

“I DON’T KNOW.” Tears were now streaming down my face.

Dr. Gallo remained calm, “What happened to Jace? I think that you do know. What happened to your brother?”

I broke, memories started hitting me like heavyweight punches to the gut. That terrible night seven years ago came flooding back, piece by piece. “I can’t, I can’t,” I sobbed.

“What happened?”

“He was so young. I tried to stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“He couldn’t control it, dad, h-he thought he was something else. I hit him and hit him, but he wouldn’t stop, I couldn’t save him. I couldn’t save him. I couldn’t save him.”

“It’s not your fault.” I could see that Dr. Gallo’s normal emotionless stare was replaced with more empathy.

“I-I couldn’t” all the energy was drained from my body, my voice went weak and I lay there staring at the popcorn ceiling once more.

“Your father’s schizophrenia was not your fault. Your brother’s death was not your fault. It happened, and it’s terrible, but it’s over now, and it’s not your fault.”

As we stared into each others emotion-filled eyes, one thing was clear, this would be the last time I would sit in this damp room, this would be the last time I would listen to the old grandfather clock, and it sure as hell would be the last time I let the weight of my past hold me back.