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Done. My desk is a mess. The warm glow of my laptop on night mode illuminates what was once a stack of papers, but has since deteriorated into a scattered clump of smudged pencil and eraser shavings.

AP Lit, AP Psych, Math, Physics. The list repeats in my mind as I shuffle through the papers. It's all there.

A sharp jolt of pain spreads up through my spine. My body objects to the hours I've spent hunched over my work. How long has it been? One, two ... six hours? My eyes survey the room, searching for my clock. To the right of me is the window, casting a blue-toned glow across the floor. Behind me are bookshelves, and-ah, there it is. I stumble to my feet, every bone in my body feeling suddenly fifty years older. My foot catches on the strap of my open backpack as I attempt to plough through the sea of candy wrappers and soda cans that obscure my carpet. I reach my destination--the small digital clock resting on a stack of textbooks. The glowing numbers indicate that it's 2:04 AM. Seven hours. Exhaustion hits. My eyelids are lead weights all of a sudden.

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Collapsing onto my bed, my body sinks into my mattress, fitting like a perfect puzzle piece into years-old indent I've created in my sleep.

My arm reaches for the little yellow container on my nightstand. I unscrew the supposedly child-proof lid, and tilt the opening into my mouth. A pill falls onto my tongue, and I swallow.

Then I begin counting.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

Hello, Mom. That was faster than last night.

She sits on the end of the bed, her black hair flowing onto the blue comforter. Her brown eyes meet mine. She pats the space beside her, beckoning me.

"You know I can't move. You'll disappear as soon as I sit up."

Her features sag, and she seems to sadden. Her greying eyebrows turn in, her golden aura seems to lilt.

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"I'm sorry," I say, my voice cracking. I wish I could touch her.
Feel her calloused hands in mine again, embrace her.

She softens. Her lips part, making way for a song. The gentle melody reminds me of how a bee must feel, nestled amongst its friends in a cove of sweet honey. My consciousness drifts away, floating on a river that flows between sleep and awareness.

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Light emanates through my closed eyelids. It's morning-but I can still hear my mother's singing. My heart thumps.

She's real. She's still here. Can I touch her?

But somewhere in my ecstasy, I realise: it's not her. The melody is far too high, the voice sharp and grating.

It's the blue bird.

I force my eyes open.

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Light floods my room, bathing it in a golden glow. Outside my window sits the producer of the sound—a small bird poised on the limbs of my magnolia.

I watch it for a while, envisioning what this bird must think when it looks upon the world. Does it see beauty or love? Sadness? Despair? Or has it, like I have, given up on feeling? Has its spirit left, gone to heaven with its mother?

Getting up feels robotic. My limbs move as they must, their function purely superficial. The blue plaid of my school uniform peeks out from beneath my bed, calling me to a day I've lived a thousand times before. After throwing my supplies in my bag, I leave my bedroom. My socks dull the sound of my feet on the stairwell as I try not to wake my dad.

Outside, the autumn air greets me. Its brisk pace reminds me of a day not unlike this one. A day when the sound of my feet crunching on autumn leaves still filled me with satisfaction. It was about a month ago, when the breeze was warmer, and the leaves of the trees hadn't yet entered that brown, decaying stage that makes you wish the snow would come sooner.

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I'd gone to school that day, waited at the bus stop just as I'm doing now. My mother had kissed me goodbye, wished me luck on my history presentation.

I remember being called out just before my presentation started. I'd been so upset to miss showing off the hard work I'd done. The school principal drove me to the hospital; I wrapped my arm around my stomach in the back of his silver SUV, distraught that he wouldn't tell me what was happening. I'll always remember how it felt, walking into the E.R that day. How the world seemed fuzzy, the fluorescent lights extraordinarily bright. The haunting sobs of my dad, how the doctor's face looked when he spoke to me.

I remember how it felt when I realised I'd never touch my mother again. How my heart twisted so hard I thought it'd rip itself apart. Feeling even a single drop of her loss wracked my body with pain.

That same doctor gave me my first prescription. Diazepam. I took a pill, and it all went away. The tiredness, the pain. The feeling a sunset gives you when its colours smear across the

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sky. The satisfaction that comes from finishing your homework.  
It all left me.

Now I sit on the side of the curb, cold wind spreading  
throughout my limbs, awaiting the bus. The icy concrete begins  
to take control of my bones as the scent of the crisp  
precipitation in the morning air greets my nose.

Tires crunching on the gravel road cut through the peaceful  
rustling of leaves. I pick up my bag, stepping onto the  
weed-ridden sidewalk as I wait for the bus to stop.

My friends sit at the back of the bus. I sit on the cracked  
black leather of my seat, listening in on the conversation my  
friends had already started.

"Ms. Faulkner is by FAR the worst. Who actually likes French  
class?"

"Yeah, but..."

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The voices start to drift, and my mind shifts. I recall a vivid memory from my freshman year as I watch the cookie-cutter houses fly by the bus.

I'm sitting on a crushed red velvet seat, in the first row of the school's auditorium. The speaker, a hunched old man with rectangular wire-rimmed glasses, stands on the stage in front of me. He addresses the students.

"What is living? An age-old question I've asked myself many times. Living is not something that can be defined in words, but by feelings. It is not simply breathing or existing. Every student in this auditorium should strive to truly live every second of their existence."

The memory fades, and I am once again looking out the window of the bus. Realizing we've arrived at the school, I stand up to exit.

As soon as I step onto the grass lawn in front of the building, I become painfully aware of the pills in my backpack. With every step, my hearing tunnels, focusing solely on the rattling sound they make as they hit their container.

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When the doors to the school open, I run to the bathroom.

Stepping into the pink tiled room, I grab my remaining pills from my bag. My reflection gazes back at me from the stained mirror as I gather my resolve. She looks different from the girl I remember.

The pills stare up at me from the centre of my palm, perfectly innocent. I swallow the first one. I count. One, two, three ...

I reach ten.

She doesn't come.

I grip the edge of the sink with one white-knuckled hand. With the other, I reach out. I need more pills. I pinch one between my thumb and index finger. I bring it to my mouth.

And then I hear it.

A single chirp resonates behind me. A window sits just above the grey stalls, creating a ledge on which a blue bird sits. The

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bird from this morning. Its chirping blossoms into a song, a song I recognize. It's my mother's lullaby.

Climbing onto a plastic toilet seat in the central stall, I pull in the window, and the bird flutters in. It does not act scared, as a bird should when faced with a human thirty times its size. It sits in the palm of my other hand, forcing me to drop the second pill in order to close the window. The medicine pings on the tile as I push the window shut. The bird immediately hops down from my hand, landing next to my discarded pill. It picks it up in its small black beak, and methodically drops it into the toilet I stand on.

I rub my eyes and look from the toilet to the window ledge.

Mom?

I don't know if I say the word or think it, but the bird cocks its head, its bright eyes twinkling as they reflect the bathroom light.

I open the window.

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The bird swoops up into the sky, until its blue feathers blend into the cloudless heavens, leaving nothing but the faint melody of its song.

My mother's song.

The bell rings. I pick up my bag off the damp floor, and head to biology.