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### Needle in the Hay

Last March, I stepped out onto the cold damp ground of a funeral procession in Sandy Springs, Georgia. The air was muggy, and I had trouble distinguishing tears of the funeral goers from the drizzle falling from the sky. It was obvious by the number of young people standing in the crowd that the funeral service was for someone who had died prematurely and not of natural causes. I was the last person to join the huddle and wouldn't have even gone if I hadn't promised to give a friend a ride. I had no interest in stopping by the cemetery that day, mainly because I couldn't muster a single emotion to pay my respects.

The last time I saw Anna Johnson she was thin, pale, and her red hair was frizzy going in any way one could possibly imagine. Anna was, in every sense of the term, a free spirit. When we first met, Hannah was in 8th grade and I was in 7th, which made her all the more desirable to me. I remember my first kiss in junior high with Anna, holed up in the school library, sweating bullets because I was so nervous, she truly had that effect on people. Her spirit bled into other parts of her life, most notably, her romantic views on drugs. Anna seemed to believe that drugs enabled her to explore not just the world, but herself and how she fit into her environment. All of her favorite artists were heavily into drugs, which I believe made her all the more excited to do them. Among other things, one of the last things I had done with Anna was get high and

drive around town, which was pretty surreal to me, almost like I was in some kind of coming of age movie that I would probably think is silly.

When we were young, maybe fourteen years old, I had asked Hannah out and to my surprise she said yes. We dated on and off for a few years and in between it all, she would find ways to crush my soul. Anna once dumped me over an e-mail accusing me of being a terrible person, but she could never really explain what I did that was so wrong. She even called my friends to tell them that I ruined her life, a claim that none of us have ever been able to justify. I finally had enough and channeled my energy into things like twelve step programs in high school which allowed me to move on, but Anna never really left my mind. Anna was as much of a drug to me as anything I could smoke, snort, or shoot, I never really wanted to put her down. She's still there, digging through my brain like a corkscrew or some song on repeat, constantly reminding me of an intense feeling that I want so badly to believe doesn't exist.

From what I understand, she was blue when her roommate in Asheville found her. She had been up there for a few years studying neuroscience at University of North Carolina. I'll never forget receiving the voicemail from a mutual friend of ours urging him to "call back, it's bad." I listened to that voicemail once a week for months, hoping it would bring me some sort of satisfaction or closure. Anna died of a heroin overdose and her body was being brought back to Atlanta so she could be buried. At first I brushed it off, as if it was nothing more than a sad story I read in the news about somebody I'd never met. I still haven't figured out how I feel about her, and that had never shown as much as it did at her funeral.

I'll never forget the glass shattering wails of the funeral goers when the coffin hit the wet mush of earth six feet below the ground. I stood there, doing my best to look solemn, when all I could really think about was the sandwich I had planned on eating at Jimmy John's later that day.

To be a monster, one must totally forego emotional response and look inward, be selfish. While I convinced myself that I felt nothing then, even when hugging her parents, I feel guilt now. There's a certain intensity of sadness that I'm afraid I'll never achieve due to my emotional detachment I find myself experiencing with every funeral I attend. The thought of never being able to truly care for someone, even after they've passed, is a terrifying thought. I almost want to bawl and feel anything aside from nothing. There is only one thing that scared me more at Hannah's funeral than the thought of never being able to connect to another person, addiction.

Addiction is a monster that is as scary in its attack as much as its heartlessness. It bears no face, shows no fear, and will take someone no matter what his or her age. There is a monster behind that needle that Anna drove into her arm, and it is one that I have looked dead in the eyes many times. The disease of addiction is literally medicated with drugs of all kinds: liquids, powders, and pills among other things. Addiction had always been something that I had romanticized, a sort of love affair I always wanted to be caught in. I'm still not sure why, but I remember being thirteen snorting powders and drinking bourbon to fix a sadness I don't think I ever really had. It didn't register until Anna's coffin had sank below eyesight, but that could have easily been my funeral had I let myself go that far, which truly paralyzed me. Of course, the easiest way to ease fear, is to drink, a medication I still indulge in all too frequently. In some twisted way, my binges help me feel connected to others, while experiencing the terror of addiction all at once.

To feel like a monster for feeling nothing and to discern the cold breath of a monster behind you, is truly surreal. There is no easy way to describe how one should respond at an event like a funeral, but there is definitely a precedent for sadness, which I am still trying to find. Anna would have been 21 last June and I can't help but realize that I have already outlived her in

more ways than one. I still want to feel sad for her but can't, and maybe it's her monsters that push me to be one myself. There are few experiences in life that allow someone to feel both like a monster and a victim. I'll never know what it was like to bully someone on the playground, but I've felt heartless. To be emotionless is to be a monster, and feeling nothing turned me into a monster at that funeral. The only thing more monstrous than me was Anna's love affair with the needle that ultimately took her life.