

Author's Statement: "The purpose of this essay was to collect interview material, either from an individual or from multiple persons, and use it to write a story. I chose to interview a close group of friends from home, who all went through a spot of trouble with me just before college started and who were willing to talk about it. What made the material so useful for me was that it was already so emotionally charged; my task was more to plumb the emotional depths of their thoughts, as opposed to inventing a new reality where the dominoes are set up just as I want them to be."

*****Essay begins below: Disregard formatting issues.*****

I remember the first time I heard the news. I saw Ishan's pink Taylor Swift sweatshirt in my head before I saw his face. I heard Rishi's voice trembling through the phone as he told what was left of him. Ish's face in flesh was gone, but his sweatshirt, his bike, and backpack all remained on top of the Bear Mountain Bridge. The water claimed the rest.

I remember thinking how stupid it was for him to leave the sweatshirt on that bridge. The night was too warm to bring the sweatshirt with him; the water was too cold to take it off. I remember being astonished at the resolve implicit in his travel. He woke up at two in the morning, so Rishi said. For two hours he biked to the bridge. He arrived, sent one last message to his friends from class (it said, "It's Britney Bitch!") and at 4:19, security cameras caught a jumper silently plummeting through the dark.

Rishi has not shared what he remembers. He simply bore the weight of the kerygma. It

was not clear what Ishan had died for. He certainly didn't die on our behalf; there was no saving significance to his passing. In a world full of persecutors, we were the furthest thing from hostile, for what that was worth. If only that was good enough. Then when people told us "there's nothing you could have done to stop it,"

I wouldn't be able to reply

"you're wrong."

Ryan remembers becoming closer with Ish than anyone he'd ever spoken to. He remembers the nights spent texting Ish for hours about things Ish assured him he couldn't speak to anyone else about. He remembers consoling Ish when his boyfriend was cold, and distant, and close to wailing, at least by the look in his eyes. I'm sure he remembers kissing Ish while they

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were both drunk and me pulling them apart and gently encouraging them to think before they leaped to any decisions they might regret. Ryan remembers Ish telling him to never stop fighting.

Ish's intelligence was incomprehensible. It showed when he gracefully coasted through his extra online classes which were never hard enough. It manifested when he fretted over half-points off on his tests. Ish's creativity was not a spark but a dark well. He drew on it in secret and sipped from its murky depths and let it poison him. Ish's talent was a curse which

left him anguished when he fell quarter-lengths behind and even more anguished when he stayed leagues ahead. Ish's death made it impossible to believe he was not alive.

Zoya remembers the three of us submitting short stories to a writing contest. She read Ish's piece and wondered at its brilliance, at the inflection of dullness in the anguish that showed just how beaten down the narrator really was. I looked at it in horror, knowing that he was the narrator. I asked him if everything was all right. He said yes, as if he could give any other answer. I said nothing, feeling my silence weigh in the air like church bells at Noon.

When the boys gathered for the first time in his wake, Joe couldn't stop crying. I wished I could cry like he did. Instead I spoke grave and solemn of the things I had missed and the signs I had seen and been blind to. They said there was nothing I could have done. I said they were wrong.

Then silence ensued until Joe broke into tears again, and told us that he really loved us

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like brothers, and our hearts broke together. Even Tom, Ish's oldest and quietest friend, bowed his head and gave Joseph a "you too." Smooth and solemn.

Tom, Rishi, Wesley, Ananya, Sumehra, Katie, Daniella, Camila, Hugh, Isabelle, Leona, Zoya, Sabrina, Jared, Nathan, Joe, and Reed. Seventeen of Ish's closest friends, posthumously

appointed. The Seventeen who would receive his suicide ZIP file from an automatic email eight days after his death. It contained a seven page note that did not break your heart as much as it bit down on your soul and shook it ragged. It contained a personal note to each of the Seventeen. It had a table of contents with a disclaimer that the contents of the letters should not be shared. It contained two aural takes of his letter, one bitter, one bittersweet. It contained two audio files of two of his favorite songs. It contained one last letter with the things he had forgotten to say in his formal note. It contained eleven sentences for his parents and a one sentence request for them to take care of his brother, who was not otherwise addressed anywhere in the contents of his last words. Lastly, it contained a video of him wearing a bright pink beanie telling us all goodbye in a way that quickly dashed the inevitable impression of his resurrection.

Daniella remembers driving around town with Ish in her MINI Cooper the day she got her driver's license. They screamed the lyrics of "Die Young" by Kesha up the hill on King Street until their voices broke. Later he posted on Twitter that it had been a magical day, and she loved that those forty minutes spent together had been one of pure magic for the both of them. I remember driving him home after he kissed Ryan and listening to him scream the lyrics of "my

tears ricochet" by Taylor Swift as the song echoed in the car from his tinny phone speaker. His voice broke into sobs as his concentration lurched back and forth from drunkenness. I sat in silence, suddenly aware that I was in the presence of a miracle.

Reed remembers driving with Ish and Joe to get some donuts after a long run. What was originally supposed to be a quick pit stop turned into a 3-hour nighttime journey around town. They talked and laughed and blasted trashy rap music. Ish listed that as his 4th favorite memory of his top ten in his note, once he finished detailing the reasons he was fairly certain we all hated him.

Camila remembers meeting him on her first day at our school in 11th grade. She was astonished that everyone he passed glowed when they saw him. She said they always had each others' back when people got on their case for using kilometers, or spelling "favourite" or "colour" with a "U". She was in France when the Seventeen met behind Sumehra's house to read Ish's note and feel its dizzying consequences.

Ananya hated that people didn't know what the Green-and-Purple hearts meant. She told me that he was the green heart and she was the purple heart in their private texts. She hated that people posted on social media with their hearts. They didn't have his love, or hers. When we met

after the letter came, she cried on Rishi's shoulder and he held her in his lap on the swingset behind Sumehra's house, with the wide-eyed, awestruck tenderness that fades

with youth.

When the police called, it was Rishi who answered. He was the one who told me what happened, four hours after he knew, with his voice shaking over the phone. He said that the police had found Ishan's phone, his bag, his bike, and his pink-and-blue Taylor Swift sweatshirt on the Bear Mountain Bridge. Ishan said I could keep the sweatshirt. I never sought to get it.

Rishi was the one who first spread the anti-gospel. When he awoke to Ishan's message, he saw Ish's phone's last location at the Bear Mountain Bridge. He told me, and Joe, and Wesley. He told the girls too. He was the one who broke the news to Ishan's parents. His parents had woken up in the morning to an empty bed, and called Rishi to see if he knew what had happened. And he told them that their child had taken his bike at 2 in the morning, rode two hours to Bear Mountain Bridge, sent one last message-- "It's Britney Bitch!"-- to a small clique of his friends, and at 4:19 the bridge authority had received a notice that someone had jumped from the bridge.

That is, at least, what he told me. Perhaps it's what he told everyone. When I shared the bad news with my brother, I stuck to the story until it stuck in my throat. Then the dam broke, I started sobbing, and "and he killed himself" rolled in the current across the table. I cried my eyes out for thirty minutes. Then my damp hands and sore eyes and pruned heart demanded respite.

Rishi is absolved of the role of Peter. He answered his call from the first moment. I would hope he sleeps well nowadays.

Katie remembers running a warmup with Ishan on a particularly cold winter day. They had wrapped a blanket around their shoulders and were shuffling, side by side, right down the middle of the track. They laughed and chatted and soon Katie found it much less difficult to stay warm.

Zoya remembers sitting with Ish in 6th grade science class, learning about the water cooling through the phases of matter, and Ish suddenly hypothesizing to the teacher that the water would reach room temperature eventually instead of cooling forever because of something called "equilibrium." Her teacher's face glowed with excitement. In high school, she remembers meeting with Ish every Wednesday after he finished track practice and she finished studying. They would walk to the supermarket and buy food and walk back to school and talk about their week and about cute boys and hastily gather their belongings when they were called to join the rest of the orchestra for rehearsal. She remembered meeting him, long ago, in 5th grade, and knowing immediately that they would be friends for a very, very long time.

Isabelle remembers going with Ish to a party in a city where everyone was a stranger. He would grab her whenever one of his favorite songs came on and throw her hands in the air and they would dance and lip sync all the lyrics. She could tell in his grinning face, in his whole body, that he was aglow with happiness. When Ish danced, his body shook with enthusiastic energy. It was one of the few times, looking back, that the subtext of the Signs wasn't written all

over his body, splayed out in his stillness.

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Joe remembers seeing cuts on Ish's arm in 11th grade. He pulled me aside and asked what we should do. I talked to Ish when he split from the group. He joked about how he KNEW he shouldn't have worn a short-sleeved shirt to practice. And in that moment, I felt a slight tug, like there was something I was being called to do. But didn't know what it was, and dismissed it without a thought.

Joe couldn't stop asking himself questions. "How is it *possible*," he asked me, when we returned to the Hudson River at sunset, "that Ish rode to the bridge for two hours, in the dark, and never thought to turn back once?" I frowned. I let my heart turn to stone as I said "I wish I could know."

I remember ninety-degree summer days spent running with Ish under blessed shade on dirt trails. I learned to love when he said "I LOVE that song!!!!". I learned to hate when he pursed his lips in effortless, perfect control and said "Yea, I can definitely see that." Ish did not disagree. He either applauded the sameness or apologized for the difference. For him, any light he created in other peoples' lives was real enough to be worth making, even if it was
artificial.

Tom said he didn't know how to handle it. Tom did not cry, but in his quiet sincerity he bore the burden of Ish's death like a noble wound. Wesley didn't know how to handle it either.

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He did not cry, but in his gentle awkwardness he grieved with hollow-souled attempts at humor, echoing in his emptiness, in his otherwise anguished silence.

Jared did not cry. He made jokes about being emotionally detached, in good humor. He said we should move on, that it's what Ish would have wanted. He said that when they had dated, Ish seemed really happy. I remember running with Ish, and hearing him explain, bashful but delighted, that he couldn't take off his shirt because he had hickies on his chest. I whooped and applauded like a giddy monkey; the grin on my face refused to budge, and his embarrassed smile was no less stubborn.

Jared never cried. Even when we played Ishan's favorite Taylor Swift songs at sunset along the Hudson River. Even when we read the letter together in the yard and at the steps and on the swingset behind Sumehra's house. Why didn't Jared cry? How didn't Jared cry?

Hugh asked me how I was doing at the park along the Hudson River. I knew it didn't

matter and asked him the same. He said he couldn't stop thinking about the body. He couldn't stop thinking that it could have flowed down from Bear Mountain and washed up on the Hudson's shore down below. He said we could be standing a few hundred feet from the body and not even know it. It was always "the body." The body was a dead one; and nothing more could be said.

I couldn't believe Jared didn't cry. I remember Ish sobbing as we left the park along the Hudson River three weeks earlier. I remember pulling him from Ryan and gently chiding them to make good decisions. I remember promising the other guys that I'd get him home safe. I remember him turning on his music and screaming the lyrics to "my tears ricochet" by Taylor Swift as it wavered out of his tinny phone speaker. I remember feeling wrenched by his despair, by my own, feeling tugged by the hand of fate. I parked outside his house and I knew that I had to say something. And that if I spoke from the heart, I would tell him what he needed to hear, and his mask which had crumbled under the weight of his drunkenness and Jared's cold and distant demeanor would stay down, and he would be humbled and struck by the weight of the moment like a churchgoer who is Astounded and Amazed by his preacher. I spoke from the brain. I asked him to promise me not to cut himself. He assured me he wouldn't, of course not, with pursed lips. I assured him his parents wouldn't know he was drunk. And I drove home cursing myself for fearing my own heart, and I'm sure a rooster crowed somewhere.

Rishi was a child. Yet when the deed was done, and Ish was gone, the stars aligned and offered Rishi redemption. When the police called, it was Rishi who answered. He pulled together what pieces of himself were within reach and spread the news as it had to be spread. I do not know if this leaves him satisfied. I would hope he sleeps well nowadays; still, how can he not stay up? When we all watched the sunset along the Hudson River, could he have imagined Ish's body on the shore below? Was there room for wondering how Ish's resolve never shook, as he

rode willingly in the dark for two hours to his death? Are these grievances features of grief, or of guilt? And if they are of guilt, how may I wash my hands of this thing?

Each of the other Seventeen assured me that I couldn't have stopped it. I told them that it wasn't my job, but it was someone's job, and I was just as good as anyone to fulfill it. Instead we stumbled around in the dark, our lamps hidden and our ears closed, sleeping in the night while Ish took the final steps towards his last fate. Ish did not allow for a Gethsemane. He did allow for the denial of Peter. He told us in the letter that if he'd wanted us to know, we would have known. I wish I could tell him he was wrong. I wish he'd told me the part I was to play in his Passion, so that I could deny him his denial when the time was right. Each of the Seventeen replied that even if anyone should have stopped it, no one could have known. I do not have the heart to tell them too that they are wrong.

