12-1-2003

Alone

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol12/iss1/6

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The dark morning air is still. The fog that has settled down in the valley creates an eerie silence. Quiet storefronts and houses line the streets. Soft lamplights glow in the windows of scattered houses as families quietly stir from their beds. A soft glow can be seen coming up over the hill, making the lawns sparkle as the dew reflects the light. The glow grows brighter and more focused as the source draws closer. Suddenly, giant beams of light pierce the darkness, blurring in the fog. The loud roar of several engines rumbles through the silence as the busses make their daily journey to the high school. Solemn faces look out into the foggy darkness as they approach their destination. As the yellow giants line the front of the school, the roar is quieted as the abrupt hiss emits from the folding doors and the breaks are set. Teenagers rise lazily from their seats and sleepwalk through the main doors. Scattered voices rise over the sound of shuffling feet. Conversations between friends and acquaintances about weekend plans and the latest gossip begin to sweep through the crowd as they approach the hallways lined with cold, metal lockers. The slamming of lockers reverberates through the stark white hallways. Cheesy neon flyers plaster the lockers and walls, giving off a fake sense of enthusiasm and excitement for the upcoming dance.

Swimming through the sea of her peers, Angela washes up near her locker. Immersed in thought she coaxes the combination numbers on the dial to the correct positions. Turn right to 15: her age in two months; left to 37: the price of the sweater she saw in the window of Nordstrom’s last night that she just had to have; nudge back to the right; 29, the number of days she’d been dating Robert. With a swift kick to the bottom of the metal door, the squeaky hinges opened in protest. As she put away the books she had hauled home the night before in order to finish the mountain of homework her teachers had mounded on her, she remembered the lecture she had received from her parents. They insisted that she wasn’t applying herself, that if her grades didn’t improve she would be spending her long, glorious vacation staring out the grim windows of summer school. They just didn’t understand that she was trying, otherwise why on Earth would she spend her nights attempting to scale the piles of homework? Whatever, parents just don’t understand what it’s like to be young. Angela fished through her jeans pocket for the new tube of lipstick she bought last night, the one Cosmo raved about. Removing the cap, she twisted the base, revealing an intense shade of berry. She brought the angled stick to her upper lip and swept the color over it. After repeating the careful motion on her lower lip she blotted her lips together and smiled dazzlingly into the mirror magneted to the inner door of her locker. Angela wasn’t what some might call drop-dead gorgeous with her natural brown hair bleached to a tell-tale fake orange tint and her crooked teeth that she had begged her parents to straighten with braces, to which they replied with their usual “no money” speech.
“Forget it Angela,” she muttered to herself as the smile vanished and she reached into her locker for her history book. “You’ll never look like the girls in Cosmo.”

“What babe?” came a voice from behind her. Startled, Angela glanced up to the mirror again and staring back at her was Robert, her latest love interest.

“Oh, nothing,” she replied, smiling to hide what she was thinking about, “I was just talking to myself.” He put his arm around her waist, pulled her close to him and leaned down to whisper in her ear.

“Come outside, I need to talk to you.” He didn’t wait for her to respond, but grabbed her hand and lead her out the heavy metal doors at the end of the hall. The cold air enveloped them as they plunged into the thick fog. They rounded the corner of the school and he stopped walking.

“What is so important that we have to talk in the freezing cold?” Angela asked shivering. He didn’t answer but instead started kissing her.

“Ugh, that figure. He doesn’t even consider what I want, just starts making out with me. I guess that’s the price I have to pay to date a jock.” She thought to herself. Robert was a freshman on the JV basketball team, one of the starters. He was even pretty cute, a catch according to the other freshmen girls. She would have to put up with the unwanted affection to keep looking cool. He was always coming on to her and lately had been really pouring it on to get her in bed. He hadn’t won, yet, but she was concerned that if she didn’t put out soon that he would kick her to the curb and find another freshman who would be more than willing to date a jock. Really, she wanted to do her own thing and just have fun. Her true friends had been neglected for so long since she’d been with Robert that they had all cut ties with her. She longed to go for ice cream and sit watching chick flicks with the girls, but by doing that she would risk being un-cool. She was afraid of being a loser, a loner; but by being with Robert, no one could see that side of her. All they saw was “Robert’s girlfriend.”

She was abruptly wrenched from her internal dialogue by the obnoxious bell signaling that they were again late for class. She slid out of his clutches and rushed off to class. He called after her that he would see her at lunch, to which she just waved behind her. She ran down the hall, past the teacher yelling for her to slow down. She slid into her seat in the back of Mr. Bauer’s history class, undetected by the teacher with his nose in the grade book. Nicole leaned over and asked her under her breath, “Hey Angela, did you get into a fight with a vacuum cleaner? Looks like the vacuum won!” Mr. Bauer looked up from taking roll to ask Nicole if she had something to share with the class to which Nicole replied, “No,” but made sucking sounds to Angela, grinning. A couple of students around them glared toward her as Angela’s hand slid up the side of her neck. Everything felt normal, what the hell was Nicole talking about? She felt something cold gently nudge her left elbow. The girl next to her was discreetly handing her a compact. Angela took the compact and quietly opened it and angled it at her face. Lower on her neck was a mark. On closer examination she realized what Nicole had teased her about, a bright intense. Angela slowly closed the compact and handed it back to the girl sitting to her left without making eye contact. She hated Nicole for laughing and pointing. Now everyone could plainly see what had happened. It wasn’t like Nicole had a boyfriend to make out with and leave hickeys on her.

Nicole was an outspoken freshman that always had something to say about everything. Often times, what she had to say was pretty irrelevant, but she tried to sound smart in every topic nonetheless. She was the third child from her family to attend the same high school, so she had to live up to the standards that all the teachers had for her, not to mention the other students. Her oldest brother had been captain of the football team, debate team and student body president as a senior two years ago. She often heard girls in the hall talking about him as they passed the wall of fame in front of the leadership room; saying how he was totally hot and how much they’d love to date a college guy—a thought that made Nicole so nauseated that she was afraid she might vomit right in front of these girls. Maybe if he wasn’t her brother he might be cute, but the way they all go on about him made her completely sick. Her sister, now a junior was just the same. An overachiever too, she was already on the homecoming committee and was a starter on the varsity volleyball team. Nicole tried out for volleyball earlier that fall but had missed the ball every time it came over the net in her direction. She was immediately cut from the team. She would love to just sit back and be herself, figure out what she was good at or wanted to do, but until she could find something she could excel at she would have to pretend to be smart in everything. She certainly couldn’t back down now anyways. People were starting to notice her and she didn’t want to risk being called a loser; she wanted to be popular like her older brother and sister, a task that was bound to take a lot of work.

Nicole gazed at the clock on the wall above Mr. Bauer. Thank God there was only five more minutes of American History left. Who really cares about this stuff anyways? Everyone they were studying about in class was dead; why not learn about people who were still around? She started doodling on the front of her orange binder, which was already covered in artwork. Nicky secretly loved to draw and had endless stacks of drawing pads lining her shelves at home. On the sly she was looking at a couple of art schools for when she graduated from high school. She wondered what her parents would say if they heard that their youngest daughter’s aspiration was to be a starving artist. This was a future that was absolutely unworthy of her parents’ approval, especially with one son in law school and a daughter that was looking at a career in medicine. She drew a very detailed table in the corner of her binder and remembered that she had promised to meet one of the girls from the softball team to see about trying out for the team at lunch today. She would really have to hustle to her locker and put everything away in order to meet the girls before the table was too full for her and she’d have to sit alone. She glanced over at Angela who was now sitting with her head propped up on her arm, while simultaneously trying to pull her sweater up to cover the hickey that was growing increasingly purple. “I’m sure glad I’m not the one who has to look ridiculous like that!” she thought to herself, “That’s got to do terrible things for her image.”
purple hickey. Next to her she could hear Nicole snickering, still quietly making that horrible sucking sound. Angela felt the blood rush to her face, making it blaze crimson which in turn made the purple of the hickey much more. The bell rang and Mr. Bauer yelled after them to read chapters 6 & 7 in the text for next class. “Yeah right,” Nicole thought as she walked down the hall, “Like I want to waste even more of my time learning about people and things that don’t matter.” All of a sudden she heard kids yelling and lockers banging. This was much louder than the usual horsing around that went on in the halls between classes. Curious, Nicole craned her neck to see further down the hall and already there was a crowd forming around the initiators of the ruckus. As she got closer she could hear her peers yelling obscenities at one or the other of the two guys who were fighting. She didn’t recognize either of the two that were in the middle of the fiasco but they were sure getting a couple of good shots in. One of the boys had blood coming from his nose and the other had a pretty big gash on his left cheek. No sooner had she asked the guy next to her what had started it all when Coach Braun came roaring around the corner to break it up. He muscled through the crowd as the students fought to catch the last seconds of the brawl. Finally he reached the center and swiftly dodged out of the way as one of the guys was thrown across the hall. Coach Braun stood between the boys as two of the campus security guards came to assist in pulling the boys down the hall toward the principal’s office. By the time the guys had reached the office they had somewhat cooled off and the two security guards were able to leave them to wait for Principal Saville. They had barely sat down when Principal Saville threw open the door to his office and stormed into the main office. Although not a huge man, Principal Saville had a no-nonsense air about him.

“So, we meet again Mr. Morrison,” he said coolly, “I warned you not to cause any more trouble around this campus. This is the last straw for you.”

“But Principal Saville, I…” stammered Aaron Morrison.

“I don’t want to hear it Mr. Morrison. I’ve heard enough of your excuses to last a lifetime. Please stay out here while Mrs. Blue calls your mother; I believe her number is on speed dial. If you, Mr. Anderson, will please step into my office we will discuss your consequences as well.” With that he escorted Aaron’s fighting partner into his office. He then leaned out the door to his office to say to Mrs. Blue, his secretary,

“Please call Mrs. Morrison and inform her that her son Aaron has been expelled from our high school. He is to pick him up immediately. Thank you Mrs. Blue.” And closed his door.

Aaron sat back in his chair and rested his head on the wall. He could feel the gash on his cheek starting to swell. He touched it and when he brought his hand back it had a little bit of blood on it. He wiped his hand on his torn jeans leg and listen as Mrs. Blue talked to his mother at work. He could tell by how Mrs. Blue was talking to his mother that she was furious and possibly hysterical. He felt bad about making her upset him, he could explain what that guy had said; why he had to hit him. That no good son of a bitch had laughed about how he was going to be Aaron’s boss someday and make him do the worst jobs possible because that is what he deserved. He had talked about how Aaron was worthless and so was his no good mom, saying that they should get out of town to rid it of such an eyesore. That no one could stand seeing them because they were such a pitiful couple. Mr. Saville couldn’t be that heartless to not understand. If he would just let Aaron explain it could all be resolved. But of course he wouldn’t; Aaron couldn’t even get two words out of his mouth in that office without being told to shut up. He heard Mrs. Blue wrapping up her conversation with his mother and then the sound of the hard plastic receiver being placed back in its cradle.

“You can go up to your locker and collect your things. You have five minutes to be back in this office; your mother is on her way.” Said Mrs. Blue frostily.

Aaron carefully rose from his chair and walked out of the office without a word. The halls were deserted except for the occasional straggler late for class. He approached freshman hall and saw some students lean in their chairs to get a look at him out the door of their classroom. Aaron lowered his head and continued on his way. He knew he had a reputation around this school for being a troublemaker. But really, it wasn’t his fault. He had to be tough; at least that’s how he felt. His dad had left his mom when he was just a baby and left her nothing. For as long as he could remember they had been struggling to make ends meet. His mom worked days at an office downtown and on the weekends she was a waitress at a little diner. She had guys in and out of her life but none that lasted too long. He felt like he had to protect her so he often times got into shouting matches with the scummy guys who picked up on his mom, sometimes leaving him bruised up if the guys were rowdy. He didn’t have any friends around school because he didn’t have the money to buy the latest trends or drive a cool car. Everyone around that school was just worried about material stuff anyways; who needed friends like that? He was a loner by choice, or at least so he thought.

He turned the corner and approached his locker. He didn’t even bother with the combination lock, just kicked the bottom and yanked up on the handle. It didn’t open. Aaron just couldn’t take anymore and punched the door of the pale, ugly locker and yelled at the top of his lungs. A yelp came from across the hall and down a little way. He looked up and saw a mousy girl at her locker, from which the whimper must have escaped. He just scowled at her and kicked the locker again; this time it creaked open. He yanked out his tattered backpack and shoved all of his personal belongings into it, leaving behind all the textbooks. Slamming the door as hard as he could, Aaron turned on his heels and marched back toward the office, not even glancing back at the girl he had scared.

Renee’s eyes followed after him. She had no idea what was wrong with that boy but it must be something bad; he looked really mean. After he rounded the corner, Renee turned to search further into her locker. Always forgetful, she had lost her assignment for math class and had been sent back to her locker by the teacher to
but he couldn't help getting in that fight. If Principal Saville would just listen to find it. Mrs. Wright had been anything but sweet when she found out that Renee didn't have her papers.

"Can't you ever do anything right Renee?" she spat, "Go get your assignment and don't come back until you have it in your hand to give to me."

Renee had taken the hall pass sheepishly and shuffled out of the classroom, her classmates laughing at her quietly. Now, in the hallway she could still hear the echoes of their constant laughter in her head, always making fun of plain, ugly Renee. There, crumpled in the back of the top shelf of her locker she found the missing assignment. She pulled it out of the locker and started to close the door when the neon flyer caught her eye. In bold letters it read, "Do you have a date yet? Get ready for Homecoming!"

Oh, how Renee longed to be popular, to be asked to the dance. She would buy a long blue dress to match the blue eye shadow her aunt had given her for Christmas last year, a dress with gloves to match. In that beautiful dress they would surely crown her homecoming princess and everyone would say that Renee Russell was the most glamorous girl to ever walk the halls of their high school. "Reality check Renee," she mumbled to herself. She quietly shut her locker and started walking down the hall back to math class. Looking down at the floor she realized that she couldn't bear to go back to class with Mrs. Wright yelling at her and her classmates laughing. She stopped short of the classroom and turned into the bathroom. As she pushed through the heavy wooden door she saw two cheerleaders standing at the mirror, straightening their uniforms. They looked up from their primping and giggled, turned to each other and laughed harder. By the time they walked out the door they were practically hysterical and making hurtful remarks about Renee to each other. She looked into the mirror and a pimple-faced, greasy haired, four-eyed geek stared back at her. In the reflection she could see the posters taped to the stall doors preaching "Just Say No" with beautiful teenage models posing in the background. Why couldn't she look like that? No matter how hard she tried she could never overcome the label she had acquired. She backed up against the wall and slowly slid down it to the come to rest on the floor. She pulled her knees up to her chest. Finally, all the hurt had come to the surface and she just couldn't hold back the pain any longer. Sobs wracked her body as the tears soaked the sleeves of her sweatshirt. She was crying for the mean things her peers said, for the beautiful girls in every ad on TV or in magazines, for her parents who were just as geeky as she was and for the guidance counselor that told her this was just a phase. She cried so long that she finally just ran out of tears and energy. She was exhausted and emotionally drained. Her eyes burned so bad she swore there was a fire behind them. She closed her eyes gently and the next thing she knew the door was opening to the bathroom. She jerked her head up and saw girls streaming in, looking at her, disgusted that she had dared to come into their hangout. Behind them, completely. The waves of students ebbed and flowed toward the cafeteria, following the scent of burnt French fries, stale pizza, and wilted lettuce. Renee fiddled with the student body card in her pocket that would buy her the needed nutrition to get her through the rest of the day. Not paying attention to where she was going she walked right into Ms. Thornton. Squeaking out a quiet, "Excuse me," Renee was swept away toward the mob that gathered in front of the food counter.

Ms. Thornton was posted at cafeteria duty, again. Being the rookie teacher at the school she always got the least desirable jobs that the other faculty didn't want to bother with. She watched the students in their various cliques and thought of all of her adolescent psychology courses in college. Nothing they taught her could have prepared her for the harsh realities of public school life. Coming from a small town in Idaho, Mary Thornton hadn't always been the most popular. She had had quite a few friends and knew most everyone but she was never in the limelight, which was how she liked it. Most of those friends had been scattered across the country after high school, save the few that stayed in their hometown, and she had lost contact with all of them. She had moved here after finishing her college education and decided that she needed a new start. Out on her own, away from everyone and everything she knew, Mary felt somewhat lonely. The faculty at the school was all on tenure and had known each other almost their entire teaching careers. There was little room for a newcomer. She watched the students in the cafeteria who were eating alone and she understood how they felt. No teacher could hang out at the students' table she knew, so instead she stood on the sidelines of the cafeteria, just watching. When the bell rang, signaling the end of lunch period, the students washed into one another and crashed down the hallway toward their next class. Mrs. Thornton was swept into the sea of bodies as she meandered toward her own classroom. There she lay out the necessary handouts and got the overhead projector in position for the lesson she would be teaching today. As the students shuffled in one of the boys walked up to her, Jeremy, the high school's star soccer player.

"Mrs. Thornton, I missed class last week because we had districts, can I get the assignment?"

"Sure." She replied as she dug through her stack of papers. "Um, Jeremy, I was grading the test that we took two classes ago and I noticed that your scores were a little low. Is anything going on that you'd like to tell me about, or were you just having an off day?" She found the assignment she was looking for and handed it to Jeremy.

"Oh, must have just been one of those days. I've been so busy with soccer I forgot to study. Don't worry Mrs. Thornton; I'll pull my grade up. Thanks for the assignment," he said as he took the paper and sat down at his desk. As the rest of the students trickled in he thought about the upcoming state championship. There were going to be recruiters from several of the top colleges there to check out the players. If he didn't perform well he would miss out on an opportunity to get a scholarship to
out the open bathroom door, she could see the crowds leaving their classes. Class must be over. She got up from the floor and shuffled past the girls that were standing, staring at her. She pushed through the heavy door again, head lowered, and entered the sea of people. Lost in the vastness of them, Renee just became a mere speck, then was lost play and a chance to go to a good school. The pressure had really been on from the coach for him to do well. The championship was riding on his performance, as he was the captain and the strongest player. The truth was that he was so stressed out with playing soccer and practicing all night that his grades in all of his classes were slipping. Between that and never seeing his family and friends, well, except for his teammates, he was feeling like he had to carry this burden alone. The school had a pep rally for the team the night before and he had been honored as player of the year. Coach had even said that the championship lay in his very competent hands. What if he didn’t play well? He’d be letting the whole school down. *So much for concentrating in class,* Jeremy thought to himself. The more he listened to the lecture by Ms. Thornton, the more he started to get tired. The long hours on the soccer field were really starting to wear on him. *I’ll just close my eyes for a minute, and then I’ll be able to concentrate.*

SLAM! Jeremy sat up in his desk immediately. It was his teammate Cody who had slammed a history book on his desk.

"Are you ready to go? We’ve got practice in fifteen minutes. I thought we could do some practice on our own before that.”

"Yeah, sure.” Jeremy said as he shoved his books in his backpack and slung it over his shoulder. The two walked out the door and into the hallway where all the students were rushing rapidly toward the front of the school in order to catch their rides home. Jeremy and Cody walked out to the front hall and then veered off course from the rest of the roaring rapids of the crowd and toward the locker room. As he turned to see where Cody was he watched the busses roll away as they made their way to take the students back to their homes. He wished he could be on one of those busses, going back to his house to sit on the couch watching TV. But instead he was off to another grueling practice and stressful evening.

Behind him the students crossed one another as they left the school. The busses rumbled off into the distance and the steady flow of cars packed tight with teenagers slowed to a trickle. The parking lot was silent again as they all went their separate ways until they would come back to be alone together again.