

## **Why?**

Jake walked into the cafeteria, the smell of Cheesy Chicken Crispito filling his nostrils. The chatter of hundreds of kids overwhelmed him. So many people. They were probably looking at him, wondering why the freak was just standing there. Maybe today would be the day he snapped. It would be a shame to disappoint them. The weight of the polished, grey steel against his side made him lean a bit to the left to compensate for the bulge under his heavy yellow parka. The cold, dark nature of February was fitting for Jake's plan. Then Jake saw him, Antoine. The guy that had ruined his chance of ever being accepted by everyone else at school. It was his fault, though not his alone.

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When he landed in Montana, Jake was, understandably, in a foul mood. After seeing his new house, his day had worsened considerably. His parents had lived in their old house since before Jake was born, and it was unquestionably the best. His childhood had filled the halls of a one story, 3 bedroom 2 bath house on the edge of Tucson's city limits. All of his best memories were made there, whether it be riding a bike in the street, or the Christmas where he got his first basketball hoop, or even his junior Prom pictures. So, Jake was expecting at least a nice house, if not his old one; nothing could have prepared him, however, for the most run-down, decrepit, rat-infested, and sorry excuse for a home that he had ever seen. The yards were overgrown with grass and weeds, and they were filled with bottles and other litter. As he picked up his only

carry-on bag and began walking up the driveway, he heard a crunch, and saw that he had stepped on a piece of clear, broken glass. “Wonderful,” he thought to himself, “this place seems so absolutely wonderful. I’m frankly surprised that we managed to get this house. I’m sure Steve paid out an arm and a leg for this mansion.”

The interior of the house was just as disappointing as the exterior facade. The entryway connected to the rest of the house through some small holes in the walls, with pink and fluffy insulation sticking out. Not only did their kitchen appear to have an ant infestation, but it also appeared to be missing a fridge. The oven was there, at the least. When Jake looked into what he assumed would be his room, he was unperturbed at the pile of needles lying in the corner of the room and the bed that looked plainer than a vanilla cupcake. He laid his bag down, and began to unpack its contents, grudgingly accepting this temporary home.

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Antoine was sitting with Veronica, and the rest of his jock buddies, it seemed almost like Antoine’s life was worth saving. Almost. The weight of his father’s Glock 27, along with a few spare clips, was beginning to burn a hole in his pocket. 33 bullets to make his worst enemies feel his pain. Jake realized that he didn’t need the extra clips though. He only needed one to get rid of those who had harmed him the most.

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Jake's father — he could barely even stand to call him that after the past year — Steve, that was better, had originally moved them from Tucson to Montana at the behest of one of his old college friends, Chad. Steve had heard that the property market was booming there, so Chad and he decided to go into business flipping houses. Not only that, but Steve wanted to escape the pain of their old house, and alcohol just wasn't doing the trick anymore. Once Steve had completely ruined the remainder of Jake's life, he then decided to give up on the house after seeing the state it was in. A crappy house in a bad neighborhood just wouldn't sell, and Steve knew that. Apparently taking the idea from the needles on Jake's floor, Steve started shooting heroin, because what more could a boy ask for than a drunk and an addict for a father? With the highs of heroin, came the lows of withdrawal. That was when his father became a lost cause in the eyes of Jake.

He could still remember coming home from Hamilton High, his new school, to his father lying on the floor of their kitchen, foaming at the mouth with a needle in his arm. Dropping what little he had, Jake had to flip Steve over to drain out his windpipe and keep him from choking to death. He could have walked away, and came back later to the comfort of police tape and some government officials ready to take him away from all of what he had to endure during the past few months. But Jake was still falling. When Steve had hit rock bottom, Jake was still reeling from the loss of a teenager's heaven. Then the beatings started. "Why aren't you good for anything? It's your fault that this is happening." Steve had cussed and yelled these thoughts at

Jake so many times that he was beginning to believe them. So much pain, and the kids at school had never understood.

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Jake was starting to look suspicious just standing there, so he decided to get in line for lunch, try to find a better position. Or stalling. It was always possible that he didn't want to do this. Alas, his mind was made up. This was happening, and it was happening today, here and now.

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This whole mess started with Jake's mom. He realized that, in retrospect, she was the one who kept their family together. Jake had been normal enough; his father had always had a toxic personality. The only thing keeping Steve from polluting their lives had been Mom. Steve had truly loved her more than anything, so they were a happy family. His old life had been perfect. His two best friends, Mark and Dave, had been together since they were in diapers, neighbors in the hospital nursery. Arizona had been kind to Jake. Even with the unending sunshine, his fair skin just got a little darker in the summer, never getting burned. He had been dating the same girl, Clarissa, since 7th grade. Together they had been voted best couple and Homecoming Prince and Princess; in other words, the classic example of people destined to be together. Jake

played the trumpet in band and had recently gotten first place in Extemp at State Forensics. He wasn't first in his class by any means, but he still managed to letter in academics year after year.

Then his world turned upside down when his mom was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer in April of the previous year. She was given a year to live by the doctors, but they were wrong. She only lasted for 2 months more. She died, on June 5th, the day before her 50th birthday. Following her death, Steve started drinking. Drinking to forget all about her, because as much as he would get angry with her before, she was the love of his life. His mother had constantly pushed Steve to do better, to stop floating between jobs and settle down for a career. Looking back, Jake knew that much, but he felt no remorse for Steve. The man hadn't been the best father before, but now, without his mother there, he began to lose all motivation to work. By Independence Day, Steve had been consumed by alcohol, leaving him a hollow man. Using what little money he had left in his savings account and from the life insurance policy, he bought a house in Montana, as well as two plane tickets. When Jake had told Clarissa about his upcoming move, she began to distance herself from him. She didn't even come with Mark and Dave to say goodbye to him at the airport. Once Jake had walked through the blue gate, tears stinging his eyes, and taken off from his old life, Clarissa texted him that she couldn't handle a long distance relationship, and she thought that it would be best for both of them if they split up. Jake told himself that this was the case, that she truly just couldn't handle the separation. A comforting lie, to be sure, but not one that Jake had confronted yet. If his mother had been the spark that started Jake's personal hell, Clarissa leaving him was the tinder that let the fire grow. It turned out that the only girl that would catch his eye afterwards was bad news for him.

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As he began picking up his Crispito and his indistinguishable blob of something vaguely fruit-like, he heard a small, high-pitched voice asking him, “Why?” Jake almost chuckled, and thought to himself, “Why? The better question is why not? Why shouldn’t these people pay for what they did. Why shouldn’t everyone pay? Anyone could have helped, but at every turn, they consistently fail to do anything! If they value my life so little, why should I value their lives? Think about what they’ve done.” And he did for a moment. As he began to remember, everything wrong with the school came flooding back.

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Jake loudly slammed into the fire engine red steel lockers, staggered from being hit. He felt warmth flowing from his nostrils, and sure enough, his fingers came away slick with blood.

“Don’t you even think of looking at her again!” Antoine growled in a menacing undertone. Jake just slid to the ground, his vision becoming cloudy. Thud. Pain blossomed in his abdomen. Thud. The back of his head began bleeding. Thud. A rib cracked on his left side. Thud. His vision slowly blacked out, until he saw nothing.

When Jake opened his eyes, he found a janitor in a blue jumpsuit poking him with a broomhandle. Jake tried to stand up, but doubled over in pain. The janitor quickly picked him up and carried him for who knows how long until Jake realized that he was in some sort of doctor's office. The janitor was speaking in rapid-fire Spanish, trying to explain what had happened, and the doctor was staring at her blankly, though she was still concerned about Jake.

Giving up on an explanation, she came over to Jake and began to give him a full examination. Despite how gentle and steady her hands were, any location on his body responded to touch only with blinding agony.

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Remembering this moment a month or two ago, Jake realized that the pain had never stopped, it had just stopped being physical in nature.

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The doctor quickly began applying medicinal pastes to clean out wounds, and bandaging the many gashes over his body. Jake realized then that he had seen this place before. It was the school nurse's office. He turned his head, and despite the pain, he noticed that she was calling someone. Jake hoped it was 911, and then blacked out again.

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Antoine had broken Jake's rib and collarbone, gave him multiple concussions, and had beaten the good out of Jake. When the school principal had asked him who had done it, Jake said

that he couldn't remember. He realized that if he told the principal, Antoine would beat him up again. Part of him also knew that Antoine had done it out of passion. Jake thought of Clarissa and knew he would have done the same if some new guy had started talking to her. As he walked toward his usual spot by the trash cans, Jake realized his chance was slipping, and that he had to act soon if he wanted to catch Antoine and the rest by surprise. He wanted to get as many shots off before people started running away. Jake set his tray down, and was suddenly calm. He knew that he was ready to end all of the pain.

"Hey, it's Jake, right?" A voice called out from behind him. When he turned around, he saw one of Antoine's cronies, Alex, standing there. "I just wanted to say that I think that Antoine and the rest of us have been real jerkwads to you lately, and I'm sorry for that. He can be nice to some people, but he gets really protective of Veronica," Alex said, stammering through parts.

Jake thought for a moment. He hadn't expected this. To be honest, Alex was the first one to voluntarily speak to him the entire year. "Why are you telling me this?" Jake asked, his voice tinny.

"Well, I know it probably doesn't mean much, and I'm sorry will just seem like empty words, but I mean it." Alex said.

Jake didn't know what to do. He realized that while he had been listening, his hand had moved itself to the pistol, asking to let it loose. Jake looked Alex in the eye, and try as he might,

he just couldn't convince himself that Alex was anything but sincere. He slowly drew his hand away from the grip, and extended it in front of him, awaiting a grip of a different type. Not a grip of violence and death, but one of understanding and peace. Alex met him in kind.