

William McKinsky

It started as a joke! We never thought anything like this would happen!

Bullsh*t.

You did. You knew something like this would happen and you tried to warn them, told them it was a bad idea, that it was too mean, someone would get hurt. You tried until you couldn't anymore because of questions and looks and *Dude, why do you care so much about what we do to some queer?*

So, you stopped. You stopped, and you sneered at them, claimed you were the only one in the group with any common sense and told them not to come crawling to you when they got into trouble.

They didn't come crawling to you. You were already there. You injected yourself into the stupid plan – the stupid *joke* – because you had to. You couldn't put a stop to it, you were too much of a coward to nark on them, so you joined them. If you can't beat them, right?

I swear, Sir, we never meant for anyone to get hurt.

There's that emphasis on *swear* that Millie always uses when she's trying to make people believe her. And, sh*t, maybe she's telling the truth this time, you don't know. All you do know is that you've listened to her ask to borrow a couple of bucks at least once a week every week since intermediate. You've heard that slight lilt every time she promised to pay you back next week. You've put up with that grating voice for longer than you can bear and perhaps you're finally about to break.

Maybe she didn't mean for anyone to get hurt. Maybe none of them did. You didn't. But William McKinsky got hurt. And it's your fault as much as it is theirs and Millie's.

A new voice cuts into the sobs of some friends and defiance of others. You don't recognise this voice, figure it's a parent, but it brings you back into focus. You blink, twice, but can't bring yourself to lift your head and meet any of the disappointed gazes in the principal's office.

Disappointed might not be a strong enough word. Your parents are behind you and you know disappointed won't be the word they use once you're in the back seat of their car.

Disgusted.

Humiliated.

Livid.

And each word will hurt deep inside just as much as the next. Just as much as *disappointed*. This isn't one of those we're-not-angry-we're-just-disappointed moments. This is an every-negative-emotion-under-the-sun moment that you could have stopped at any moment.

If you weren't such a f*cking p*ssy.

Millie's talking again, but you don't care. You should have told her to shut up when she first brought up the idea – the *joke*. You should have told her it was dumb, not worth the punishment of getting caught, that it was outright bullying and not okay. You should have done so many things, because you've always had that power, that popularity with your friends, that they would have followed you if you had fought hard enough.

But you didn't fight at all and now William McKinsky is lying in a hospital bed with bandages wrapped around his wrists.

You thought about kissing him once.

Only once, though, because you try not to think about kissing the same person more than once. Doing so would make things too ... real. If you only think about kissing one guy one time then it's nothing, it doesn't matter. It's not a big deal. But if you think about kissing one guy more than once then it's ... it's too much.

Too much reality, too much uncertainty, too much dealing with something that makes your throat close up.

So, you thought about kissing him, but only once. At a party. Two days before he happened to come out. He was smiling and you were smiling and no one else was around until everyone was around. You don't know if it was a *moment*, or if it had anything to do with his coming out, but it was you and him and you thought about kissing him once.

And now you're the reason he tried to off himself. You and the people you call friends. The people who are the worst people you know. They can't be your friends, not anymore. You don't think William McKinsky will be your friend, either, even if he had once thought about kissing you, too.

Not that you deserve his friendship. Or any friendship. Your dad's voice cuts through everyone else's, and it's that voice he uses when he's trying to defend himself to Mum for buying a pie for lunch

instead of taking a sandwich and you don't deserve that, either. You don't deserve him standing up for you, being on your side, defending you. You don't deserve your mum's hand squeezing your shoulder, letting you know she's right there, right behind you. She's disappointed, but she's got your back.

You're not sure there's much you do deserve. There's no punishment fitting for the crime you all committed.

Sure, you could blame peer pressure, social media, the alcohol ... all the things that have already been thrown out as excuses. But you won't. You went into this eyes open, knowing damn well that you shouldn't be anywhere near it, sure that if you could come clean and be honest then your so-called friends would see a different side of things.

Come clean.

Ha.

You struggle to even *think* the words about yourself, but you need to. You need to do it. Do it, do it, do it, goddamn it!

A deep breath.

Come.

Out.

Come out.

Come out, come out, *come f*cking out, you despicable sh*t!*

Your mum squeezes your shoulder, hard, and you look up, hoping like hell that no one's noticed your trembling. They haven't. They barely notice you at all as each of your friends leaves the principal's office, their *disappointed* parents trailing behind. Your mum gives you a look filled with too many questions, so you stand up and follow.

You follow.

You're so sick of following.

You don't know what your punishment is. You don't know what else your friends said. You don't know if William McKinsky is going to be okay. All you know is that there's a feeling inside you, surging and burning, making you sick with everything you hate about yourself.

You follow your parents to the car and climb into the back seat.

You're so sick of following.

They say nothing once you're all in the car. You had expected screaming and anger or, at the very least, *we're so disappointed in you*, but there's nothing. Nothing except the churning, fiery feeling in your gut, and you can't stand it. You can't stand the silence, the pain, the self-loathing. The constant, throbbing *come out, come out, come out*, in your head.

So, you open your mouth. To apologise, to explain, to ask how William McKinsky is. You don't know. To say something, anything, everything.

Come out.

Come out.

Come out.

Your head pounds. Your mouth is dry. Your words are choked, raw, honest.

You come out.