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My Heart and Other Black Holes

Written by

Jasmine Warga

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JASMINE WARGA

MY HEART & OTHER BLACK HOLES

HODDER

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Music, especially classical music, especially Mozart's Requiem Mass in D Minor, has kinetic energy. If you listen hard enough, you can hear the violin's bow trembling above the strings, ready to ignite the notes. To set them in motion. And once the notes are in the air, they collide against one another. They spark. They burst.

I spend a lot of time wondering what dying feels like. What dying sounds like. If I'll burst like those notes, let out my last cries of pain, and then go silent forever. Or maybe I'll turn into a shadowy static that's barely there, if you just listen hard enough.

And if I wasn't already fantasizing about dying, working at the phone bank at Tucker's Marketing Concepts would definitely do the trick. Lucky for them they're off the hook in terms of liability because I have a preexisting condition.

Tucker's Marketing Concepts is a telemarketing firm located in the basement of a dingy strip mall and I'm their only employee who wasn't alive to witness the fall of Rome. Several gray plastic tables that were probably bought in bulk from Costco are arranged in rows, and everyone gets a phone and a computer. The whole place smells like mold mixed with burnt coffee.

Right now, we're conducting a survey for Paradise Vacations. They want to know what people value more on vacation—quality of food and beverage or quality of hotel rooms. I dial the next number on my list: Mrs. Elena George, who lives on Mulberry Street.

"Hello?" a scratchy voice answers the phone.

"Hello, Mrs. George. My name is Aysel and I'm calling from Tucker's Marketing Concepts on behalf of Paradise Vacations. Do you have a moment to answer a few questions?" I lack the singsongy delivery of most of my fellow workers. I'm not exactly TMC's star employee.

"I told y'all to stop calling this number," Mrs. George says, and hangs up on me.

You can run, but you can't hide, Mrs. George. I make a note on my call log. Looks like she's not interested in a two-week

vacation to Hawaii with a time-share opportunity. Sorry, Paradise Vacations.

Making more than one phone call without a break in between is too much for me, so I turn to face my computer. The only perk of my job is the free, unrestricted internet access. I double click on the browser and log back on to Smooth Passages, my favorite website of the moment.

"Aysel," Mr. Palmer, my supervisor, snaps, mispronouncing my name as always. It's Uh-zell, not Ay-zal, but he doesn't care. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop playing around on your computer?" He gestures toward my call log. "You still have a lot of numbers left."

Mr. Palmer is the type of person who could change his whole life if he just once went to a different barber. He currently has a bowl cut, the type more typically found on gangly sixth-grade boys. I want to tell him that a crew cut could really bring out his jawline, but I guess he's pretty happy with Mrs. Palmer so he's in no rush to reinvent himself. Nope, no midlife crisis for Mr. Palmer.

I hate to admit it, but I'm a little jealous of Mr. Palmer. At least he can be fixed, if he wants to be fixed. A few scissor clips and he'll be brand-new. There's nothing that can fix me.

"What?" Mr. Palmer says when he catches me staring at him.

"You have nice hair." I swivel in my chair. I guess I lied,

my job has two perks: free internet access and I get to sit in a spinning chair.

"Huh?" he grunts.

"You have nice hair," I repeat. "Have you ever considered wearing it in a different style?"

"You know, I took a risk, hiring you." He waves his wrinkled finger close to my face. "Everyone in this town told me you were trouble. Because of your . . ." He trails off and looks away.

Because of your father, I complete his sentence in my head. The inside of my mouth fills with the sour, metallic taste I've come to know as humiliation. My life can be neatly divided into two sections: before my father made the nightly news and after. For a moment, I allow myself to imagine what this conversation would sound like if my father weren't my father. Mr. Palmer probably wouldn't speak to me like I'm a stray mutt raiding his garbage can. I'd like to think he'd have more tact, but no one wastes their tact on me anymore. But then it hits me, the thought I try to squeeze out of my mind. *You wouldn't feel any different inside.*

I dip my chin to my chest in an attempt to shake that thought. "Sorry, Mr. Palmer. I'm on it."

Mr. Palmer doesn't say anything; he just looks up at the three giant shiny banners that were recently hung on the office's back wall. Each one of them features Brian Jackson striking some sort of pose—arms crossed over his chest, arms

thrown above his head in victory, arms pressed at his side midsprint. He's been Photoshopped to have perfect skin, but there was no need to alter his ashy-blond hair or bright blue eyes. And I know from passing him in the halls at school that his calf muscles really are that large. At the bottom of each giant banner, the words HOMEGROWN IN LANGSTON, KENTUCKY, AND OLYMPIC BOUND are scrawled in red block text.

The banner doesn't say anything about the first boy from Langston who almost qualified for the Olympics. But it doesn't have to. As I watch Mr. Palmer study the banner, I know he's thinking about that boy—the first boy. Almost anyone who sees Brian Jackson's sweaty brow and muscular calves can't help but think of Timothy Jackson, Brian's older brother. And anyone who sees the banner and then sees me will definitely think of Timothy Jackson.

Finally, Mr. Palmer peels his eyes away from the poster and turns back to me. He can't look me in the eye, though. He stares over the top of my head as he clears his throat. "Look, Aysel. Maybe it would be best if you didn't come in tomorrow. Why don't you take the day off?"

I press my elbows into the table, wishing I could melt into the gray plastic, into an unfeeling synthetic blend of polymers. I feel my skin starting to bruise under the weight of my body and I silently hum Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor. My mind fills with dark and heavy organ notes and I imagine the organ's keys arranging themselves into

the shape of a ladder that leads to an empty quiet place. A place away from TMC, away from Mr. Palmer, away from everyone and everything.

Mr. Palmer seems to misinterpret my silence as confusion, not complete and utter mortification. He stretches his hands out in front of him, wringing them out like he just washed them. I inspire that feeling in most people—the desire to wash their hands clean. "As you may know, tomorrow we're going to be making calls on behalf of the city of Langston to try and increase attendance at Saturday's rally for Brian Jackson." Mr. Palmer's voice quivers a bit and he sneaks a quick glance back at the banner, as if Brian Jackson's focused athletic countenance may help him muster the courage to continue.

Brian's magic must rub off on Mr. Palmer because he finds his voice again. "Brian's coming home for the weekend from training camp and the city wants everyone to show him a warm welcome. And as much as I know you would like to help, I'm afraid some of our customers might feel uncomfortable with you inviting them to the rally because, well, because of your father and . . ." His voice lowers and he continues talking, but he's stumbling over his words and I can't really understand what he's saying. It's something of a mixture between an apology, an explanation, and an indictment.

I try not to laugh. Instead of focusing on the absurdity of

how I am apparently too unappealing to even operate as a telemarketer, I choose to zero in on Mr. Palmer's word choice of "customer." I don't think the people we harass on the daily consider themselves to be customers, but rather victims. And thanks to my dad, I'm pretty good at making everyone feel like they could be a potential victim.

Red-faced and flustered, Mr. Palmer walks away from my desk and begins strolling the other rows. He asks Marie to stop chewing gum and he begs Tony to please refrain from smearing hamburger grease all over the keyboard.

Once Mr. Palmer's a safe distance from my desk, I open Smooth Passages again. In the simplest terms, Smooth Passages is a website for people who want to die. There are tons of these websites. Some are fancier than others, some are more niche oriented for people who have a specific method they prefer, like say suffocating, or they're for a certain type of person, like depressed injured athletes or some shit like that. I still haven't found one dedicated to the unwanted daughters of psychotic criminals, so for now Smooth Passages is the place for me.

Smooth Passages' website is plain, no flashy or cheesy HTML work. It's black and white. Classy. That is, if a website dedicated to suicide can be classy. There are message boards and forums, which is what I mostly look at. Recently, I've become really interested in this one section called Suicide Partners.

The problem with suicide, which most people don't realize, is that it's really hard to follow through. I know, I know. People are always yammering on and on about how "suicide is the coward's way out." And I guess it is—I mean, I am giving up, surrendering. Running away from my black hole of a future, preventing myself from growing into the person I'm terrified of becoming. But just because it's cowardly doesn't guarantee it's going to be easy.

The thing is, I'm concerned that my self-preservation instinct is too high. It's like my depressed mind and my very-much-alive body are in a constant struggle. I worry about my body winning out at the last minute with some jerky impulse and then I'll end up having done the deed only halfway.

Nothing scares me more than a failed attempt. The last thing I want is to end up in a wheelchair, eating pulverized food and being watched around the clock by some sassy nurse who has a not-so-secret obsession with cheesy reality TV.

And that's why lately I've been eyeing the Suicide Partners section. I guess the way it works is you find some other sad excuse for a person who lives pretty nearby and you make your final plans with them. It's like peer pressure suicide, and from what I gather, it's pretty damn effective. Sign me up.

I scan some of the postings. None of them are a good fit for me. Either they're way too far away (why do so many people in California want to blow their brains out? Isn't living

by the ocean supposed to make you happy?) or they're just the wrong demographic (I really don't want to get mixed up with some adult who's having marital troubles—stressed-out soccer moms are not for me).

I contemplate composing my own ad, but I'm not really sure what I'd say. Also, nothing seems sadder than reaching out, trying to find a partner, and then getting rejected. I look over my shoulder and see that Mr. Palmer is a few rows away. He's massaging Tina Bart's shoulders. He's always massaging Tina Bart's shoulders. Maybe he isn't as happy with Mrs. Palmer as I thought.

Mr. Palmer catches me staring at him and shakes his head. Flashing him my sweetest grimace, I pick up the phone and dial the next number that's on my log: Samuel Porter, who lives on Galveston Lane.

As I'm listening to the familiar ring of the phone, I hear my computer beep. Damn. I'm always forgetting to mute the volume.

Laura, the middle-aged lady who works next to me and wears lipstick that's too bright for her jaundiced complexion, raises her eyebrow at me.

I shrug. "I think the software is updating," I mouth to her.

She rolls her eyes at me. Laura, apparently, is a human bullshit detector.

Mr. Samuel Porter doesn't answer his phone. Guess he's

not craving piña coladas. I hang up the phone and click back to Smooth Passages. Looks like it beeped because someone posted a new message in the Suicide Partners forum. It's titled "April 7th." I open it:

> I'll admit I used to think this was stupid. The whole point of killing myself is so I can be alone forever so I never understood why I'd want to do it with someone else. But that's changed now. I'm nervous I'll chicken out at the last minute or something. There are other things, too, but I'd rather not get into that here.
>
> I only have a few requirements. One, I don't want to do it with anyone who has kids. That shit is too heavy for me. Two, you can't live more than an hour away from me. I know this might be hard since I live in the middle of nowhere but for now I'm sticking to that. And three, we have to do it on April 7th. That date isn't negotiable. Message me for more information.
>
> —FrozenRobot

I check FrozenRobot's stats and try not to judge the screen name. But, FrozenRobot, really? I understand that everyone on here is a little bit, okay, a lot emotional, but still. Have some dignity.

FrozenRobot is apparently a he. He's seventeen, so only one year older than me. That's fine. Oh, and he's from Willis, Kentucky—that's about fifteen minutes away.

A surge jolts through my bones and I vaguely remember that this is what excitement feels like. FrozenRobot has perfect timing. Maybe, for the first time in my life, I'm lucky. This must be a sign from the universe—if the only time you get lucky is when you're planning your suicide, it's definitely time to go.

I read the message again. April 7, that works for me. Today is March 12. I can maybe last another month or so, though lately each day feels like an eternity.

"Aysel," Mr. Palmer says again.

"What?" I say, hardly paying any attention to him.

He walks so he can stand behind me and taps my computer screen. I try to minimize the window. "Look, I don't care what you do in your free time but don't bring it to work. Got it?" His voice sags like an old couch cushion. I'd feel bad for Mr. Palmer if I had any pity saved for anyone else but me.

I'm going to go out on a limb and guess that Mr. Palmer isn't familiar with Smooth Passages. He probably thinks I'm looking at some heavy metal fan site or something. Little does Mr. Palmer know, I like my music soft and instrumental. Didn't his parents ever teach him not to buy into stereotypes? Just because I'm a sixteen-year-old girl with unruly curly hair who wears dark striped shirts every day doesn't mean I can't appreciate a nice violin solo or a smooth piano concerto.

Once Mr. Palmer walks away, I hear Laura scoff. "What?" I say.

"Don't you have the internet at home?" Laura asks, frowning at me. She's sipping the complimentary coffee, and the plastic mug's rim is stained with her god-awful berry burst lipstick.

"Don't you have a coffee maker at home?"

She shrugs, and just when I think the conversation is over, she says, "Work isn't the place to be fishing for dates. Do that on your own time. You're going to get the rest of us in trouble."

"Right." I look down at my keyboard. There's no use explaining to Laura that I'm not searching for a date, or at least not that kind of date.

I stare at the pieces of cheese crackers that are stuck in the spaces between the F and G keys, and that's when I decide—I'm going to message back FrozenRobot.

He and I have a date: April 7.