

Meredith Is Missing

An interpersonal history

Suzanne Richardson

As I write this, my friend Meredith is missing in Washington,

DC. A police report has been filed. The facts are these: she never showed up for dinner with her family, and the next morning her belongings were on the curb. Her wallet and phone were on her bedside table and no one had seen her in twenty-four hours. Her neighbor was the last one to see her. According to the neighbor, Meredith got emotional, told her that certain plans she had made for herself might have to go on hold for a while and that her parents would be there shortly to move the rest of her things to her grandmother's house in the suburbs. Meredith told her neighbor to take what she wanted from the pile of things on the stoop and gave her a hug.

On the pile was Meredith's boom box. This detail worries me the most. Since we were kids, she was always listening to music. Her family's home has one central stereo and in high school we'd crank it up and have dance parties in the middle of the night. Her parents thought it was funny. Meredith and her sister Theresa sang opera, and starred in every school musical. I met Meredith in a local theater production of *The Sound of Music*. Her sister played Mother Superior, while I (not a good singer) chanted Latin with a pantyhose habit on my head. Lily stood behind me, also a nun, but because she had a beautiful voice she had a solo. That was the summer Meredith, Lily, and I became friends.

Lily's the one who told me. I got a short text: *M is missing*.

When I talk to Lily on the phone, we run through various worst-case scenarios. Meredith's never been suicidal, but her breaks with reality are so intense, she could inadvertently harm herself. Step off a bridge, step into traffic, step into a car with a stranger. If the wrong person found her, what could happen? We don't fill in the blanks. What if she boarded a plane to Romania? They can't find her passport, and she's a dual citizen. She was supposed to go back in a month for research.

We are three. I can't bear to think of Lily without Meredith. There are certain bonds we each have to one another. Lily makes Meredith make sense to me. I'll often look to one to understand the other. I know they do the same with me. If one of us is missing we don't make sense.

"Lily, I'm scared."

"Me too."

I think about how Meredith called me a few days before she went missing, and I didn't call her back. I didn't because I was tired, and because I know that every phone call with her risks becoming circular. She'll spin on one or two topics incessantly. Usually having to do with men—recently, a very devout Hindu man who claimed he needed a Domestic Goddess as a reason for no longer seeing Meredith.

"I could learn how to cook," she had said to me over the phone.

"Domestic Goddesses just know how, they don't have to learn."

I replied. "Besides, you're a Rhodes scholar, who needs a Goddess when they can have a scholar?" She always dates men who are intimidated by her rare, very real intelligence. A part of her is very drawn to a traditional man, and traditional gender roles. I think she likes being dominated in certain ways, but Meredith is exceptional, and at twenty-nine is already one of the world's leading scholars on Romanian studies. She's a playwright, and a highly creative, beautiful person who is always following through on the smallest promises and projects. All the things I admire so much about her could feel overwhelming to a potential partner. Part of me laughed at the scene she recounted, some random D.C. graphic designer telling a woman who graduated at the top of her class from Oxford University that because she can't cook, she's not worth his time.

"The people here are boring, heartless, uncreative," she complained to me about D.C. "They aren't like you and me." I always value when she groups us together. I've never been exceptional in

the ways she has, but her opinion that I'm smart, creative, on her level means a great deal.

Eight years before Meredith goes missing she had the first bipolar breakdown of her life. She was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford.

Friends of hers there informed Meredith's family that something was wrong, she was in the hospital, and she'd had some kind of breakdown. Meredith recounted the story to me later. She was under a lot of academic pressure, and had gone to a party weeks before her break down, a costume party. She had dressed provocatively, but everyone had. She was drunk, very drunk, and a boy in her program offered to take her back to her apartment, or maybe they ended up at his apartment. Either way, he stood in front of a door, wouldn't let her leave, or wouldn't remove himself. This boy in front of the door, with blonde hair, very straight teeth, a real pedigree WASP, had been publicly challenging her all year about her studies. Meredith said he seemed angry, unreasonable, and this led to sex that she can't quite remember, but didn't want. By the end of the week he had told everyone that he'd tasted Meredith, and it was sweet, and hoisted what she now calls rape up as a trophy. She told me that thing, with that jerk, it really bothered her, and might have caused some sort of depression. The rape could have contributed to that first breakdown. The rape was probably a factor in the fracturing that was genetically inevitable. But it is also something other than a factor, it is a robbery, it is a misery, it is a separate wound, and as her friend I don't want this to be two thorns, but it always will be. I don't want these things to pile up. Isn't one thing enough?

Lily and I took a trip to visit Meredith while she was on her Fulbright in Romania. We traveled all over the countryside before ending up in the region of Transylvania. We decided to tour Dracula's Castle.

It turned out that our tour guide, Julian, gave this tour up to

six times a day. He could give it in ten different languages. Having grown up in Brasov, he hooked up with the Transylvania tourist thing early on. All the languages he learned, he learned from tourists and tapes. As he drove us further up into the mountains, the Romanian countryside rushed past in a quiet, green, beautiful blur.

“Dracula’s Castle!” I exclaimed when it came into view as we entered the town.’

“Bran Castle,” he corrected quickly. “And actually, it’s a fortress technically.”

Bran Castle rests at the top of a small rocky mountain, and the town below is all a-buzz with activity. Huge power lines obstruct a perfect view of the castle from almost every angle on the ground. Julian parked the van, and instructed us to follow him through the chaos.

“A small walk,” he said, taking a sip from a water bottle then tossing it in the van. We weaved through hundreds of people walking along the streets; vendors lined the streets like liquor bottles: trinkets, clothes, food. Advertisements plastered the building walls, and advancing towards the castle a dirt corral of souvenir booths appeared to the right. Each booth held hundreds of different images of Dracula, on t-shirts, on mugs, on aprons, on rugs. The vampiric, toothy, deviled grin of Dracula dangled venomously from every vendor front, doubled and redoubled, shaking in the wind. We walked past the trinkets up the stone path to the castle.

But like Julian told us, it’s a fortress, not a castle, and Dracula may not even have ever set foot in it. There is one room where Julian let us touch the stone wall that *may* have held Vlad the Impaler for one night only. It’s a tourist trap. At some point people came to that region of Transylvania looking for a castle and Transylvanians pointed to Bran Fortress to make a buck.

But there are two stories there still. What is actual and what is believed. These stories are somehow in the same place at the same time. Meredith’s bipolar breakdowns result in something similar.

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She has what doctors call “a running narrative.” Her breaks with reality are so intense that she has an alternate story in her head of what happens to her. False memories. Part of her job, part of her recovery from each breakdown, is to reconfigure her story. Begin to discover what the truth is, understand her experiences, and try to uncover what is real for herself.

The truth about Transylvania is that it was the star in a piece of fiction—fiction that was actually fiction, as opposed to thinly veiled truths. As we toured around the fortress grounds in Transylvania we walked to a back balcony. From there, Meredith pointed to a small stone path that lead into the woods.

Two years before Meredith goes missing, she has a breakdown in Vanuatu, a small island in the South Pacific where she lived with her boyfriend. While Meredith had been in Romania on Fulbright they had broken up, and she longed to make things work so she flew to Vanuatu to live with him and try and fix their relationship.

Lily was visiting me in New Mexico. We got up early to hike Kasha Katuwe and on our way back, got an international call from Meredith. It’s a tradition when two of us are together, that we call the missing third. She sounded strange on the phone. She said she’d been up all night and the birds kept distracting her. We knew she lived close to the sound on the island, so the birds were plausible, but the sleep concerned us. We told her we loved her, and wanted her to get rest.

“Okay,” she said, “Hugs. I wish I was there.”

We thought she might not be well. But we decided that her boyfriend Rob would know if she needed help. But a week or so later, I was sitting at my night job as a receptionist at a financial firm in downtown Albuquerque on the nineteenth floor of the Bank of Albuquerque building, and I got an instant message from Lily.

*Suzanne I’m on the phone with
Rob. Meredith isn’t well and*

*we can't get
in touch with her parents.*

I emailed Meredith's sister, called Meredith's house and left more messages. In each message I said: "I'm worried about Meredith, I'm afraid what happened at Oxford is happening again." I didn't say episode, or bipolar breakdown. I didn't say she's sick. It seems unfair to call it what it is. Maybe I'm afraid there's a reduction of her that happens when I say it, even though I know it's not offensive to say what's true. I tried to remind myself that Meredith is still herself and her condition does not define her but I didn't say the words into the phone. Instead I referenced Meredith's first breakdown.

It's later that I heard the full story: Rob finds Meredith wandering in her nightgown down the road to the neighbor's house in the early morning. I imagine her looking like a kind of Angel in a holy trance, her white-blond curly hair waving along her back. Her brown eyes dilated in fervor, her thin lips parted slightly, and the square of her jaw clenched as she steps unconsciously farther and farther away. She has lost language. She laughs, and cries. Eventually, she convulses on the floor of their kitchen involuntarily, unable to stop, unable to communicate, her eyes darting wildly, unfocused.

When I heard this I wanted a throat to choke. How could Rob have let her get to that point? Even talking with her on the phone I could tell something was wrong. How in living with her, could this go unnoticed? I told Lily over the phone that I blamed him. Lily said, at least he brought her back stateside.

"Yeah, on her dime," I spat. Rob made Meredith pay him back for both plane tickets when she got out of the psych ward at Duke.

I've never met Rob, but I've seen photographs: him on a sailboat, shirtless, his black hair in his green eyes, him patting an elephant on the head in Sri Lanka, him with his arm around Mer-

edith in a restaurant in Cambridge. I know what he likes: spicy food, anal sex, numbers, the color blue, liquor over beer, always blondes (there's a parade of them after Meredith; Australian swimmers, rich equestrians on vacation, lonely pig-faced tourist girls and Meredith will wail about each one.) Lily said it's not his fault; Meredith is sometimes withholding about how she's feeling. I know that Meredith is ultimately responsible for taking care of herself, keeping herself healthy, reading her own highs and lows, but I'm protective, angry. He was supposed to be her partner. He wasn't listening. He wasn't looking. I'm pretty sure Rob was scared and didn't know what to look for, listen for, but he also never asked.

That summer Meredith is in Durham recovering from Vanuatu, and I'm also in Durham by coincidence. Lily has moved back to Durham with her fiancé. We spend the summer in each other's orbit for the first time since we were teenagers.

"What if things don't get better?" Lily said to me over a beer. It's my twenty-seventh birthday, it was hot-as-hell July in North Carolina, and I was trying not to sweat too hard in my birthday outfit. The bar fans spun above us, the bar light was predictably low. Our elbows were almost touching on the wooden bar top. In high school people thought we looked alike in the way that young girls with long brown hair who dress similarly look alike. Now older, we're more distinct, we've grown into our own faces, own styles, but Lily feels like a sister, in the same way Meredith does.

"What if it keeps happening even though she's recovering?" It hadn't occurred to me that episodes could build and tumble in a snowball effect. Lily told me about a hallucination Meredith told Lily was a memory.

Lily sipped her beer, "It's scary. It made no sense. She said she was in her house, by the sound and through the trees she could see an island, and a boat, and on the boat there was a flash of light, and through the flash of light Meredith said she knew the people on the boat wanted something from her. The light flashed again, and she

picked up the phone, and on the phone were the men from the boat. The men invited her to a secret island.”

Meredith hadn't told me anything this concrete. She had told me she believed the Chinese government was after her and she thought there were spies in her yoga classes. Once, earlier in the summer we had gone to brunch, and she was very bothered by the flies that were hanging around our table. She kept saying that there were also flies at her house, and so why were the flies also here? She was afraid the same flies were following her, or that the flies were somehow connected to her, that all flies were connected through her and it meant something.

This same summer I was sleeping with a social worker—until then, an unconsummated crush from high school. When we were younger, he was a drummer of a punk band called The Human Flies, and like most high school bands they weren't very skilled, but played often. I say we were sleeping together, because even though we know each other, and our parents know each other, and we went through half-hearted motions of caring about one another's life goals and aspirations, we didn't really hang out except for a weekend my parents went out of town, and he stayed for a few days. In those three days I told him about Meredith, her condition, how I was worried. He told me about running group therapies at mental health clinics in Raleigh. He teaches mostly coping skills, life skills, how to manage emotions, reinforces the importance of medication, hygiene etc. He confessed he plays mostly ping-pong with the patients, or cards, and it soothes them. It didn't occur to me that his patients have similar diagnoses to Meredith until he pointed out some of his patients are bipolar.

“But they're not like Meredith,” I insisted. He looked at me thoughtfully, his white-blue eyes didn't really ever show emotion, but I could feel something building behind them. I was making eggs in my bathrobe. He was lounging sideways in my mother's favorite reading chair, in just his boxers, his legs dangling over the sides. For

some reason, in my memory it was a visual joke: tall, broad, half-naked boy doesn't fit in floral patterned chair.

"Okay," he said, and held out his mug for more coffee.

"I mean she's not going to be like that," I said, now scrambling the eggs I've failed to fry properly.

"Okay," he said and got out of the chair to refill his own coffee. I know he was trying to tell me that it's a possibility that she could become low functioning like his patients over time, and in my own passive-aggressive way, I didn't let him.

Eight months before Meredith went missing I visited her in Washington, DC. We walked the mall at night. We took in the Washington Monument. American flags whipped in the dark wind as we got closer. Meredith said she used to take pride in walking the mall daily, but now she's rundown by this town. She told me her plans to meet a married man at the Washington Monument within the week to discuss his proposition of an extramarital affair. I made a joke about how presumptuous it was of him to ask to discuss a sexual affair next to the most famous erect phallus in our nation.

"It's not exactly subtle," I smiled wryly, "but I see where he's going with it." She laughed loudly; her laugh is always peppered with hiccupped sharp noises. She always says the person's name who's made her laugh over and over, and sometimes a hurried "omygod." People turned to see where the noise was coming from as we hurried down the paved path away from the monument. Her laugh makes me laugh.

"Suzanne," she grabbed my arm, "you're so right."

This whole trip I tried to tell her I think this affair is a bad idea. I gave her a lot of reasons: *You'll get hurt. You deserve a relationship not an affair. If you get insecure about his feelings you can't call him—can't email him. If you get caught you are the fall person—women blame women. You'll have to stop being friends with him to avoid suspicion. Everything will be in his control.* And the

one that I don't say is the one that is most logical; *it could give you an episode*. This man had painted himself the victim and Meredith felt sorry for him. She said, he said he's tried to make it work. I said, he'll say whatever it takes. It sounds strange, but I wish she could have had this affair. I want her to be able to make bad decisions, or have strange, terrible experiences and survive them. I want her to be stupid like the rest of us, but stakes are higher for her.

We walked arm in arm up the mall towards the Capitol building.

"Suzanne my love, your being here makes me feel strong," she squeezed my arm. When I'm with her and Lily I feel strong too; we bring out something inside one another. I feel a renewed strength around her. Boundless wonder and energy like being fifteen. We went to a French restaurant, drank tons of wine, ordered mussels and pate. We are grown ups, we are children; we stumbled home in fits of laughter. On the edge of D.C.'s China Town we reassured one another despite recent failures that we're worthy of love. In bed Meredith started crying, she couldn't sleep, she didn't want me to leave, and she's worried about her hair. She's convinced its falling out. She's convinced she's no longer beautiful. She feels old. I sat up and held her hands in the dark.

"You're always beautiful. Take a deep breath. Have you talked to your doctor about this? Your hair isn't going anywhere. It's a beast!" I tugged playfully on a strand of her long blonde curly hair. She laid back down still sobbing. I've felt these kinds of things in different waves so I tried to soothe her, talk her through it. I had a 9 a.m. flight, but even after she fell asleep, I couldn't. She was crumbling.

In the spring, Meredith and I were bridesmaids in Lily's wedding. When we arrived at the pre-wedding hotel room, we dressed, did our make-up, and then both realized we'd forgotten the jewelry Lily had gifted us specifically for this occasion. Running to the hotel parking lot we simultaneously called our mothers, instructing them on places to look in our childhood homes for the jewelry we're sup-

posed to have: bedside table, bureau—top drawer, bathroom sink, kitchen table, coffee table. When we pulled up, Meredith’s mother was waiting at the end of the driveway holding the box out with a tight-lipped frown, and worried eyes. Meredith got out of the car, kissed her mother, and grabbed the box. At my house, my mom was on the back stoop holding the same box, same look. I got out of the car, hugged her, kissed her, and thanked her. Both of us laughed, at the scenario as we sped back to the hotel. *Mothers are important* we nodded like baby chicks.

Later, after the reception and all the bars closed we were at Meredith’s house. I was on her living room couch making out with a high school friend, Maurice, for old times’ sake. I could hear the cadence of Meredith’s voice in the other room as she spoke to other friends. Maurice kept asking my permission to touch me, touch various places on my body. Everything felt like seventeen again. I passed out on the fancy couch, the one no one sits on, next to Maurice with my high heels still on. When I woke it was still early, so I crawled up the steps to Meredith’s room, and got in the bed across from hers (she always had a guest bed in her room.) Taped above the bed were letters, photos, and collages Lily and I gave to Meredith in high school.

“You still have all this stuff up,” I murmured.

“It’s important,” she said, and rolled over in her bed.

I didn’t tell my parents where I was going to be, but the first place they called was Meredith’s house. I asked my mom on the phone how she knew where I was; she said she just knew.

In that moment: I had to catch a plane in three hours and I could still feel the champagne in my feet and there was hot, raw, alcohol at the back of my throat. I walked barefoot down the driveway in my light-green, wrinkled, bridesmaids dress feeling like I was still a kid, and I was playing dress up, but feeling too old to walk barefoot, too old to be a bridesmaid. Feeling like Lily didn’t just get married—because this is Lily, and she’s always so sick of boys after a few weeks. And this is me and somehow I know this is the tallest

I'll ever get, and I used to not know. And this is Meredith, and *Lord* I always thought Meredith would get married first.

Four months before Meredith went missing, she visited me in New Mexico—a birthday gift from her mother. That was the last time I saw her in person. I was frustrated with her because she became fixated on a guy she met here, Brian. I could tell she was on a high. She was overflowing with energy, fixated on men, wanted to go out every night. At a concert downtown she got emotional. She was up against the wall with her eyes closed.

My friends noted that Meredith was really comfortable being herself, as she kind of rocked out alone in a corner in a hippy-ish way. She's always been like that and I love that about her. The way she lets herself feel things out in the open. She let a guy pick her up at the venue bar, but I didn't let her go home with him. I told her to get his number and call him later; if he's serious about getting to know her he'll come out again. She agreed that what I suggested was reasonable. All the next day she was playing phone tag with this guy, and it preoccupied her mind. We were visiting Acoma pueblo, west of Albuquerque, we got out of cell range.

“He'll call?”

“He'll call.” This repeated up and down the tour for some time.

Saturday night her guy came out; we were meeting up with friends downtown. I didn't talk to him much, as I was focused on my crew, and when I was ready to go, Meredith told me she was going home with Brian. I gave him a look.

“She's welcome to come with me,” he said.

I didn't smile.

“I wasn't worried, that she wasn't invited,” I shot back. I demanded his cell phone number and address. I called him at the bar, and made him show me his ringing cell. I let him know if I didn't hear from her by noon I was going to drive to his house and get her.

“I’ll pull her out of your bed,” I said flatly. He laughed. “I’m dead serious. Noon or else. She’s my best friend.”

The next morning I waited for what seemed like hours. I was drinking coffee, trying to have a normal morning. I’m not her mother, but I’m worried. I had let her do what she wanted, while trying to be safe, cautious. I texted and called both his and her phone multiple times over the course of two hours with no answer. It crossed my mind that his address could be fake, but I tried to kill that thought. This guy, this social worker, with brown kind eyes, who during a lackluster round of truth or dare at the bar table revealed something too serious and painful (he was once in foster care), thus killing the game, just wasn’t a creep I kept telling myself. I grabbed my car keys and that’s when my phone rang.

“I’m so sorry Suzanne, we overslept, I swear. Brian says he’s sorry too, he’s dropping me off in ten.”

The rest of her trip was about Brian. We ate meals with him, constant texting, and she spent each night with him. I drew the line at watching him play volleyball at a bar uptown.

“This is not 1955.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m not watching a boy I barely know play a sport at a bar just because you’re banging him. We’re not even allowed on the court.”

“But Suz! It’s our last night together.” She whined quietly. The *our* hurts because she meant herself and Brian, even though it was also her last night with me.

She really wanted to be with him, so I didn’t confront her about it. When I hugged her at the airport she told me she wanted me to hang out with Brian, she gave me permission to date him. I was not interested. Finally, she begged me not to tell him about her bipolarity.

The next time I heard from Brian is four months later when Meredith is missing. I knew he had heard she was missing before I did, because the police called everyone who had recent contact with her. Brian had.

For some reason that bothered me the most. The way he contacted me was in a tone where he informed me of what was going on. Like he was her friend, and I was the stranger.

Meredith is missing. Have you heard from her?

I didn't respond. Did he forget that she came to New Mexico to visit me? That we told him we were childhood friends. Best friends? Did he forget he was the one-night stand?

When he called later in the day, I picked up and tried to turn the conversation around.

"I'll let you know when we find her," I said, reinforcing the "we." The subtext being *we* are the people who really know her, who really cared. There's nothing wrong with Brian. I know he's a "nice guy" but I can't help disliking him. I've pegged him as a horny opportunist in nice guy clothing. These men who hook up with Meredith don't understand what part they're playing in an ongoing narrative. She's amazing, but she requires more understanding, more work, more awareness, and I've seen a whole host of men fall down on this task. Men who have dated her for years, and just evaporated, or worse, blamed her for her own sickness when things got bad.

A month before Meredith goes missing I got a phone call from Sarah. Sarah never calls, she's more Meredith's friend than mine, but Sarah hung out with Lily, Meredith, and I in Romania. She was also a Fulbright scholar with Meredith placed in a small town north of Bucharest called Timisoara. I was writing, but I picked up the phone. Sarah wouldn't call me without a reason.

"Meredith's been committed, and she's refusing to take her medication. Can you give me a bartering chip for her to take her meds?" I got up from the table, and walked out the back door. I was sitting on my stoop in Albuquerque listing reasons for my best friend to take very high doses of serious medication.

A few feet away was the patio table we had eaten brunch at one morning during her visit. Meredith had made a perfect omelet. I was feeling down. Tears wet my face, and she was calmly telling me

my worth was innate and no one could take that away from me, and she thought I was worth a great deal. She had moved a chair closer to me, and given me a hug, which prompted my roommate's highly emotional pitbull to jump up for a hug too. So we both hugged the dog, and told her, she was worth a lot too. *See Meredith had raised her eyebrows. Look how lucky we are.*

"How bad was it? How bad is she?" I asked, the pitbull now roamed the backyard every so often looking up when I spoke.

"She was stripping off her clothes in public, doing yoga in the middle of the street, on the stretcher. She couldn't put any sentences together. She's really bad, Suzanne."

"Just make sure you mention Romania and I'll call if I can think of anything else."

"Okay."

Meredith is found almost exactly seventy-two hours after she has gone missing. She was in the middle of a huge intersection in D.C. trying to direct traffic when someone took her to the hospital. It took almost three days for her to remember her own name.

The same day that she is released she writes me an email:

I'm at Grandma's, don't worry.

As if she'd never gone missing at all.

In the middle of my worry I find a memory from a trip Lily, Meredith, and I took to Greece. We had rented a car to drive around Naxos Island. I was driving, and we hit a small village where the road kept getting narrower and narrower, the buildings and church structures were closing in on us. It got to the point where I was afraid the road was going to end, and I'd have to back the car up this winding hill out of the village. I put the car into park as we approached a sharp turn between two buildings.

"Someone has to get out, and make sure this road continues. I won't be able to back the car up through this curve." I turned to Meredith. She was wearing her bikini bottoms and a t-shirt over

her bikini top. Large black sunglasses with diamonds on the sides shaded her eyes. She always wears embellished stuff like that; beads on bags, fake diamonds on sunglasses, textured embroidered and ribboned shirts. Meredith laughed at the task, and got out of the car.

“Oh my God, Meredith’s going to run through this village in just a bikini.” Lily was gleeful in the back seat, and got out her camera steadying it for a shot. Meredith disappeared down the hill and then reappeared her butt barely covered by her pink and black striped bathing suit. I realize as she’s running down the street, that what she’s wearing isn’t a bathing suit bottom, it’s actually spandex hot pants that went under an outfit she wore to prom. Then, I wore it to my prom, then Lily wore it to a party, almost ten years ago. Locals that were sitting outside of businesses gaped. Old women came out onto their porches to watch Meredith run through the center of town in practically nothing. Rounding a building she disappeared again. But before we knew it, Meredith was bounding back up the hill towards the car. She was smiling, laughing, running, she made it to the car window out of breath.

“It goes through, the road goes through,” she said, putting her hands on her knees catching her breath. “We’re gonna make it.”

