

X AS H

Ancient word on the street is that when Leonardo DaVinci was painting the *Last Supper*, he waltzed into the church housing his work and stood for hours. Look once, think, rationalize, take ten steps back, and look again. Cogitating, he'd place a single stroke of paint onto the mural-sized wall and that was 9-5.

That is me now.

It is also not.

I'm no egocentric. Not anymore anyway. I make no claims to have lived a life any different, exotic, or tragic from the next person. Nor one delineating from the standard deviations of pain you (I) face today.

I make no claims to having lived a life.

I just want to paint in places that need painting. Explain in places that need explaining. And help in places that need more help than I can provide.

If you are looking for quick answers, I am the wrong life for you. And certainly, the wrong book because I do not have them. Return to sender, file a claim with your bank: “Product not as expected” and get your money back because this is no science. We are not objective. This is no medical practice. A practitioner’s office, maybe. But I will not diagnose you. I will not prescribe the right music, the right thoughts, the right emotions, the right workouts, the right activities, or the right words to remedy us. To free me.

I can only place paint and make art. Offer the framework that derives positive from negative. Identify mental capacities that invest every no, to earn a yes. And carefully choose what emerges from the pique blinking cursor on my screen.

The sky was blue, and the sun was out. My address hadn’t changed. My mind was young. My heart was beating. My blood was my blood. I still loved Diet Coke. Everything remained the same on this, 5 years passed but ever so vivid morning. I packaged the mail as it became gone, bopping my head to DaBaby on my way to Conrad High School for freshman orientation that we students called fish camp. I was excited, nervous, ready, inexperienced, happy, and hopeful. I will refer to this combination of words as “The 6”.

The school looked the same. I recouped with some familiar faces, regaling in their presence. One face familiar,

but much more intimidating, “Scary Jeri” as we kids’ called her, approached us students and walked us to the classroom. “207,” she said as we walked down the hallway, up the stairs, and to the right. I took a seat on the farthest side from the door because I walked the aisles not able to pick a spot approaching the wall. Everybody found their seats and Scary Jeri addressed the class, “Welcome to IB”. It didn’t take long before I spotted X. But before X was X, “it” was something else. I will call it H. On the outside, H was astonishing. The idea of H was one I’d wanted for many years. Knowing nothing more but the two vertical and one horizontal lines H was composed of, I’d never wanted a letter to represent my life so badly. I was just like H, but I was more like an h, or an H.

I was not Times New Roman font.

Nevertheless, I had two vertical and one horizontal lines. Or at least I thought I did. It was only the first day of orientation, but thinking about the time me and H had ahead was euphoric.

Excited. Nervous. Ready. Inexperienced. Happy. Hopeful.

The day came to an end, and I texted my father, letting him know I was ready to go home. I was excited about H but too nervous and far too scared to interact so unsurprising with the day and age of 2019, I found H online. I followed any account that resembled H, as I was not sure who was Times New Roman and who was Calibri or Ariel. Unbeknownst to me, I followed the correct H. It

was the first night and H was already a billow, looming over my every decision. I told my brother and my friends about H as the excitement was too much for me to handle. Too much to contain. I thought about how beautiful H was and how I needed to keep working out so my lines could be as sharp as yours. This led to the first of many times I would work out thinking about H. I didn't know H would make me work out hundreds of times over that summer. I for sure didn't know X would make me work out thousands of times, and do hundreds of thousands of reps, sprints, and drills. Do my homework, clock in at Spring Creek Barbecue, and help me accomplish my dreams. I did not know how powerful H would become once it became X. But what I did know was that H existed and I would see her tomorrow.

Excited. Nervous. Ready. Inexperienced. Happy. Hopeful.

The 6 will be getting a new friend, but one in its own category because everything alluded to as “the same” before, in the first paragraph, would no longer be the same after I employed this next word. It was day two of fish camp orientation and I was feeling the 6 in a great way but the 6 would turn into the 7 in a manner like never before as for the first and last time in my life, I took a leap of faith and approached the letter I liked. Due to some extraterrestrial force or the alignment of the stars, I sat directly next to H in a classroom full of young teenage kids. As previously mentioned, on the outside I am an H, so

sitting next to H garnered many looks as my conspicuous actions were purely hedonistic. The other students in that class didn't have an H like I had one, so they chose to rain on my parade. They began to talk, filling their minds with rumors and prophecies of two letters in a relationship. But as a 14-year-old who wanted what everybody was saying, I couldn't recognize the harm these rumors could cause. I made no effort to stop them. I welcomed the rumors that turned H into X. I welcomed the rumors that turned my life upside down. As day two wore on, H's lines became nicer. The straight lines got straighter. The sharp cross became sharper. I was infatuated with H, and the emotions I felt did not allow me to see that H wasn't Times New Roman, or that I wasn't an H at all. The emotions I felt brought me into a personal fable. I could do no harm, and nothing could go wrong. But luckily for me, the one in 6 + 1 wasn't the strongest and my lack of courage led me to reservations in fully expressing my newlywed emotions. But I was okay with that.

I had to be.

Day three went the same as day two and as I knew it, fish camp orientation was over. I feared not though, because H and I had 4 years ahead of us. At least I thought we did. H's rein only lasted 3 months. The night of day three solidified my belief that H was different from the other letters in the alphabet. And it solidified my belief that I too was an H, one in Times New Roman font. We texted

for hours, quantifying just how much we had in common. I grew even more excited whilst reading about your middle school experiences that were so similar to mine. I told my closest female friend Diana about you. I talked about you to my friends in the Xbox party chat. I wanted the world to know how straight your lines were. And I wanted you to be mine. Thankfully, I refrained from telling you that, because had I did, I wouldn't be writing about you now. I wouldn't be where I am today. And I wouldn't have a semicolon tattoo on my left calf.

The months following fish camp, but before H became X were the only days you brought immense joy to my life. I was a jovial spirit. My middle name was smiling. I was so happy to engage with whatever I did because you were by my side. We talked about me, we talked about you. We reminisced on the past and we talked about the future. I believed that our visions for the future were similar. I thought you felt the same for me as I felt for you.

I was wrong.

Two weeks after fish camp was the first time I heard of O. We went to different middle schools, so I didn't know him. I didn't know you. But I knew the H I wanted was with O and that was painful. This would be the first of two times I saw H on a different team than my own. But by June 28th, I knew you were with O, and I didn't care. He was going to a different school, so it didn't matter. I didn't believe in manifestation, but I believed in us; so, I said to

you “Goodnight ML”. You didn’t know what ML meant. I didn’t tell you. I didn’t want you to know. But I wanted you to figure it out and say it back to me. I wanted you to feel the way I felt. Whether there was an O in the picture or not, I was hopeful that one day you’d confess your feelings for me, and we could be together. But until that day came, and until I could tell you what ML stood for, I closed every night with a Goodnight ML.

The days were short. I wanted nothing more but for time to pass and for days to end because each day that went by meant a day closer to going to school together. As students in the IB program, we had many classes together. I thought this meant I’d get to see H all the time, but eventually, I’d come to know that it meant I’d have to see X every day. For the time that H was still H, I was excited. The 7 was still present, although I felt a little more experienced with you. I was as comfortable with H as I knew comfortable could be. That was only over the phone of course because we both know I was anything but comfortable in person. But the person I was online, the friend that I was to you during the 2020 pandemic was the same person I was in real life. I wish H could’ve seen that. Maybe this story wouldn’t be about X and maybe I wouldn’t be writing at all. Maybe I’d know happiness.

I probably wouldn’t because the hurt is inevitable.

You were inevitable.

August 19, 2019, was the first day of school and I was bricked up just thinking about you.

H was all-encompassing and endearing, but your lines were titillating.

I was eager to interact with the letter that I wanted in my life. We had talked all summer, so I was a familiar person in an unfamiliar crowd. Scary Jeri placed us in 6 out of 8 classes together, which meant we'd be around each other a lot. You didn't love that, but I was sure H did. Our fonts clashed a bit. I began to realize that I was not Times New Roman. We had some differences but the 7 worked in many ways and one of those ways was making sure I remained confident.

The first week of school was done. The football team played in a scrimmage that Friday. I was a freshman and apart from mousing a senior receiver during one on one's, I hadn't really made a name for myself yet. I didn't play much but for the time I did, I hoped H was watching. I hoped that you saw all my good plays, blinked during my mistakes, and were totally unaware that I was going out with the JV team in a JV jersey. At the time, sports were our greatest common ground. You didn't care for them as much as I did, but I knew you were on varsity so that's where I wanted to be. The night of the scrimmage you told me H and O were no longer together. With all the confidence in the world that my time was near, I asked you

if you were okay. You told me that you were, and you thanked me for the concern. You informed me that nobody had asked you that yet. I thought that meant something.

It didn't.

The next week was more football practice and long nights awake texting you. Never face-timing though. You never wanted to. I knew this meant something; I just didn't want to believe it. You were still very close to me though, holding the lanyards that hung from my backpack as we walked to every class together. After the second week of school came to an end, you invited me to watch a football game with you. I couldn't go, and I stressed believing that I was selling my chance to be with H. I believe now that it wouldn't have mattered, but sometimes I think about how important those little moments can be. It had been two full weeks since school started, and our friendship was strong. September approached and it would be the dawn of an era I didn't know was coming.

3 DAYS

In Minecraft, when you create a world, you are free to do whatever you please. You can farm animals, build houses, build cities, or fight bosses. You could also do nothing. Sit still and watch the grass grow. This game has been popular for two reasons: simplicity and freedom. You can play with people you know, or total strangers. This is not an analogy. This is not metaphoric or literarily rich. This is me explaining the context of Minecraft because I'm not sure my parents will know what it is. I assume they do, but I am not certain.

I was a 14-year-old freshman in high school when I started my first substantive Minecraft world. Just a few days prior, I was playing on a world with a couple of friends when these so-called "clan wars" they had started turned into my rage quitting.

We had rules.

None of the rules were broken, I just lost.

So, I quit and started a world with my best friend, Jaden. Unfortunately, not then but now, when we left this shared world, my brother, Bryce, was playing by himself. I left because I couldn't handle rejection. I couldn't handle the loss. I couldn't handle feelings of inferiority.

I still can't.

And because of that, I left, taking my friend with me, effectively ending the fun for my brother. Our memories are only as prevalent as we, though inadvertently, allow them to be. Through vehicles of experience, you obtain an arsenal of memories that you can reflect on in time of need. Or unintentionally because some stick out more than others. The memories surrounding my departure from this world constitute guilt because for as long as I've remembered these days, my brother's been stuck in that barbaric, lonely world; cloistered by notions of violence and the absence of his brother. Even though he quit soon after I did. The truth becomes irrelevant when all you have is your perception of the events as they happened.

You know how a conversation only functions when people, plural, talk to each other? In the same posture, a shared Minecraft world, a realm, is most exhilarating when accompanied. Otherwise, the realm tends to feel banal. The Gen-Z jargon for what I'm describing is the "two-week Minecraft phase". This phenomenon implies that a Minecraft world lasts for two weeks and after that, it's

never played again. When I left the realm, that world was never played again.

Although I quit the realm, my two-week Minecraft phase wasn't over. I scrolled the game menu intending to start a new world with the unstated intention of facilitating a distraction.

It's a kid's game.

I willfully integrate the joyful serenity, composed of three-dimensional blocks that make up Minecraft, into a space of devastation. Minecraft worlds are typically short-term.

Mine is going to last forever.

I weighed potential names for my solo, duo world because although trivial, they carried weight. The name had to be enticing. It had to mean something to me. It had to motivate me to play because if my distraction faltered. If my two-week Minecraft phase ran its course, I'd have to confront the rejection and losses I'd suffered in the real world. The name had to incentivize Jaden to play because we delegate our interest based on how much lore is involved.

I had nothing.

Nothing captured me, and Jaden was in my ear telling me to "bring my ass" because I was taking a while. Purgatory, operating in fallacy, trying to craft some mythical, woe-smitten name for this kids' game.

It was right in front of me. I just ignored it.

Maybe this is metaphorical (it is not).

I was keen on crafting the best name possible because I was manufacturing distance from my reality. I wanted space from the pain, the juxtapositions, the rejection, the hurt, the emotion, and the mental frameworks that existed but were not yet cemented. I wanted a surrogate reality for my own that would dismantle the confined space of my perception. I knew the name had to be something near and dear to Jaden and I. On the middle of my wooden dresser, the one snack hoisting lore like no other: a half-eaten pack of brown sugar Pop-Tarts.

“PopTart”.

I said it aloud and Jaden “went dumb”, as did I. It was the stuff that we slightly pubescent teenage boys spoke at any given opportunity. “Dat shit cold” and “Gimme dat shit” aired out as we loaded into our new world. We spawned in a Mulato-looking biome, half desert, half grassy plains, and just behind a hill. It was getting late, 2:43 am, so we figured we’d climb the hill, garnering us a vantage point for when we got on the next day. As we surfaced, we saw a long stretch of gush terrain, clouded with small lakes and openings in the ground, neighbored by some mountains. I got hype because I knew I could terraform this land and build something luxurious. But I didn’t actually care about what I could build on the screen.

I don’t actually care what I can write on these pages.

I was comforted by a promising distraction from my X, my H, and my F.

I am comforted by a promising distraction from my X, my H, and my F.

This initial hype afforded us the motivation to build a foundation for our first house. I always fancied the progression of things; so, I had Jaden run out in the stretch of land where I took a “before” picture with my cell phone. We left the game where that photo suggests and got off for the night. I continued with my nightly self-harm-induced overthinking when my distraction started distracting. I conjectured a floorplan idea for our first house. I always liked to create things, so I took on a builder-architect role in our world. Jaden had a... anything but productive, duplicate grass while I grind type of role. It didn't matter to me though.

This wasn't about efficacy.

We were (are) also perpetrators of lore. So that next morning I took a picture of the Pop-Tarts that named our world. I knew it was lore and that it'd find its way into downtime conversations at football practice. We didn't know it yet, but this Minecraft world in and of itself would become the lore. We use old and new to describe lore's inception place in time, but not as adjectives with the typical notions of old and new things. We use premium lore to describe something that is only known, or something that is only to be known by Jaden and I.

Here, now, and between the days of yesterday, I have brought forward the premium lore. Old and new. I wanted to tell everybody why everything that happened to me wasn't my fault and why I shouldn't be held accountable.

I've explained why everything that happened to me wasn't my fault.

I did not hold myself accountable.

It granted me nothing.

I stopped hiding from it and started dropping lore.

I wish I could say the pain I've caused others was not my fault.

I cannot.

You wish you could say the pain you caused me was not your fault.

I'm done allowing you to.

Hereby let it be known that "you", is X. X is a variable representing a person. These variables will change as you traverse the pages of my pain. But in a general context, if there is no direct correlation between a variable and the pronoun, "you", will always mean X.

I want there to be no confusion when I'm talking to you.

I want there to be no confusion, I am talking to you.

"Here" is these pages and these words. Here is a part of you and it's all of me.

Here, is the only way to introduce my perception of things as I've experienced. To resurrect my narratives from the irrelevant. Here can liberate me from the bondage of your work, but only on these pages, only in these words.

So here is where I'll stay. Until the words I write can free you from me too.

It shouldn't have to be this way.

September 3, 2019, was the day H became X. Although I was born on June 2, 2005, it feels as if my life started on that day. Up until that point, everything was sunshine and rainbows to me. I didn't know it yet, but as August 31 came and went, I had three more days.

I had three more days of leading a calm life. I had three more days to take people at face value. I had three more days before I'd succumb to the victim cynicism that carried me through high school. I had three more days before I obtained the emotional state of mind that garnered me a reputation as cruel and heartless. I had three more days before I'd become the person who was so mad at the world that I refused to help one of my best friends get a football scholarship. Three more days before I became the person who shamed my father for his lack of education in front of our family. Dad, I will continue to be sorry for as long as I live. I wish I could say that it wasn't my fault. I cannot. I wish we could forget about the things I've done

and said. We cannot. And since we cannot, I want to tell you what happened.

I had three more days to only know happiness. I had three more days before suffering, depression, anger, and pain became my new 6. I had three more days of competing for fun because I'd soon be forced to compete in such a toxic and hostile way that I could and still cannot enjoy friendly competition. I had three more days before X would supersede every, single, thing, I did. I had three more days to be a kid and it was your fault.

Do not be deceived. It is not X's fault because she did not like me back. It is X's fault because of the way this situation was handled. It was the rumor-spreading kids' fault that led to you doing what you did. It was my fault for not telling you about my feelings sooner and avoiding what would inevitably happen. This is so much more than a story about a relationship that didn't pan out. I am not trying to make amends by writing to you this text. I am not trying to reconcile our relationship.

I do not write this story because I want you in my life.

It is my wish and ultimate desire to help people understand how things like high school relationships and social media posts can forever change lives. I want to tell you how one social media post and the intentions behind it changed my life. I would be remiss, without adequately detailing the events and circumstances that led me to where

I am now. That led my best friends to where they are today. How one social media post kept the poor kids' around me poor and without an opportunity to escape the cycle of poverty. But I cannot merely just tell you the story of what happened and expect you to feel the emotions and put the pieces together. You must hear what I heard. Read the texts that I read. Feel what I felt. Think the thoughts I thought. I must put you where I've been.

I write because I want to put my family that I was so ready to leave behind as I swallowed those pills, where I've been. I want to put my grandmother who had no idea that I was hurting at all, where I've been. I want my children to understand that things happen and no matter how small or how large they may seem, it is okay to feel sad.

I want my readers to read and maybe understand how these letters, separate from but represented by people affect their lives and to one day make sense of senseless situations. I want to try and put this situation behind me but as the years go on, I come to understand that this will never be behind me. H and X will never go away. The way an H or an X interacts with an O is something that affects everybody. It's something we all struggle with. I want to help the kids who think suicide is an answer. The kids' who wake up every single day and out of all the things to feel and places to go they think death and the afterlife are the best options. Maybe I want to be heard and understood by

those around me. Maybe I hope that my readers can use their X in a healthier way than I used mine. I hope that if my children encounter an H, that their H is truly an H and that they can be happy. But if an H turns into an X... I'm sure I'll be handing them a copy of this book.

Maybe I want you to feel what I felt. Maybe I am upset about the way you treated me. Maybe I am still hurting 5 years later.

I want you to feel what I felt.

I am upset about the way you treated me.

I am still hurting 5 years later.

I'm writing to tell the story of a kid from Carrollton, Texas who cried in his room day in and day out, wondering why he wasn't good enough. I'm writing to the neighbors who heard my screams of pain and anger every night as I worked out in the garage. I'm writing to show my parents that they didn't fail at raising me and to show that any parent of a child who struggles with depression is not a failure. There is just a certain way you must approach mental health to help the ones you love.

There is no single reason as to why I'm writing what I'm writing, although I could go on and on as to why I'm here. I am most certainly not remembered for choosing the most appropriate actions or thinking the right thoughts, so I don't know where this book will land me.

But to my former H, and to my now X, I want to put you where I've been. I conquer your existence until I let you conquer mine.

We cannot account for how our actions affect everybody, but we can try to understand how we've affected others.

I suffered.

I was depressed.

I was angry.

I was in pain. Until I wasn't.

I was all these things, so you don't have to be.

I had an H, and now I have an X. This is how it happened.