

X as H

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 attempt to 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 because in an age full of silence, the truth is a revolutionary act – a lot of voices when we’re ghosted.

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 loved Diet Coke.

Five years passed, but an 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.¹ I was excited,

¹ “Packaged the mail” is a lyrical reference to DaBaby’s 2018 single, *Stige*.

nervous, ready, inexperienced, happy, and hopeful. I will refer to this combination of words as “The 6”.

I stared at the deep blue pin striped cafeteria walls avoiding eye contact with my classmates, faintly wishing I was the kind of person people greeted in the morning. One face familiar, but much intimidating, “Scary Jeri” as we kids called her, approached the group of students and walked us to the classroom. “207” she said as we trekked 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 before meeting the wall. Everybody found their seats and Scary Jeri addressed the class with a written message on the whiteboard, “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.

H was poetically stricken, like a referee signaling *touchdown*, or grasping for something better – hoping, dreaming, perpetually reaching. 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 relishing the prospect of four years with H

brought forward more promises than my black ink can describe.

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

When the first day came to an end, I texted my Dad, letting him know I was ready to go home. I was excited about H but too nervous and far too scared to interact with the letter, so unsurprising with the day and age of 2019, I found H online. I followed any account resembling H, as I was not sure who was Times New Roman and who was Calibri or Ariel. Unbeknownst to me, I followed the right font. 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 straight 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, do hundreds of thousands of reps, do my homework, clock in at my minimum wage dishwashing job, 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 plus one here shortly – another one of those feelings words, but one that I can't describe on paper.

It was day two of Fish Camp orientation, and I felt The 6 as Scary Jeri and the class walked through the doorway of room 207 at Conrad High School. Due to the alignment of the stars, or my excitedly nervous, readily inexperienced, happy-hope, I sat directly next to H in a classroom full of young adolescent teens. On the surface, I was an H, so sitting next to my H drew eyes and gossip pouring over my conspicuously hedonistic intentions. I imagined most fourteen-year-olds hadn't seen, felt, or recognized variables to the extent that I would and will write myself into this room, but I didn't know taking this seat could mean so much.

The kids began to talk, spreading their minds with rumors and prophecies of two letters in a relationship. As a kid who wanted what everybody was saying, I couldn't discern where these rumors might harm. I welcomed the romantically charged comments and inklings. I welcomed the rumors that turned H into X. I welcomed the rumors that have brought us here today.

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. Luckily for me, the one in 6 plus one wasn't the strongest, and my lack of courage found reservations in expressing my feelings. I was okay with that though.

I had to be.

Day three passed quicker than day two and as I knew it, Fish Camp orientation was over. But I feared not, because H and I had four years ahead of us. At least I thought we did. H's rein only lasted three 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 all night long figuring just how much we had in common. I grew excited learning of your life and experiences that were so similar to mine. I told my closest school friends 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 done so, 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 two months following Fish Camp, before H became X, were the only days you brought unwavering joy to my spaces and to my thoughts. I was a jovial spirit. My middle

name was smiling. I was so happy to engage with whatever I did because I found myself within you. Our texting on Snapchat transcended spatial constraints because your words that came from you brought us closer to me. I thought we shared a vision for the next four years in Scary Jeri's IB program, and I knew the power of two variables to be greater than one.

H squared.

Two weeks after Fish Camp was the first time I heard of O.² We all went to different schools, so I didn't know him.

I didn't really know you.

I knew H was dating O, and that should have scrapped any slate variables could live on. Yet before long, I knew you were dating O, and I didn't care. Growing up I was never really the spiritual type. I played around with manifestation, never expecting it to work, but during this time, the one thing I believed in, was us; so each night I followed our Snapchat conversation with a "Goodnight ML", under the guise that you couldn't know what ML meant.

Maybe you did, but I wouldn't tell you.

I didn't want you to know because I feared being so vulnerable. 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 equation or not, I was hopeful one day you'd decipher the acronym and confess your feelings to me. And until that day

² A third party by which two members in a relationship have a different perception of.

came, and until I could tell you what ML stood for, I closed my eyes every night whispering to myself, “Goodnight my love”, certain, I’d hear it back.

My summer days were short. I wanted nothing more but for time to pass and for days to end because each day passing meant a day closer to starting high school with H. As students in the IB program, we shared space on many different class rosters. I thought this meant I’d get to see H all the time, eventually, I’d come to know it meant I’d have to see X every day.

The 6 was still present, although I felt a little more experienced with you. I was as comfortable with H as I knew comfortable could be, but only over the phone of course. We both know I was anything but comfortable in person. I wish I could have been the same person in real life that I was over social media, but I was so overwhelmed by the glamor, décor, and straight lines, I couldn’t suppress my feelings for you. Feelings that informed our interactions gravely. I wish H would’ve picked up on that. Maybe then you’d be reading a novel about love and laughter.

You 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 endearing but your lines were titillating.

I was eager to interact with the letter I wanted in my life. We had talked all summer, so I was a familiar person in an unfamiliar crowd. Scary Jeri had us in six out of eight classes together, which meant we'd spend majority of our day within a hollers distance away. You didn't love that, but I was sure H did.

Our fonts clashed a bit. I began to realize I was not Times New Roman. We had our differences, but The 6 expels thoughts and beliefs deviating from what I knew to be H.

Still excited. Still nervous. Still ready. Still inexperienced. Still happy. Still hopeful. Still plus one.

The football team played in a scrimmage on the first Friday of the school year. I was a freshman, and apart from mossaing 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 since you were on the varsity volleyball team, I knew I couldn't be Times New Roman if I was on the JV team.

On the night of that first scrimmage you told me H and O were no longer together.

"Are you okay?" I would ask under the same conspicuously hedonistic indentations.

You told me you were fine and thanked me for the concern. You said I was the only person to check on you, and I thought that meant something.

Your intentions couldn't have been less hedonistic.

The next week was more football practice, long nights awake texting you, and never face-timing because you didn't want to. I knew this meant something; I just didn't want to believe it.

I couldn't believe it because only an H would do things like text back fast on Snapchat, text my phone number at night asking if I was awake or hold the lanyards that hung from my backpack as we walked to class in the morning.

During the second week of school you invited me to watch a football game at the stadium across from our high school. I couldn't go, so I rode home in the back seat of my Dad's car certain I had lost my chance to make H squared. I believe now it wouldn't have mattered, but I know how important those little moments can be.

It had been two full weeks since school started, and my friendship with H was strong as I'd ever know.

September approached and it would be the dawn of these pages that I didn't know was coming.

I had three more days.

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 Dad will know what it is. I assume he does, 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, and I couldn't handle the 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 allow them to be. Through vehicles of experience, you obtain an arsenal of memories that you can reflect on in times of need. Or unintentionally because some thoughts disturb us 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 functions best when people, plural, talk to each other? In the same posture, a shared Minecraft world, a realm, is most exhilarating when accompanied. Otherwise, the game 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 am willfully integrating the joyful serenity composed of three-dimensional blocks that is Minecraft, into a space of devastation. Minecraft worlds are typically short-term.

Mine is going to last forever.

I weighed potential names for my duo world with Jaden because although trivial, the name 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 the 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. Nothing came to mind as Jaden told me to "bring my ass" because his ADHD self couldn't sit still for long. Purgatory, operating in fallacy, trying to craft some mythical, woe-smitten name for this kids' game.

It was right in front of me.

I was keen on crafting the best name possible because I was manufacturing distance from my reality. I wanted space from the Snapchat posts, the text messages, the rejection, the hurt, the emotion, and the mental frameworks that existed but were not yet cemented. I wanted a reality surrogate for my own that would dismantle the confined spaces 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.³

PopTart.

I said the name aloud, and Jaden went dumb into his Xbox headset. 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 Mulatto-looking biome – half desert, half grassy plains, and just behind a hill. It was getting late, 2:43 A.M. to be exact, so I 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 what I could build in the game.

³ Brady’s first interaction with Jaden was the smacking of a brown sugar Pop-Tart from Jaden’s hand in 2017.

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

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

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

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 started my routine ML induced overthinking when my distraction started distracting. I dreamed up a floorplan idea for our first house and drew it onto a black screen using my phone. I liked to create things, so I took on a builder-architect role in our world. Jaden had an 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, and still are, 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 new 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 to you why everything that happened to me wasn't my fault.

I did not hold myself accountable.

It granted us nothing.

I stopped hiding from you and I 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.

I tried to control the production behind your eyes.

You've banished my practice.

Your pique blinking thoughts will harm, harass, deject, and ripple my soothing thoughts until I find the words to reassemble and reconstruct your imagination.

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 our 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 the only way to introduce my perception of things as I’ve experienced them. Here can bandage the laceration divorcing me from your lexicon and trains of thought – a cancerous tumor spoiling the prospect of a righteous sanity. And here can liberate me from the bondage of your presence, 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.

September 3, 2019, was the day H became X. Up until that point, my life was athletic ability, diet coke, and cheap fast food. I didn’t know it yet, but as the sun rose and fell on August 31st, 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, 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 my family.

Dad, I will continue to be sorry for as long as I live. I wish I could say it wasn't my fault.

I cannot.

And since I cannot, I need to tell you how I got here.

I had three more days to know happiness in the form of happy things and not in the form of relinquished desperation. I had three more days before suffering, depression, anger, desperation, pain, and void became The New 6, and intense workouts became the new plus one. 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 couldn't 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.

It is not X's fault because she did not like me back. It is X's fault because something told you to ignore me when I texted you. 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 has to be 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 us here, or into room 207 at Conrad High School, or into Pop-Tart 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. How your surveillance became spiteful in digestion, stewing inversely correlated as we continued on away from matters of love and loss. I'd be remiss without giving you the chance to see my voice and my words in a jist that we can all understand... but I cannot merely 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, and 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 young or detrimental they may seem, it is okay to feel sad. I hope that if my children encounter an H, that their H is truly an H and that they can be content. But if their H turns into an X... I'm sure I'll be handing them a copy of this book.

I want my readers to read and maybe identify how these letters, separate from but representing people, or death, or life, or social media posts on September 3rd, can inform their lives. I want people to one day make sense of senseless situations when their H and their X won't give them the answers they need. 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, yes, children, 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 know death and the afterlife to be the best options.

Maybe I want to be heard and understood by those around me. Maybe I want my readers to use their X in a healthier way than I used mine.

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

I want you to feel what I felt.

I am upset about the way you treated me.

I am still hurting five years later.

I'm writing to tell the story of a kid from Carrollton, Texas who cried every night, wondering why he wasn't good enough to be Times New Roman. I'm writing to the

neighbors who heard my screams void of hope and filled with anger 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 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 need 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.

Here, is what that means.