

Flying Solo

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Eighteen months since he left; eighteen months; alone, with his mother. The boy sits in his solitude, a pen stealing his thoughts to imprint on paper. As the rolling ball continues to bleed, it concludes: I miss him. He leans back in his chair.

Pictures of the familial void surround his bedside. Memories accompany them, shining light on the boy's idealized image. Mountains of letters take up space on the floor, promising "good health" and a "speedy return." When is he coming back? Eyes pinch together. A tear comfortably journeys down his cheek. His fists curl up, but they lack the will to fight.

His mother didn't take it well. The moment her son's dear father left, her confidence fled. A crumbling, sobbing mess was all that was left behind. To distract herself, she took on extra duties, working past midnight most days. She's hardly ever home. Except for today.

She walks into his room, her hands gently grasping his shoulders.

"You ready to go? It's your birthday!" Her attempt at positivity masked her constant despair.

He sighs, yet he can't help but smile. His birthday was the one day where it was okay to celebrate. The one day they could stop thinking about what they were missing.

The chair creaks as he stands. His face meets his mother's, and he is painfully reminded how the stress has worn on her once beautiful face.

Before he knows it, she's dragged him into the car. The red metal door slams shut, and a worn key starts the rusted thing. The neighborhood flies backwards, and an optimistic rhythm emerges between the wheels and the asphalt.

Gazes meet each other in the rearview mirror, the familiar eyes meeting his tired face. They looked happy, even. He shakes his head. *It's just my birthday; it's nothing special.* He looks out into the maze of passing buildings, attempting to clear his head. Finally, he sees his favorite restaurant:

which she drives right by.

He looks up at the rearview again, but his mother's eyes don't meet his. The buildings slowly

begin to morph themselves into a highway. To the airport. His mind races, searching for an answer in his expanse of thoughts. And then it clicks, but there's no way.

Foreign feelings, forgotten by the boy, suddenly spread throughout his head. Excitement makes its way into the boy's gut, and his depression transforms into hope. Cautiously, he drives them back, but a true smile sneaks onto his face, driven by his sudden happiness.

The realization renders time to a limp, and the boy has waited well enough when they arrive at the airport. Though his mother tries to keep it a surprise, her air of hope gives it away. He sprints to the terminal, despite shouts from his mother. Is he really...? Passersby reprimand him for running, yet he pays them no notice.

As he approaches baggage claim, he sees a familiar face, dressed in a camo green. The boy practically flies into the elated arms. Of dad; of home.

"But, for the first time in a while, those eyes looked... hopeful."

