

A person's silhouette is shown from behind, looking out a window. The window is partially covered by light-colored curtains that are slightly parted, allowing bright light to stream in from the left. The person's hair is long and dark. The overall mood is contemplative and quiet.

six o'clock

A SHORT STORY

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SKY'S THE LIMIT
press



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a short story

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I wake up.

The room is cold. The sheets are cold. The floor is cold.

It's June.

The breath wafting down my neck is cold. The air that burns my lungs is cold. The toes I wiggle out from beneath my blanket are cold. Then they hit the hardwood floor and if I thought they were numb before, I'm proven wrong. I find my slippers and step into them, only a sliver of warmth residing there in the fluffy fabric that's like ice in comparison to the blazing inferno raging in my chest.

Daylight winks at me, and I blink back, drawing the dark curtains before the sun's face to obscure his mischievous yellow grin. Across my prison, the flickers of light under the closed door bow their gnarled fingers toward me, and I disregard their greeting with the barest hint of a sneer.

Before another day can beckon me with its taunting tone and gleaming beady eyes, I tug a shirt over my objection to follow the incoming tide and brush away the fading call of lasting sleep with the sharp bristles of my comb.

With the scrub of my toothbrush goes morning breath, and with the swipe of my deodorant body odor remains at bay. A spritz of floral perfume masks the stench of death, though it mingles with the scent of pretense, and a quick swoop of my lipgloss's gold-tipped wings disguises my chapped lips and silences my cries.

And so the day begins.

I leave the room.

The hallway is dimly lit by the light that curls around the corner. It's cold out here too, but the wall I brace my shoulder on could fry an egg. Tendrils of heat lick at my pores, searing them closed until air can no longer seep through my epidermis and a slow muffling envelopes my body. The sudden clamp that follows startles my nerves, inciting the instinct that flings me to the other side of the hallway.

I straighten, screw up my face in a chastising frown which I throw by way of the offending wall, and descend.

By the time I reach the end of the stairs, my slippers are gone, abandoned in favor of the heels perched on the bottom step. An extra four inches to my average height decreases my walking abilities and boosts the awareness rattling my brain. Things are so much farther away now, others closer. It takes a moment, a blink or two, to adjust before I glance down at the shoes and breath.

Pastel and *too* white, they compliment my pale yellow blouse and stonewashed denim jeans well. The clash of colors, so springy and happy, plays rough with the

shadows inching toward them. Yellow grins, all Cheshire Cat-like, while Despondency shrieks, his grey face tight when he pounces on top of bubbly Yellow and struggles to squeeze the life out of her. He wins.

I sigh. It's an outfit my mom will praise the moment I walk through the kitchen. The earrings and necklace laid out for me on the sideboard will cloak my body in the shimmer of grace and elegance, while the blatant fact that I am not going to put them on snuffs out their ladylike glamour. She'll be distraught. And how do I know?

She picked them out.

Before I enter the dragon's lair with no small amount of reluctance (I could go back to bed and feign the chicken pox), my stubborn feet park me by the full-body mirror beside the front door to make last minute adjustments. Involuntarily, my fingers make quick work of half-tucking my shirt in, poking in my pockets, then fluffing out my curls. One lock is strategically placed behind my left ear, chaining the appendage into place; the other is finger-combed out of my eyes, which bemoan the loss; while the last rogue strand curls around my chin.

Two more months, and my hair will hit the perfect length just in time for senior year and the wild, untamed look will be camera-ready. For now, I look the picture of perfect summer enjoyment. Life is alight in every aspect of my persona—the jaunty cock of my hip, the playful flick of my fingers, the simper of my mauve mouth. I'm Miss Popular. Miss Perfect. Little Miss *Everything*.

It's a part I play tremendously well.

I have to.

Once the curtain lowers, I have no one else to be, but whatever someone else wants—a role I've grown used to, despite my reservations.

Wait. What reservations? I'm perfectly fine with my position in life. Always have been. Always will be.

My frown twitches back into place, Despondency once again reigning supreme, before I cram Yellow's happiness into my cheeks and jaw. Suddenly, a pair of childish dimples arise to wink alongside the bright glimmer of straight pearly whites—all twenty-eight of which surely worth the seven hundred and twenty thousand dollars put into them.

There. Gorgeous. I can't even see Despondency's sooty footprints anymore.

Mom should—likely won't—be proud.

My heels *click clack* with an annoying amount of fortitude against the glossy hardwood floor. Each stomp is a step in the wrong direction, loosening my shoulders and knees and wrists until my five hundred pounds of hair weigh my head down and my neck loosens too.

Yeah, girl. Be the boss...while you still can. You'll have control for, oh, two more seconds before—

Ah. There it was. Mom's voice, almost masculine at this hour in the morning, and nearly too low yet still so smooth, bearing only the smallest reminder of a

childhood spent in the Caribbean. Of course, her words form dark storm clouds, each boasting an angry grey face and fire-breathing nostrils, that quickly rain on my parade.

I forgot the sash-like white belt she specifically told me to wear last week, the one I hung up in disregard and underlying disgust four days ago. That, and makeup to disguise the too-dark circles under my eyes, the shadowy pair that match the ones she's cast over my day.

Apparently Despondency remained. *Thanks, bub.*

I would go back upstairs and remedy the situation as soon as was humanly possible. I would—but I don't have time. It's six thirty now, and Lexi is meeting with me at seven downtown. It'll take me twenty minutes to get there, and I've got to stop for breakfast on the way—because Mom and her “faster way to fat loss” doesn't agree with me and my most important meal of the day.

So instead of pivoting around and creating deep brown swirls in the wood floor, I sidle past her and her “fasting-approved” cup of black coffee and glowing laptop screen set atop the breakfast table. The huff she emits brushes her storm clouds into a frenzy. They bump into each other, skittering across the room with absolutely no manners at all. One collides with the refrigerator, and I almost wonder why Mom doesn't see it, or at least hear the clatter that follows.

Almost. But then I remember the diagnosis.

No one else can see.

Either that, or I'm the one who's blind.

I stifle a reply or some sort of petty justification, biting down hard on my tongue, when she spears me with a glare. The taste of metal pools in my mouth, melting over my tongue. I swallow it down, unsure what to think of the familiarity. Blood is too close a friend for either of our good.

I close my fingers around the keys hanging from the hook mounted on the wall, letting out a hum to satisfy the old crone's nettling.

It's Saturday anyway; I only have photo shoots on Sundays, Mondays, and Thursdays. No need to look perfect, which I know she would discount because “perfection is key.”

As the portal into the outside world widens, Dad's voice—worn, tired, strained, and hidden beneath a classic Georgia drawl and false contentment—bumps into Mom's clouds with just a tiny ray of evening sunshine. The burst of pink and orange and just a little bit purple casts an odd glow, almost a pallor, over the house. Or is it just my imagination that everything seems to creak with pain and shrink back, as though night has already fallen?

He greets the family, including the canary, but I simply lift two fingers in acknowledgment over my shoulder. Despondency sneers, while Yellow giggles from...*somewhere*. I honestly don't know why she's still here.

He says nothing. He didn't notice.

I shut the door.

The portal to one world has closed, and the entrance to a much larger one stares at me with wide white eyes and a curved black mouth. I grin back at my '73 Triumph TR6, thankful for my chariot's arrival, and slide into the vehicle as the key turns and my French blue baby roars to life.

Once I release the clutch and ease into drive, my wheels roll smoothly backwards, and the garage door yawns to grant me passage. The characters that meet me outside greet me with odd looks—but I'm used to them now. The house across the street frowns, the dog (who owns the property just as much, if not more, than the man with his name on the deed) yipping enough to cause the windows to shatter and shingles to crash.

The long stretch of road, which doesn't end until I've arrived on the mainland and turned off Skidaway Drive into the heart of Savannah, gapes at me as though surprised to see me again. I'm surprised to see me again.

Not that I'd go anywhere. Not anytime soon, that is. Not today or tomorrow or next week—but eventually, maybe. When Despondency removes his heavy hood and reveals himself for who he truly is...whoever he truly is.

The broad smirk of the sun, too bright and too big and too bloomin'...*smirky*, shakes Yellow's hand and waves at me, shooting flaming arrows of his wild enthusiasm for life through my pupils and past my retinas, halfway frying them before the arrowheads finally pierce the back of my brain. The heat burns out several cells, leaving my head to droop and hit the steering wheel, darkness invading, overtaking, gripping the wheel and jerking...

I jolt up, grasp the wheel, shove against the brake and ignore the spasm in my foot that protests. I can't see the sun anymore. Somehow it's gone, hidden, fading, blurred into the sky, which is half white clouds and half blue puddles of the ocean's reflection.

I blink.

Nothing happens, so I blink again. Then I hold my eyes wide open, like I did last time, and count to ten. It worked the first go-round, but I have to count to thirty seconds before my vision clears this time and I can ease off the brake.

I need glasses. That's all. Or more water. I'm probably dehydrated and, despite the chill of earlier this morning, dying of heat exhaustion this summer. It's insane.

Once I take a breath and settle down and meet with Lexi to talk over the design of my website, sip on a latte and suck in the salty Savannah air, I'll be fine.

At least, Yellow's twinkling eyes assure me I'll be fine. Her casual manner brushes off my encounter with unconsciousness, while Despondency croons worry into my ear.

For once, I disregard Despondency. He's been known to lie before. Why I've kept him around this long...well, he's the only one who'll stay. Yellow will be gone by this afternoon, when my nerves are shot and I'm feeling lightheaded again and my stomach is churning and I'm snapping at every man, woman, child, and tree in gibberish. Disorientation, a new acquaintance, will have appeared out of the blue,

bashing me against the head, taunting me, puzzling me with his weird sayings and freakish grins. He never stays for long. I can usually blink him away—I have the last three times he's come to see me. Until today, that is, when he asked for a glass of tea and attempted to knock me out completely.

I turn on Skidaway, let it carry me across the isle to my destination of Downtown Savannah.

I pass by several houses. They wink at me. I smile sardonically.

I roll onto a long stretch of empty highway surrounded by marshland. The puddles of warm ocean water ripple with the eastern sea wind, while the reeds and tall grass sway with each invisible brush of the breeze, striking the air and the open azure sky with quick lines of green, yellow, and grey. Dotted the horizon with the fading drops of summer glory.

It would be a glorious picture. If it weren't for the electrifying song each blade of grass sings.

Soon, soon, the day shall end

Soon we all shall die

Soon, soon, the time will come

Soon we say goodbye

There is no mistaking the fact that, yes, they sing the truth—grass withers and flowers fade. But the eerie whisper of their voices against the wind leaves the imprint of Death's crooked fingers upon every crevice of my mind.

Is there anything that endures?

Is there any hope beyond tomorrow? Assuming that tomorrow herself will ever arrive.

I groan, sending a shocking quiver through Yellow, Despondency, and even Disorientation, whose sullen pink-grey eyes peek up at me in a teasing call.

I'll not succumb. Not today.

They all disperse, vanishing into their hovels, in which they cook up their witch's brews and stew new ways to torture me.

It wasn't always like this.

The sky didn't always gape at me so, as though I'd been accused of murder.

The color of my blouse didn't always take on a persona and pull out a smile.

When it began...I can't remember. Sometime, at some indiscernible time, in which I'd been too busy to notice and simply adapted. Adaption is second nature, after all, if only to me.

Things change. *People* change. I change along with them, or else risk being left behind.

The wheels of my car come strolling into Savannah, while my hands, out of instinct, guide the vehicle through different streets and alleys, past businesses, churches, apartments, into the upper part of Savannah that boasts the city's historic district and the current residence (it's been prone to change) of my agent Lexi McCarthy.

It's only been about a twenty-minute drive, just like usual, but my foot's aching already. My left one's fallen asleep, and I can feel each nerve tingle in my right. My toes curl up on me without provocation, preventing me from stepping out of the car without tripping (and possibly twisting my ankle, which would just ruin my modeling career). I struggle to flex my foot, stretch them both, but one refuses to move and then I suddenly lose all feeling in the other.

Panic consumes me. Disorientation grasps me by the shoulders, shaking me until my head bobs furiously, nearly hitting the dash and giving me severe whiplash.

I need to get a grip. Like, *now*.

I force my eyes to open, concentrate them on something objective rather than the body that hates me. They snag on Lexi's oncoming form, cling to her like a lifeline. I let them, then snatch my brain out of Disorientation's slimy hands and take control of it.

I need to move my feet.

I can't...I can't...*feel* them.

I feel...I feel darkness. Deep, fathomless, bottomless pools of darkness. It's thick, chocolate pudding darkness that I crave. I dive into it, plumbing the depths of the pudding with my hands, my arms, my legs, cutting through each heavy wave before it can envelope me.

Come, sweet darkness. Rob me of my sanity. Of my insanity. Render me empty and lifeless and—

“Kenya!”

It's the first time I've heard my name all day. Not even Yellow bothered mentioning it.

My head jerks up.

Then my eyes fly open. (When had they closed?)

My feet...I can feel them.

Lexi's all but on top of me, the car door open as she crouches beside me, knees braced on my seat, hands on my head, jerking me back into reality. (Yay.)

“Heaven have mercy, Kenny! What the heck was that?”

I can't...I don't know.

“What was that?!”

Haven't I already said? *I don't know*.

I open my mouth, prepare to yell, but nothing comes out. Then...a stream. A couple *blahs*, several *ems*. A lot of *yabba dabba wachimashi*.

My hands seize my lips and squish them together. More gibberish. If only I could—I bite down on my fist—physically make myself—my teeth snag on my tongue—speak English. Or French. I'd even take French right now. Anything that's an actual *language* with actual *words*.

“Kenya—” Lexi's nails dig into my shoulders as she slowly pulls me closer to her and bends into my eyes “—you're either going crazy, or you need to see a doctor.”

Yellow gasps, eyes wide. Despondency moans, echoing me. Disorientation
cheers.

I look at the clock. It's seven.

Author's Note

Usually, I use this special section to give you some behind-the-scenes of the story or even my prayer for you as you read it.

This time, I believe I owe you an apology.

Six O'clock began as the first chapter in a novella all about one day in the life of Kenya Brogan. Kenya Brogan began as one of three characters in a novel titled *Footsteps in the Sand*. I set both aside after a time, and went about my way. Well, when the opportunity to entering a writing contest arose, I wracked my brain for a good story.

Then I remembered Kenya and this one hour of her life.

I finished up the chapter-turned-short-story, polished it considerably, then entered it.

Needless to say, I didn't win.

But I came back to this story and read over it, realizing how much I love it. So here we are, at the end of this interesting little journey.

Six O'clock is one of the darkest things I've ever written—and, in my opinion, I've written a good deal of darkness (some of which has yet to come to light, so to speak). It's only one chapter in a much larger story that I hope to share with you one day, but for now this must suffice.

I will clear one thing up.

Kenya has brain cancer. And Despondency and Yellow and Disorientation? Well, they're all very real to her. She's been seeing them and their friends for years. Kenya has a very strange sort of depression, and even she doesn't quite know it. When I created her, I knew she'd be unique. More than that, I knew she would be the most broken character of mine, in both mind, body, soul, and spirit.

It may seem like a hopeless story—you're not the first to think so.

But there *is* hope, even in brokenness. Even in darkness. Even in despondency. Even when you cannot see it, there is hope. There is light. And there is salvation from the darkness, the depression, the uncertainty. Of that I am most assured.

I will write this story of hope, one day, but you don't have to wait. You can start living out the hope God has given us in your life. Today. Right now.

So, yes, I'm sorry for writing something so dark, so depressing, so...*unfinished*. But I'm not finished with Kenya yet, nor is God with you.

Thank you for reading *Six O'clock*. I do so hope you enjoyed it! Feel free to let me know what you thought! You can always find me hanging around my blog, Gabbing with Grace, where I'm constantly chatting about what I'm reading, writing, and learning.

May God bless you and keep you,
Grace A. Johnson

