

## **Say Something, Not Nothing**

By Conor Gross

Rosemary considered herself a collector of secrets. It wasn't hard, when you had friends like hers: friends in dark places, who found solace in between shadows and tried to hide from eyes that pried too hard. She knew where to look, and she knew how to listen, and that was all she needed to coax out people's most hidden truths.

Yet sometimes, this put her in very difficult situations. Such as now, sitting in her dad's beaten down, rust coloured pickup truck, parked in the driveway of the town's hospital, drumming her fingers against the side of the steering wheel like she might be able to divine the way forward from the syncopated beats.

"To hell with it," she decided, swinging open the door.

People aren't joking when they describe hospitals as overwhelmingly sterile. The world outside smelled like dried grass with a hint of barbecue smoke, while the world inside stung her nose with the acrid burn of rubbing alcohol. The sky outside was painted the colours of a bonfire, courtesy of the summer sun slinking below the horizon- while in here, Rosemary squinted against the piercing white of the LED lights and snow coloured walls.

"I'm here for visitation," she said to the receptionist. "Gabriel Esposito, hospitalized with a severely broken nose."

"That'll be room six," said the receptionist, pointing down the ER hallway. Rosemary smiled tightly at him, then set a brisk pace towards his room.

“Surpriiiiise!” she sang, pulling the curtain aside. Gabriel was limp on the dingy blue hospital bed, and he flapped a hand weakly at her when she stepped inside.

“I figured you might appreciate some company,” she said, smiling at him. There was a dingy chair in the side of the room, which she settled into.

“Uuungh,” was his response.

“Yeah, thought so,” Rosemary said. “Sounds like you’ve had quite the day.”

“You have *no* idea,” Gabriel said.

“However will you cope?” she asked, laughing. She reached into her purse, and the sound of plastic crinkling filled the room. Gabriel turned his head to her sharply.

“Is that what I think it is?”

“Maybe,” Rosemary said coyly.

“Rosie, I have had my nose violently split in two, and I swear to all that is holy that if you do not produce the goods-”

She pressed a Reese’s Pieces peanut butter cup into his left hand.

“And *that* is why you are my best friend,” Gabriel declared, plopping the whole thing into his mouth.

“I’m just simply the best,” Rosemary agreed.

“Of all time.”

“Until the end of forever.”

Rosemary sighed, relaxing on her chair. Candy was easy. Why couldn’t they just eat candy until his nose healed? Top tier recovery plan, in her opinion.

Alas. She came here for a reason.

“What happened, Gabriel?” she asked, her voice a whisper.

Gabriel stilled.

“He was just angry,” Gabriel said, and Rosemary hated that she knew who he was talking about. “It’s nothing special.”

“He broke your nose, Gabriel,” Rosemary said.

“It’ll heal.” Gabriel’s voice was flat.

Rosemary got out of her chair and knelt by his bed, crouching so she was at eye level. Ouch. Holding this position hurt (it was worth it). “Other parents don’t break their kid’s noses because they’re angry.”

A beat.

“Mine does,” Gabriel whispered.

Another beat.

“You should tell someone,” Rosemary insisted.

One beat turned into two. Three. Four.

“You know how that went last time,” Gabriel said, blank, and Rosemary recognized this. He was retreating inside of himself, into the crawlspace that nobody could get into once he was all the way gone. He was closing the door, slamming the windows, sealing everything back inside the iron bunker.

She’s had 9 years of friendship to learn how to coax him out. She just needed to catch him before he’s all the way gone.

“It could be different, now,” Rosemary insisted. “I’m here with you. I could vouch for you, force them to listen. I’m good at that.”

Rosemary could see him pausing, teetering on the precipice. Good. The longer she could keep him out of the crawl space, the better.

“A nurse is going to come in to check on you soon,” she whispered, gently, quietly, because this was like talking to a scared animal, and she was afraid that if she spoke too loudly, he’d spook, shatter, come undone. “All you need to do is tell them what happened.”

Gabriel’s eyes turned glassy. “It won’t fix anything.”

“It might,” Rosemary insisted. “No parent is allowed to beat their kid bloody. It’s against the law.”

“I don’t have a lawyer.”

“You have me.”

Gabriel was as impassive as a statue

“I’d like to report an incident of child abuse,” Rosemary said, taking his left hand, and his skin was cool. “That’s all you need to say.”

Rosemary’s voice turned pleading, even quieter, the faintest echo: “I’ve watched you go through hell and back for as long as I’ve known you. Please. Say *something*.”

Gabriel closed his eyes. A tear threatened to slide down his cheek.

“Say *anything*. Just not *nothing*.”

He opened his eyes.

“You don’t deserve this. There are people that can *help you*.”

A nurse walked in.

Rosemary’s stomach dropped.

*Not now*, she thought, practically begged, wondering if she could plead with the universe to rewind the past ten seconds, un-open the curtain, un-enter the nurse. Because now Gabriel’s all the way gone. Hidden, veiled from view- silent. He’s always

like this around other people. Never letting the mask slip, not once, except for her. That's why she was such a good secret collector: she knew how to get behind the mask.

She tuned out the nurse as he checked Gabriel's vitals and re-dosed him on painkillers. He said something about how Gabriel was going to stay overnight, but should be good to go in the morning.

Then he turned to leave.

"Wait," Gabriel whispered. The nurse turned.

"I'd like to report an incident of child abuse."