

Shattered

Alone.

Failure.

Pathetic.

These words said it all. He'd scrawled them all over the apartment. Most in ink. Some... not. Caleb stood before an archaic mirror, but what he saw was not himself. At least, not what he'd hoped to be looking at. Not at this point in his life. A blurred, fleeting glance at the bottle told him he'd had too much absinthe.

Then it smiled. Caleb pressed some fingers to his lips to be sure - his reflection -

"You're pathetic, you know." Its words echoed throughout the desolate house, crumbling and decaying. He wiped at his eyes, this couldn't be happening -

"You always have been." It mocked him.

"N-No - it wasn't -" Caleb stammered.

" - your fault? Oh, because you, what, couldn't catch a break? Face it - you're pathetic. You always were, you still are, and you always will be. Pathetic, pathetic, pathetic." It sang.

Caleb's left hand tremored violently as it took a bar of soap in its hands. "S-Stop." He slurred.

"Or what! You'll go sulk in your decrepit home? Drink more absinthe? It makes you see things, you know. Perhaps you'll hallucinate a world where you're *not* a failed musician. Where someone *actually* cares whether you live or die. You're a *stain*, Caleb - and someone needs to remove you from this -"

The mirror shattered, falling in a shower of reflective agony upon the floor. "Only by acceptance of our past, can we change our p-present." He recited the words quietly, before clutching at his tangled hair, desperate to control his frantic thoughts. "N-No... t-that's not it..." He mumbled, voice so frail. Then his legs gave out beneath him, and his failures forced him to his knees. This was his life, he thought. Kneeling beneath shattered dreams.

Soft voices hit him then. He whipped his head about, terrified someone would see him like this. See him for what he truly was - a pathetic, disgusting s-s-stain. But he was alone. Still, he heard voices - coming from beneath him. His eyes fell upon the cracked pieces of himself, and he saw it then. Tears began to fall at an irregular beat, as he lifted a single shard, and within it, the past -

He was an echo, invisible to the world. Caleb turned around, recognising where he was. Some forgotten bar in some forgotten part of town. No place else would hire him. People were dotted about the place - all of them laughing. Talking. Living. Music played - but nobody was listening. They never were. He found its source - a young man, whose eyes once seemed so hopeful, now full of hate, and - and regret. Everyone ignored this musician, trying so valiantly, failing to realise the futility of it all. It didn't matter what songs he played. It didn't matter how original his songs were. It didn't matter that he went last week without eating to repair his guitar.

He was so, utterly alone. Caleb approached the man, wanting so desperately to help, but having no idea how. He placed a hand on the musician's shoulder, and he turned to face him. Caleb looked now at his reflection, and stiffened.

"Why?" His reflection whispered softly. Caleb opened his mouth, but the reflection interrupted, repeating the word louder still. "Why?" Caleb stumbled back as it began to scream. "WHY - WHY!" Its nose began to dribble blood, hair falling apart as dust in a breeze, his entire body decomposing - as the entire room shattered.

Caleb sat sniffing in the bathroom. The shard was crushed beneath his foot. Snapping fully out of his flashback he proceeded to clean up the mess he had just made. Despite his drunken state he managed to stumble clumsily to the dark dusty cupboard and sweep up the fragments of the shattered mirror. Everything in his life seemed broken - his mirror, his relationships, his life.

The phone began to ring. Caleb let it go to voicemail, he knew it would be his parents and each chime was a cacophonous reminder of his failures. Caleb was a good, loving, trustworthy son, however he never seemed to 'click' with his parents, he never had that same bond only-children usually tend to have with their mother and father. He felt as if they viewed him as merely a blank canvas onto which they could project their own hopes and dreams, so they could view the lives they wish they had followed. Caleb did not want to be an actor in their play of insecurity and unobtained aspirations and decided to break free from their spotlight, live in his own and be the director of his production. They say your life flashes before your eyes when you die, Caleb wanted his to be worth viewing.

One evening he packed his duffle-bag and, with his battered guitar slung across his left shoulder, left for better things...or so the thought. No longer would he have to work in his family's business, a pathetic corner shop that was on the verge of bankruptcy. He was going to be a musician. That's how he wound up in this small, washed-up town where everyone keeps to themselves and no-one knows your name...

Caleb hardly knew himself anymore. His life just hadn't panned out as he had expected. He took one last look at himself, at his weary face and shaggy appearance, in the shattered shards. He felt as if he had lived beyond his years, and had the crow's feet bordering the periphery of his eyes to prove it - a result of all the stress and anxiety that ate away at him like a parasite. Caleb sighed, took a long, much-needed slug of the absinthe and got back to work.

Lethargically, he cleaned away the last dusty remnants into an adjacent bin. The finer pieces lay on the ground like powder, Caleb attempted to pick them up but they slipped through his fingers, much like his life and aspirations. He could never achieve his hopes and anything positive in his life quickly disappeared and blew away like thin smoke. He glanced at his posters that were plastered on his crumbling walls of all the great rock-stars he grew up wanting to be like. There was Kurt Cobain, who, at 27, ended his life having achieved a thousand times more success than Caleb ever would. Kurt never even cared about fame, one of his most famous quotes is "I'd rather be dead than cool." Caleb didn't concur, but had no choice in the matter. He was nearing 26 years of age and has nothing to show for it. He was a pathetic excuse for a musician and could feel Kurt's eyes staring into his soul judgingly, shamingly. They bore a hole in his chest and his breath began to fail him, coming out in short, rasping gasps. Black spots danced in front of his eyes and clouded his vision. He attempted in vain to move but his legs were un-cooperative. The weight of all his past decisions, his contrition and penitence, pressed down on his soul like lead.

Caleb felt like he was suffocating, both physically and metaphorically. Warning voices screamed in his mind telling him to run, get out, leave. He needed to escape, not only this house but this town. Desperate for fresh air Caleb stumbled to the stairs in his inebriated state.

He never made it out the door. Several days had passed when the police eventually found him lying in a pool of his own rusty, crimson blood that spilled from his cranium like a knocked-over bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon. Looking around, one officer, a middle-aged mustachioed man named Drayton, noticed a faint blinking light on the answering machine - the voice mail from the call Caleb never answered. Drayton

pressed the button, the sound of a man's voice full of enthusiasm and promise began to play.

"Hi, Caleb. This is the manager from the NewHope Recording Studio. We received your demo tape, and guess what? We loved it and are more than excited to hear more! You've got raw talent that's hard to come by, kid. Call us back and we'll arrange a follow-up meeting. Keep playing...."

The police officer stopped listening half-way through and the words, filled with hope and opportunity, were left lingering in the air as he walked out the door, never reaching Caleb's ears.