

Say It

By Stephanie Arhin

Her mother had committed suicide.

Claudia could say it.

And she'd been saying it. Every night. For the past three months. It was basically a routine. She would wake up as a cool wash of sweat coated her entire body, the perspiration soaking through her sheets. She'd clutch her hand to her chest, her heart thumping as if it was trying to beat out of her torso. She would slowly allow her eyes to open as she reached for her desk lamp. Carefully. And then she'd say it.

It was a simple truth that she'd resigned to. Despite the fact that she wasn't at the scene of the event when it took place, she heard her father mention it to her grandmother once. The 'drowning' that had taken place two summers ago in North Carolina was no accident. Her mother had deliberately swum out too far. She never planned on coming back. Claudia knew this.

And she could say it.

"Wake up!" Her father theatrically sang. "Brunch is in twenty!" The curtains flew open and the sun leapt into her bedroom.

On reflex, Claudia threw her pillow over her face, nearly suffocating herself in an attempt to escape the ferocious and relentless rays the sun provided. Spring mornings in Delaware were always like this, and maybe if her mother were still around she would've appreciated them. But she wasn't. And she didn't. And Claudia refused to sit through another shallow Sunday brunch on her family's estate without a fight.

Especially since he couldn't say it.

"Claudia! I let you sleep in for an extra half hour."

How kind, Claudia lowered the pillow from her face. Her father loomed over her, his hands folded over his puffed chest and an overall look of disconcertion plastered across his face. He never used to look this way. He used to always dress in flannel shirts and work boots. He never used to shave, the bristles of his beard pricked Claudia's cheek every time she gave him a hug like pine needles tickled her skin on Christmas day. Back then he smelt like wood, sweat, smoke, and the outdoors. He always grinned in the mornings, ruffling his fingers through her hair as he read the newspaper.

A frown tugged at his lips.

"I'm awake." Claudia tossed the pillow beside her and sat up. "See?" She widened her eyes, hoping that perhaps her own vision would pass over to her father.

Her father nodded slowly. "I do." He began to look around her room, his eyes averting her gaze. "Get dressed, okay? Company will be over soon." He quickly exited, failing to shut the door behind him.

Company was always over.

Company was always on their way, about to leave, and staying for a few weekends. Her father constantly entertained them. He had parties, hosted dinners, and supported tennis tournaments. Caterers bombarded the house on a daily basis, and the house always wound up smelling like an overpriced five-star restaurant. The house was a constant chorus of unfamiliar voices, unfriendly faces, and unimportant people Claudia would never get to know. She didn't wish to get to know them.

Company filled the house, but the house was always empty.

Besides, the one person who Claudia wanted to show up was always missing. Her mother never showed up to the brunches, benefits, or tennis tournaments. She hated caviar and every other revolting dish that rich people ate to impress one another. She liked the quiet things, she wished for time spent with less people and less money. But she was dead, and no amount of company was going to replace her.

Claudia walked over to the door and slowly closed it, watching as the latch clicked. Her mother had abhorred the concept of brunch, and often times ditched vacations to Delaware altogether. She would coax her family into going on an alternative trip. Two years earlier she had somehow convinced her family on going on a five-day, totally secluded camping trip in North Carolina. She was ecstatic when they made s'mores on the first night. She beamed as she placed a marshmallow on a nearby twig. Her eyes sparkled as she focused all of her concentration on roasting the gooey confection. The natural fire illuminated her radiance, her teeth shining as she laughed incessantly. The embers danced around her body like glitter, an angel lightened by campfire. Her image was brightened in Claudia's memory.

Claudia sucked in and zipped up her dress.

Not that she expected her father to know her exact measurements, but she wished the clothes he bought didn't fit her like a sausage casing. The dress was a body constricting, white lie of a garment. The thin straps dug into her skin, nearly cutting off her

circulation. The dress wrapped around Claudia's whole midsection like industrial toilet paper, forever mummifying her into a person she couldn't even recognize. She exhaled a shortened breath before unzipping the dress and dropping it to the floor. Her total ambivalence towards looking presentable prompted her father into buying her feminine, noticeably frilly, nausea-inducing apparel. Clothes she never wanted to be caught dead in.

"It's just what they do here," he explained as he dumped sacks of shopping bags on Claudia's bed. "My mother used to do the same for me when I was growing up."

Of course she did. It was Claudia's grandmother who suggested they move back to Delaware and live with her after the funeral. It was she who suggested her father start looking 'presentable' again, purchasing a wardrobe complete with button-up Oxfords and dress shoes. She threw away the flannel, the work boots, and he shaved off his bristly pine needles. He was unrecognizable, the old him was buried away with her mother and the weeks of mourning.

Her grandmother said it was time for them to start anew.

Starting anew meant learning to forget. It meant discarding the incident altogether, to abolish the word 'suicide' from the family vernacular. It meant that Claudia's father was allowed to go on dates; he was allowed to drink and laugh with women whom he hadn't known for eighteen years. And Claudia was urged to 'socialize,' to spend time with teenagers who were far too interested in getting high and spending money to discuss anything of substance.

Starting anew was a joke.

Claudia slipped into a comfortable skirt and loose fitting shirt. She could actually catch her breath in this particular ensemble. Her mother had purchased the skirt for her a few years ago. At the time it was too big for a young Claudia, it would drop to the floor every time she tried to put it on; the image made her mother smile. She told Claudia to be patient, that the skirt would be hers when she was older and more mature. Claudia had looked forward to it.

She walked over to her window and peered outside. Her grandmother's estate was a red brick, two story colonial mansion. Four large sturdy columns stood in front of the house like guardsmen, indicating the public of the large supply of wealth that resided inside. From her window, Claudia could see the pathway that led from her grandmother's backyard deck to the private lake. Lanterns lined that path that was accompanied by a wooden railing. The walk took three

and a half minutes, a comfortable distance from the life Claudia chose not to be a part of.

She backed away from the window and left her room. Once Claudia finally made her way out back to the deck, the party was already in full swing. It always was. She could hear the chatter of rich, inevitably amused people before she walked out onto the deck. She slowly made her way through the crowd of people, observing everything and everyone as if it were her first time. She found the entire charade primal: an almost National Geographic account of high society. She surveyed the scene.

Claudia's grandmother lived for the Sunday brunch. It was her idea after all. "I just think it's a good way to get acclimated to the community," she said; she had enough self-respect not to reveal the true intention for the brunches; the social power that she gained with each wealthy guest, the adrenaline that circulated through her veins every time someone would bring up "Sunday at the Hixson's" in good favor. She sat in the crux of the scene. She wove her champagne flute in the air as she chuckled gaily at some self-obsessed man in his sixties.

Claudia's grandmother was the nucleus of the whole operation, and no matter where Claudia stood; she could see that the whole affair revolved around her. Directly across from her grandmother's table was where the mid-life crisis brigade sat. Claudia's father could easily be a member of that table if his mother wasn't inextricably tied to his life. Those men were in their mid-forties. Every Sunday consisted of them showing off their new cars and even newer girlfriends. They always brought in some new energy, a youth and vitality not even found in young people. If Claudia had to choose, they were her favorite. At least they were entertaining.

Next were the women in the bright hats.

Every Sunday they would clamor around one table with their necks shortened and their voices hushed. Gossipers. They assumed the disposition of vultures, eyes dodgy and shoulders hunched while they stalked their prey. Their hats were always intricately designed; each the hue of pastels, and each ostentatiously adorned with feathers, pearls, and tinsel. They gabbed on incessantly, pausing only to push a morsel through their gaping mouths.

Claudia couldn't take her eyes off them.

Particularly Mrs. Montgomery, who took hats to a completely new strata. On that particular Sunday, she wore a bright yellow bee

hat that shone brilliantly in the sunlight. Vivid flecks of shimmer made her look like a starburst or a disco ball, her head the main source of entertainment to the Delaware elite.

Claudia shoved a piece of croissant in her mouth as she walked past them and their eyes immediately gravitated towards her. They always did. She was “the eater,” the female specimen who came to brunch and *ate*. Claudia tore off another piece of croissant with her teeth and eyed them as she continued to walk on. She walked past the giggling newlyweds and the snotty ten year olds. She walked until the party was out of earshot and headed to her one place of comfort.

She ran her hand against the wooden railing as she walked down the path to the lake. She always walked slowly, taking in deep breaths as she ventured closer to the water. Before her mom’s death, she would spend every spare moment she had in the water. She dived, played water polo, and just swam whenever she wanted to. After her mother’s death, she never ventured back.

It was too unpredictable.

Letting go of the railing, Claudia stood at the edge of the dock, her toes hanging over the edge as the deep blue water lapped closely up. The lake was always empty on Sunday mornings. The water was a deep, peaceful blue; the horizon was stretched far in the distance as the water gently rippled. The breeze lightly whistled and tussled the bottom of Claudia’s skirt as she craned her head toward the sky. The familiar chatter of birds singing in the distance soothed her, their high-pitched chirps full and cacophonous. They were always out near the dock on Sunday mornings, and the fact that they didn’t stop singing meant that they knew.

And they could say it.

Their twinkling, twittering symphony was native to Claudia. She held up her head to the location of the sound, soaking in any light they offered. They reminded her that there was at least *some* beauty in Delaware. And up there, where her mom was, was a place where she could still send down joy.

A tear rolled down Claudia’s cheek.

“So you ditch the party to come out here and cry?”

Claudia immediately whirled around; she had been out on the dock for so long that she’d forgotten she was in the vicinity of true human interaction. Once she noticed she was in the presence of a young, manufactured, male mini-socialite she raised her defenses and

faced the sky again. She dropped her jaw and extended her neck as a wave of tenseness showered her body.

“Are you just going to ignore me?” The boy walked closer to her. She could smell his putrid, over-priced cologne wafting through her peaceful air. The aroma was throttling. “Everyone says you just keep to yourself.”

“I come out here to think.” Claudia immediately grunted an explanation. “It’s quiet here.” Her voice muted as she spoke the last words, her eyes filling with an overwhelming abundance of tears. She was nearly blinded by them, each drop rose up in her eyes to complicate her vision, the world before her becoming a smudged assortment of watered shapes and colors.

“Claudia?”

“What’s your name anyway?” Not that she cared, but at least she could put a name to the voice and display of try-hardness breathing down her neck.

“Bryant.” The boy’s tone softened. “Bryant Calloway.”

“Well, *Bryant Calloway*,” Claudia tightly closed her eyes to hold back any tears that persistently fought to swim out of her eyes. “I don’t spend a lot of time with other people because I like to have time to myself.”

“So why are you crying?” Bryant stepped closer, but Claudia’s back was still turned. She could feel him reaching out, the twinge of desperation aching in his voice. He wanted to say something, to say the right thing – but he was still searching for the words.

What did it all mean anyway? The fact that her father never spoke about the suicide didn’t mean he didn’t think about it. She knew he thought about it. He had to. He thought about it in the way he avoided the lake and took five-minute showers. He thought about it when Claudia caught him staring at her mother’s picture every morning. The unspoken blame hung in the air, the ‘what if’s’, the ‘we should’ve been with her’, the ‘we could’ve done more’s’.

But never the words. Never the ‘she committed suicide’ and never the truth.

The reality hung from Claudia’s lips every day. It dangled mid-air, a ghost that she was always close to catching. She remembered the first time she said it. It was right after she heard her father confide in her grandmother. At first she couldn’t repeat it, but in the middle of the night she sat on her windowsill and looked up at the stars. Their brightness was a clear reminder of the camping trip two years prior.

So she said it. She expected herself to feel lighter, less heavy to not be bogged down by lies and inconsistencies. But it still hurt and she still needed to say it every day.

“Claudia?”

She couldn’t answer. She hung one foot over the edge of the dock. The chilling tongue of the lake licked her toes, playing with her before inviting her into the bitter bath. She exhaled gently. She wanted to know what her mother felt, how she jumped, what she thought; she needed to know something. She could feel a light spray of mist teasing her skin, her feet sprinkling with tiny droplets of water. She could see the memories luring her into another swim. She hadn’t done it in so long. She drew a long breath.

And jumped.

“Claudia!”

Her head submerged into the chilly lake, immediately sending shivers up and down her ribs as her shirt clung to her torso. Her arms slowly waved up to her sides as she bobbed her head up, popping her eyes open when she finally resurfaced. Under the cloud of tears and water she could make out the physique of Bryant, mouth agape and stance stiffened.

Claudia tossed her head back and howled with laughter, her stomach fully filling with uncontained amusement. She could see everything: the Saturdays spent in the garden, the salon nights they’d spend on the couch, she could smell her vanilla shampoo. In the water, her image came to life. She could see her on the last night, swimming too far from shore. She was coming back. She was alive.

Claudia’s mouth completely opened and her top lip curled under her top row of teeth. She laughed so hard that tears began to burst from her eyes, her softened howls turning into sharp, shrieking screams as reality overtook her.

The image was fading, the embers disappearing into darkness, the glittery angel fading into one indistinguishable blob of light.

“I can’t!” Claudia gasped upon realization. “I can’t see her anymore!” She splashed her hands on the water, complicating her vision once more.

Her mother was gone. She disappeared. She needed to see her.

Claudia splashed wildly, losing the image of her mother in her own mind. “I can’t see –” the word *her* disappeared into Claudia’s panting breaths. She was sobbing; her body shaking as tears overtook her body.

Bryant leapt into the lake.

"I can't!" Claudia hiccupped. Claudia could feel pain stab her body from every direction as tears rushed out of her eyes. Bryant's arm circled her waist as he scooped her in one swift motion and carried her back to shore.

The birds continued their symphony.

She could feel water drip from Bryant's nose as the palm of his hand stuck to her back. He was taller than her, his eyes focused on the crowd above her and she imagined that the top of her head was still in his peripheral. Her lips were pursed tightly shut and she exhaled heavily from her nose. She wrote the story in her head; she was an untrained animal, a puppy who jumped into the deep end, and he was the responsible owner who rushed to save her.

Bryant pushed Claudia through the throng of partygoers, all of their eyes magnetically attracted to her image. She hugged herself tightly, water trickling off her arms and onto the lush green grass below. She could hear the whispers, the hatted vultures inspecting her with full expectation, but she continued to press on. Bryant's strength was impossible for her to challenge.

She held her head to the sky.

Their eyes threatened to burn through her skin; accusations penetrated her from near and afar. Her clothes weighed down with each step she took, and the bottom of her skirt dragged behind her. She continued to place one foot in front of the other. She had no other choice. Stopping was a sign of weakness, a sign of embarrassment.

She wasn't.

"What the hell happened here?" Claudia's father immediately leapt from his seat and towards his daughter. He was wearing his 'smart glasses,' the clear frames that perched perfectly on his nose while he spoke about financial accounts and 401K plans.

Whatever.

Bryant removed his hand from Claudia's back and stood beside her. He looked down at her expectantly as all anger washed from his face. It resurfaced with another emotion, a hesitation and trepidation that Claudia was far too amused by. Her father began to rub his hands up and down her shoulders like he used to do when she was younger and she complained about being cold. He attempted to cocoon her in a warm, almost maternal human blanket as water continued to drip from her nose. It was a sweet gesture, a not-too-distant reminder of how things were in the past.

“Bryant.” Her father’s voice was sternly searching for an explanation. His face was stoned and darkened with every word he spoke. “What the hell were you doing with my daughter?” There was a fear in his eyes, a fear that couldn’t be assuaged by Sunday brunches and upper class socialization. It was a fear beyond his control.

Bryant glanced at Claudia for assistance. He slumped his shoulders when he fully understood the extent of her silence. He shuddered as he began to speak. “Mr. Hixson, I can definitely explain...”

“I jumped.” Claudia swallowed. Her eyes were fixed on her father. “And I started freaking out, so Bryant came and got me.”

Bryant exhaled a deep sigh of relief. Life saved.

Her father tensed. “What do you mean you jumped?”

There was an audience now. They took no attempt to hide it. Claudia could hear their yelled whispers. She could feel their disdain. Their judgment. She straightened her back as she performed. “I jumped in the lake, dad. I sprang, leaped, bounded – *fuck*, I jumped in the lake.”

Say something. She concentrated on his cool eyes.

“She was struggling.” Bryant felt the need to clarify. “Sir, she was hysterical.”

Her father’s deep eyes widened as he looked down at his daughter, a softened rage highlighting the contours of his sharpened face. The words that left his mouth were feeble. They strained to reach his lips. “What were you thinking?” His forehead crinkled as his tone hushed.

Claudia shrugged.

“You know...” he dropped the words as quickly as they came. He buried them with paternal scorn. “You know better, Claudia. That was completely irresponsible.”

God. Claudia rolled her eyes toward the clouds. Her father’s hands were heavy on her arms now and she wriggled to break out of them. He met her eyes with a frown as she wrapped her arms around herself, a symbol for the route their relationship had taken. They stood in silence for a few seconds. The absence of the sound was louder anything either had heard before.

“Claudia!” Her grandmother ran up with a beige towel. She wrapped her granddaughter up, never mind Bryant’s sopping physique. “Baby, you’re gonna fall ill.” Her grandmother was in full

performance mode. She quickly rubbed Claudia's arms, undeniably causing towel-burn.

"Grandma. Stop." Claudia insisted. She now felt the significance of Bryant's presence for perhaps the first time all morning. "Please."

A woman arrived and handed a towel to Bryant as Claudia's father continued to search for words. He looked at his daughter with a new display of sadness. She could feel it. She could also see the bright red tinge of pain shading him as she spoke. "I haven't been in a lake since mom – and I guess I just wanted to know she felt – before she..."

Her father's eyes widened upon realization.

"Claudia," her grandmother's arms tensed as she hissed a whisper. "Now is not the time."

"Then when is?" Claudia's tone rose. Murmurs broadcasted from all directions. "We *never* talk about it." She took one step further, there was an audience after all, "you know, sometimes I think you never liked her. You're probably happy she did it. She hated your bullshit society."

Her grandmother retreated.

Her father's eyes continued to widen. "Stop." He urgently choked. "Claudia. Stop."

"Stop what?"

"Claudia..."

"Stop what?" She needed to hear more.

"You know what you're doing..."

"Tell me!" She was powered by adrenaline. It was insatiable. If Bryant hadn't jumped in to pull her out of the lake, she wouldn't be having this conversation. "Tell me." She repeated.

Her father looked to his own mother for assistance, but she had already recoiled into a shell of embarrassment. He sighed deeply and focused all of his attention on Claudia. "You really don't want to have this conversation right now."

"Why not?"

More broadcasted murmurs.

"Claudia..."

"Say it." She demanded for the first time. Her tone was unwavering as she held her father's gaze. It was as if all the people had vanished and they were the only two on the planet. She could feel the power in her own words, and she was charged by them. They ignited an intense electricity that was relentless and shocking. "I had to find out on my own! You never said *anything*."

“Come here.” Her father grabbed her arm and pushed past the crowd. The women in the gaudy hats and her father’s peers watched as Claudia was led down the pathway to the lake. No one followed. Claudia’s heart thundered through her chest as the sun followed her like a spotlight. Her father never let go, the film of sweat between his hand and her arm kept them connected like invisible glue.

They walked to the dock in silence.

The water was a deep, peaceful blue; the horizon was outstretched far in the distance. She looked up at her father’s eyes. They were focused and wet and his hand still gripped onto her wrist. Somehow the birds had stopped singing. Once the two reached the edge of the dock, he let go. He crossed his arms over his chest and looked out to the horizon. To Claudia, the lake was endless, just like the one in North Carolina. Her mother could still be swimming out there; she could still be alive.

“What did you want me to do?” Her father finally spoke as he placed his hand on the back of his neck. He didn’t bother to look down at his daughter.

“I want you to say it. I don’t want you to hide things from me and act like nothing happened –”

“I was trying to protect you.”

“From what?” She challenged.

“From the pain, Claudia.” His bottom lip trembled. “She left a note.”

Claudia felt her mouth open as she struggled to find words.

“She’d been planning it for a while,” he sighed, his voice breaking. “I had no idea. She set up the entire trip to North Carolina on purpose. She wanted us to have good memories of her.”

“No.” Claudia shook her head. “She would’ve told us!” She sniffed as tears washed her face. She would’ve said something. They would’ve known.

“Claudia...” her father reached out and pulled her into him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her to his chest, rubbing his hands up and down her arms like he did when she was younger. She was shivering; she suddenly began to feel the coldness that had overtaken her clothes and skin. And she couldn’t stop crying. The glittery angel no longer danced in the embers of the campfire, her fate had already been sealed. The truth lay right in front of Claudia.

Claudia shook her head. “She would’ve said something!” she screeched.

“I’m sorry.” Her father whispered as Claudia’s chin trembled onto his chest. Claudia looked out at the lake and the way she couldn’t see anything past the horizon. There was nothing else out there, no one was going to turn around and swim back. No one was going to swim to shore and say anything.