“One Heart, Two Cities”

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# A Series of Short Stories

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“One Heart, Two Cities”

Chapter 1

The sheets stuck to my body and tangled around my legs. My limbs were locked in by his, and I felt like I was seat belted into his chest by an arm that wouldn’t budge. I turned my head and looked at him sleeping, feeling the urge to break from his hold. I tossed his arm from my chest and untangled myself. It felt cooler outside of the bed and by the window. The rain fell heavy outside. Nothing is as beautiful as a rainstorm in the city; lightning dashing in and out of the city blocks and thunder added to the sound of sirens and horns that are a fixture of the night. I had just graduated graduate school, and Bobby and I had been living in our apartment for about a year now. I opened my computer earlier today and he closed it for me. I was ready to tackle the impossible task of finding a job after graduation, but he had beat me to it.

“We’re moving to New Orleans,” he said as he closed my laptop. “No need to look for a job here when we are going to be moving so soon.”

“What do you mean so soon? I love New Orleans, but what’s the point of picking up our life here and moving to a city where we don’t know anyone? And you don’t even have a job there.”

“Well that’s where you’re wrong. I do have a job there. Remember my sophomore year of law school when I went down to do the Mississippi Project?”
He paused for my reaction, as if his sophomore year of law school had been more than a year ago.

“Yes, I remember. What about it?”

“Well, I got a call from the public defenders office and they offered me a position there. Starting salary is about 45,000 a year. Not much, I know, but with you working we will definitely be able to afford it.”

“I mean that’s great Bobby. Congratulations!”

“That’s all you have to say?”

“No, I mean I don’t know what to say. I can’t see myself living in New Orleans. I mean going there for Mardi Gras or vacation, that I can see. But living there? I don’t know anyone.”

“Okay so you’ll meet people.”

“Yah I guess. Do you know how angry my parents would be if I told them I was leaving. They’re helping me pay my loans off. We won’t be able to afford much of anything when they stop helping me with that because I left New York. Which you know my father will do right? He’ll do it on purpose because he knows that is the only control he has left over me right now.”

“Fuck that. Pay your loans off little by little. I hate that he still has control over you in any way. He shouldn’t at all. You should cut all ties to your family. They are vindictive people. They tried to separate us. Was it that far off for you?”

I stared at him blankly.
“That’s your problem Vicki. You always find a way to let your parents come in between us. How am I supposed to even take this relationship seriously if you are going to let your parents stopping payment on your loans stand in the way of us moving on with our lives.”

“Why are you yelling at me?”

“I’m not. You just need to seriously think about that, because if you want to take this move with me, and you want us to grow, then you need to step up to your parents. Tell them that this is your life and your choices and mean it, or I can’t be with you, and I don’t want to be with you.”

“How could you say that? You don’t want to be with me? I love you.”

“How, I love you too. I want you to grow up, and I need you to grow up so that we can make a life together.”

We didn’t talk much for the rest of the day. I had too much of a personal battle going on inside me. When I was a little girl, I looked at my father, and nothing but adoration and love beamed from my eyes. I don’t know whether to blame myself or him. Two years ago, I was intent on blaming Bobby for the strain on my relationship with my Dad, but…

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It was the night of my grandfather’s 80th birthday party and my one year anniversary with Bobby. For the first time I was bringing him to a family event. He had bugged me the entire year, thinking I was ashamed of him and that I didn’t want him to meet my parents. That was not the case at all. I knew exactly
how this interaction would go, and I was afraid he would see how crazy my
family was and that I would inherit their genes. My family consisted of extremely
conservative Republicans, except for myself. To make matters worse, my parents
knew that Bobby had taken me all over the country to help campaign for Barrack
Obama. Since he won, no one else was to blame except for Bobby, who put
Barack in the White House. Bobby always wore the same leather jacket, despite
the occasion, with a “Yes We Can!” pin on the upper right collar. One look at
him, one glance at his pin, and I would be surprised if it was still on and intact by
time he went to check his coat.

My mother had convinced the entire family that Bobby monopolized all of
my time. My cousin Christine related her version of my mother’s story to me,
telling me that my mother said I never came home on weekends because Bobby
forced me to stay with him. He had no trust in me to be off on my own. She also
added that he must come from a very dysfunctional family if they condoned two
sexually active twenty somethings to sleep together under their roof. The truth
was, I hated going home. My mother would drown me in incessant questions
about my future and my present, and harp on my mistakes of the past. My father
whom I once looked to as my dark knight, saving me from awkward and painful
situations with my mother, no longer came to my rescue. In a way, I felt like he
was jealous of the relationship Bobby and I had. Before that, my father was my
world and now he had to share my world with someone else. He was never good
at sharing.
Lastly, I feared that my mother would finally discover I was a smoker. It was not the fact that I was afraid of her reprimanding me about smoking, it was the fact that if she knew, she would be like an overplayed song. Her barrage of questions would be as follows: Why do you smoke? Does this boy make you smoke? Don’t you know your Uncle Richard died of lung cancer? I guess you don’t care about your health, do you? Does this boy know that for the twenty years I raised you, you never once put a cigarette up to your mouth?

One whiff of me once I got out of Bobby’s car, after the two of us had smoked enough cigarettes to calm a thousand nerves, and she would know. We pulled up, parked, and left the car. Like a showdown, we walked from the south end of Arthur Avenue, and my parents walked down from the north end. We met in front of the little Italian restaurant, which had been my grandfather’s favorite for years, and I saw my father’s eyes dart down to the pin on Bobby’s jacket collar. As his eyes darted my mother’s arms plunged, right around my neck and then clenched. She was smelling me.

“I smell smoke. Do you smoke Bobby?”

“Unfortunately I do, but it’s a nasty habit we are both trying to quit.”

I wanted to kill him, but it was my fault for not warning him. I wanted to tell him that I would rather quit smoking then have my mother find out I was a smoker. Quitting cold turkey would be easier. It was out in the open now and I heard the race starting. He shot the pistol; now her questions would run endlessly.
“Okay then,” my father said awkwardly, “should we go in or are we just going to stand outside and bullshit about how you’re screwing up my daughter’s life?”

My father laughed, which eased Bobby’s mind, but brought me to full attention. That was not a joking laugh, but rather a twisted laugh. He was plotting some way to break Bobby’s balls during the course of dinner. I just didn’t know what his course of action would be. As we walked into the small restaurant, my father held open the door for my mother and myself, and so I walked ahead. When I looked behind me I saw that behind my father was Bobby. He was agitated to say the least.

“What’s wrong with you? You have this pissed off look all over your face. Not a good way to walk in and greet my family.”

“Well Vick, I would have a fine look on my face. In fact I may have even cracked a fucking smile, but it’s clear your father hates me. You know that nice little gesture he just did? The one where he held the door for you and your mother?”

“Yah?”

“Well he stepped in front of me and slammed the door on my face.”

“No he didn’t!”

“Vick I’m telling you he slammed the goddamn door on my face.”

“I don’t think he meant it.”

I said that to reassure Bobby even though I was not reassured. At least he was prepared now and on alert for the rest of the night. When we walked in, I
grabbed his hand, brought it up to my face and kissed it. I was happy I had someone to help ease the pain that family gatherings always induced. I introduced him to the line up: Uncle John, Aunt Lisa, Uncle Joey, Aunt Joanne, Uncle Tony, Aunt Maria, Cousin Joey, Christine, Corrine, Matthew and so on. There was at least about thirty members of my family there, and of course the guest of honor my grandfather. Everyone looked at Bobby, squeezed at his face, kissed his cheeks. Not only was he in an Italian restaurant, but he was surrounded by Italians. My father took his place right next to my Uncle John. The two ball busters of the family always sat together and passed insults down the table as if they were dealing cards. Bobby and I sat across from my cousin Christine and her boyfriend Charlie. I felt less awkward there. I knew it had something to do with the fact that my uncle hated her boyfriend too; but, it was still awkward because I knew my uncle had a reason to. My father on the other hand just met Bobby. He knew nothing about him, except for the scraps of stories my mother tried to put together and label as my crazy, new, and uninhibited life.

We were halfway through the antipasto when Bobby grabbed my hand.

“Babe, I don’t want to sound paranoid, but the waiter who was just down at your Dad’s end of the table pointed at me and mouthed ‘That one. Oh we’ll take care of it.’”

“What!”

“Babe, I just want to know. This looks like one of those small Italian joints. I’m looking around and I see sixty-year old men with jogging suits on and twenty-year old girlfriends. They have to be connected or something.”
“Oh my God. Are you serious? What do you think my father just put a hit on you and the next time you get up to go to the bathroom one of these sixty-year old men will limp back to the bathroom and shoot you? Maybe we’ll have a Godfather scene right here in the restaurant. You have a vivid imagination Bobby. Maybe you should be the writer.”

“Okay don’t believe me. But your father keeps shooting this glare at me and talking to your uncle. Then he looks up and gives me this weird twisted sort of smile. Just watch him. You’ll see.”

I was watching him alright. Watching him drink down glass after glass of wine. I watched him looking at Bobby and then looking at me with a smile he thought was harmless. I knew better. He flagged me over with the wave of his hand and I kissed Bobby on the cheek and walked over. I knew I was stepping right into the belly of the drunken beast.

“What are you doing with that asshole? Come here, sit on my lap. How’s my little girl. I never see you anymore. We used to be so close but you’re never home. You’re all over the place with this guy. He hasn’t even attempted to come up to me and talk like a man.”

I sat down on his lap awkwardly and placed my arm around his back.

“Well Dad it’s not like you’ve made it easy for him. You just automatically assume that he’s an asshole, slam the door in his face on the way in here, and supposedly have the waiter placing him on a hit list.”
“Right. Is that what he told you? That I closed the door on his face? The door slipped and I went to grab it, but it closed to quickly. That’s what happened! And what’s this he’s saying about the waiter? He’s got a some imagination.”

As my father slurried his words I turned red with embarrassment. I was mad at myself for bringing Bobby here. I knew it was wrong, I wanted to keep him separate from my family, unharmed. I wanted him to know me on my own, not in association with my family or my father’s possessive antics. It wasn’t just Bobby, it was every single guy I had ever dated since high school. No one was ever good enough for my father’s little girl. In high school I rebelled by dating some of the biggest assholes just to piss him off, but that only backfired. Now, I was dating someone I actually loved. Someone who supported my dreams, cared about me, loved me back. This was real, and to tell you the truth, I think my father was scared shitless.

“Well Dad, Bobby’s actually not an asshole. I don’t appreciate you not giving him a chance. The least you can do for me is give him a chance. If you don’t like him, that’s fine. Then you’re just going to have to deal with it.”

“Oh see how they talk to you Billy? One glimpse at what they think is love and these kids become blinded,” my Uncle Johnny said, sticking his two cents in as usual.

“Yah you’re right John. I can see where I stand. I guess he pays your cell phone bills, your health insurance, and your tuition now?”

“This is ridiculous Dad. I’m in school, I have two jobs and whatever money I am not putting towards my loans, I am putting towards my car insurance.
You know how much that is! Why are we even having this discussion right now?
It’s Grandpa’s birthday.”

“You’re right. Walk away kid, you’re getting good at it.”

I walked back to Bobby trying to compose myself. I didn’t want him to see the side of my father that made me cry because then he would hate my father for hurting me, but it was too late. He saw the upset look on my face.

“Are you okay? You look like you’re about to cry. This is not the way I wanted us to spend our anniversary.”

“I’m fine, really.”

“I thought this was going to be so much more laid back, but I can see why you didn’t want to be here, why you didn’t want me to be here.”

“I’m sorry babe.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m just glad you haven’t mentioned anything about spring break to them. I think it’s better if you start to tell your parents less. The less they know, the less they will have over you. The less control they’ll feel. You’re going on twenty-two in a week. You’ll be a graduating college. You’re an adult. They need to see that.”

I knew he was right, but before I let myself get emotional, I got up and went to the bathroom. My mother followed me in. She knew I was upset and even though I knew she cared, I also saw past this and into her ulterior motive. When my father used to get mad at me when I was younger, she would always follow, the good cop, bad cop routine. It was her way of trying to swoop in and show me that I should be closer with her. She’d always start off with the line,
“See, this is why daughter’s need their mothers. Sometimes father’s can get a little bit overbearing.”

True to the pattern I had always seen after every fight with my father, she came into the bathroom and said, “See, you say I ask too many question, and you tell me I drive you crazy. But what would you do without me. Who would be in here with you right now?”

“I shouldn’t be in here right now. I shouldn’t be upset today. It’s our anniversary and I wanted him to meet my family. Now I’m strongly regretting that decision. I believe it was you who told me you want to see more of me? Well you can thank Dad, because probably after today you’re only going to see less.”

I felt bad, but I was so angry. For years she was always at the brunt of every argument. She was always the one whom I hurt because my father hurt me. Before I had a chance to go back into the bathroom and apologize, I heard the barreling voice of my father. I walked in to a scene that would change our relationship permanently. There he was in a drunken stupor, leaning across the table, his hand firmly grasping Bobby’s shirt, just inches away from his collar.

“I bet you’re an abusive mother fucker! You’re not good enough for my daughter asshole. You want to look at me with that smug look on your face you go ahead. You think your better than me? Oh, you’re not going to say anything back? Figures. Well you can pay for your own meal.”

I felt like I was stuck in cement. I couldn’t move from my place and I couldn’t shake the shakes, which were pulsating through my body like a wildfire.
I looked at Bobby and I just saw a look of shock. He didn’t utter a word back to my father. He got up from his chair and walked over to my side.

“I know this is not you. This is your family. But I need to go. Your father came within inches of hitting me, and before I lose my temper, for your sake, I need to leave. Are you coming with me?”

My father must have seen the horrified expression on my face because he stumbled over.

“I don’t know what he just told you, but this asshole just told me to go screw myself. I invited him back to the house for coffee with the rest of the family. He tells me you have other plans. Tell me, when do you see your family? You’re always with your new family now, his family. What do you have to do that is so damn important that you can’t give us fifteen minutes? I tried to make my nice gesture kid. I tried! But he’s the one who told me that you are going to do what he wants you two to do tonight and you have no time to come back to the house.”

I stood, still unable to move. I was in a state of embarrassment and shock.

I knew that my father’s version of the scene I had missed while in the bathroom was false. Bobby would never speak to anyone, especially my father in that way. He may have given him a look implying “go screw yourself,” but he would never say it. I knew my father had pushed Bobby to his limit and at that moment, for the first time in my life, I didn’t look at my father with adoring and forgiving eyes after our fight.
My father must have read the look on my face because he said, “You better not leave here with him. If you leave this restaurant with him after what he pulled in front of all these people and your family, I am done with you.”

My mother cried out from behind me, “Don’t say that to her Billy. Listen honey don’t go. You and Bobby can always sort this out later. Stay and try and make amends with your father.”

I realized then if I didn’t leave, I would be stuck in that moment forever, regretting my decision to stay. I grabbed Bobby’s hand, he paid the man at the front of the restaurant for his meal, and I tried to hold back crying as I heard my father scream behind me, “You’re done! I’m done kid! You made your choice!”

I was so embarrassed and so mortified that when we left the restaurant I ran ahead of Bobby to the car and leaned up against it. I pressed my head against the cold grey door and let it all out. Bobby came up to me, put his arms around me, and held me. The thought of not having my father in my life made me feel as if I had lost my shadow.

I had made my choice, and my father would never let me live down that decision. I thought the fight that night had settled things, but it was just beginning. As my father began to drink more, it only fueled his anger. He called my cell phone and left angry voicemails telling me that he was done with me as a daughter. I felt his anger and his pain in those messages, and the more I listened to them, the more I became hurt. I thought back to the restaurant and how embarrassed I was that my father disowned me in front of my entire family. All
of my life my father warned me to avoid the exact type of asshole he himself had become that night.

I remember he used to say, “Don’t date a guy who drinks too much and then becomes violent, because one day he will turn around and become violent with you. I never want to see anyone hurt my little girl.”

Bobby and I decided that if my father wanted to threaten me with money and tie me down by holding things over my head, I would just have to rely on him less and less. We went to Verizon the next day and signed a contract for a family cell phone plan together. I shut my father’s phone off. Eventually he’d get the hint. Now, neither of my parents could reach me because no one in my family had my new number. I figured, if no one in the restaurant wanted to stand up for me, and my father said that he was ‘done with me,’ then so be it. Let him see what it would really be like without me in his life.

Two days later, Bobby and I left on spring break for New Orleans. We packed up the car with snacks and energy drinks and set out on the road. Driving over the bridge into New Jersey, I looked out the window and couldn’t help but feel regret. Somewhere in this state were my parents, and they were probably worried about me. But I pulled myself back in with anger, remembering my father’s harsh words, and my mother’s instigating ways.

I remember singing along to the Rolling Stones as we entered New Orleans. Bobby held his left hand out the window as he belted, “Wild, wild horses...couldn’t drag me away.” I swayed to the music, my two feet on the dashboard, and my arm dangling out of the window with my lit cigarette. At that
moment I felt free. I was free from emotion and judgment. There was no one telling me what to do or how to act. It was Bobby, the open road, and I.

When we finally got into the city, we plugged in the address to Bobby’s friend’s apartment. He told us he could put us up for a few days so we wouldn’t have to worry about a hotel. Driving through the neighborhood we saw different houses with marks from FEMA on them. The homes looked like abandoned skeleton’s whose shingles had been ripped off by the claws of Hurricane Katrina.

The more we drove, the more nervous I became.

“This doesn’t look like the best area Bobby. Are you sure that the gps is taking us in the right direction.”

“Of course I’m sure. We’re not in the Ninth Ward. If we were, trust me you would see about ten times this amount of abandoned homes. Don’t worry, when we get to Al’s we’ll bring all our stuff inside.”

“You have arrived at your destination,” said Raina, the voice of the gps.

We looked around, and there were two homes, one on each side of the car. It was pretty obvious which one was Al’s because it had the beer banner hanging from the 3rd floor balcony, and a plastic blow up doll in the swing on the front porch. I looked over at Bobby and he must have read my expression because he muttered for me to prepare myself. I wasn’t prepared.

Walking up to the front door was like walking through a minefield of empty cigarette boxes, broken bottles, used condoms, and glow sticks. When we got to the door the doorbell had been pulled out so we knocked as Bobby tried Al on his cell.
“I’ll be right down to let y’all in,” Al shouted down from some upstairs window.

Moments later he swung open the door and stood before us completely naked.

“Sorry man. You should see this sweet piece of ass I’ve got up in my room. I make a killin’ playin’ bass in this new band. She’s got these tiny lil ta-tas but man can she give some great head. Sorry Vick I’s forgot you wuz standin there. How ya been sweetheart you lookin’ fine as ever. Damn Bobby you must grab that ass and thank Jesus.”

“Yah, thanks for having us man. Why don’t you go grab some pants and show us where we can put our stuff down.”

“Nah, ain’t puttin’ no pants back on. I gotta go finish poundin’ that lil lady. Gotta keep the woman happy Bobby, gotta keep ’em happy.”

We followed his naked ass up one flight of stairs and into a cloudy room of smoke.

“This is where yall can stay. It’s Big John’s room but he’s been missin’ so we just use this room for bake outs nows.”

After he showed us to our room he disappeared back up the stairs.

“I’m not fucking staying here. There is no way in hell I am staying here. This room smells like shit and pot. There’s garbage all over the floor. Your friend’s a mess. I’m just not doing it babe. I know he’s your friend and everything, but we can always hang out with him somewhere outside this house. I
don’t care if the hotel is expensive, I would rather suffer the loss of money then stay in this shithole.”

“Yah I knew you were going to say that. I saw it back when we walked up to the porch, and as soon as you saw Al. It was written all over your face.”

“I really hope you’re not giving me an attitude right now. I have nothing against Al, I just do not want to stay here and listen to him fucking some ‘hot new piece of ass’ every night. That is not my idea of a vacation.”

“Okay, I don’t want to fight with you. That’s not my idea of a vacation either. We’ll find a cheap hotel closer to Bourbon Street and the French Quarter.”

We didn’t even bother walking up to Al’s room because we could hear the bed crashing against the wall from where we stood. No need to interrupt, we’d call and explain later. We got back in the car and headed back toward the city. It was really unbelievable to look at New Orleans in the passenger’s seat, and see that even after five years, the city was still physically wounded. So many houses were marked uninhabitable, and Bobby explained the X’s to me as we drove. He told me that in the upper quadrant was the date the house was checked by FEMA. To the left was the unit that did the check, and the lower quadrant was the number of dead people found in the house. It was just as chilling to look upon the terrorist act of Mother Nature as it was to look into the gaping hole where our Twin Towers once stood.

When we finally got into the city, it seemed as if all ghosts of destruction had disappeared. The city was full of life, and brimming with business, jazz, and the blues. A strip of hotels and casinos lined the main street we were on, and
instead of calling, Bobby decided to pull over at every other hotel and ask their rates. I think he did it just to prolong the process and piss me off. We finally settled on the Queen and Crescent Hotel because the rate was low and the rooms allowed smoking. We parked in their garage, unloaded our stuff and got ready to walk to Bourbon Street.

The art poured color onto the streets of New Orleans. There were watercolors, painted street signs, ornate lighted ornaments, and three dimensional city landscapes. Everywhere we went there was a vendor in-between buildings selling Grenades, the tourist attraction drink of choice. We walked down into the flea market and I turned to Bobby as I pointed at the statue in front of me.

“Babe, look at that statue. It’s so realistic.”

He started laughing at me, and I didn’t know why until the copper baseball player statue switched positions.

“They do that down here. I’m surprised it hasn’t caught on in NY,” he said.

I had completely forgotten about all the complications in my life until night fell in New Orleans. After about three Grenades each, Bobby and I walked down Bourbon Street and in and out of bars. Beads were falling from rooftops and balconies and the people on the street down below were screaming for more.

All of a sudden I heard this guy scream, “That’s not right. Stick to tradition. You have to show your tits to get beads in New Orleans.”

I turned around and realized that guy was Bobby.
“You’re a fucking pervert. Did you really just say that! You wanna see tits? I’ll get you some beads baby!”

Just then I lifted my shirt and pulled my breasts from my black-laced bra. The guy on the balcony above me screamed down, “Sweet tits honey!”

Four pairs of beads dropped down and so did my shirt. I turned to look at Bobby but he wasn’t standing next to me. I called his cell phone but there was no answer. All of a sudden just as I started to panic, I see him walking around four strippers that were standing on the street corner outside of the club.

“What the fuck!” I shouted as I walked towards him.

“I was looking for a job for you honey.”

“Hey, you’re the one who shouted that you wanted to see some tits, so I gave it to yah!”

“I didn’t want my girlfriend showing her tits to all of New Orleans. Did I say that? You are such an instigating bitch.”

“Oh now I’m a bitch. I’m a bitch yet you’re the one by these sluts. You’re the one leaving me on the street.”

“Well if I’m going to be around sluts, they might as well be professionals.”

The Grenades had finally hit us. I exploded into a bar with a mechanical bull and a collected series of bras from the women who rode it. Bobby followed me in grabbing my arm to try and pull me back out. I slipped into that drunken stupor where I no longer heard any sense of reasoning. I was past the point of
behaving. Bobby recognized it all too well. He finally got a good grip of my arm and pulled me in toward him.

“Remember when we were first dating and I wanted to take you to the Rocky Horror Picture Show? And I didn’t realize that you couldn’t handle your liquor, and I let you convince me that you could drink a pint of rum and be fine.”

“Yah, what does that have to do with anything Bobby?”

“Well I want you to remember how you couldn’t actually handle it, and how you walked into the bathroom and almost had some girl chop your hair off into a mohawk. Then we couldn’t go to the show cause you passed out in the line to get in. And then to top it all of you threw up in almost every section of Manhattan on the cab ride, while still in the cab.”

Laughing I said, “Yah, I remember. I thought you were going to leave me. I was so embarrassed, but you said to me...”

“I said, I didn’t mind because you were my punishment for all the shit I put my friends through when I drank too much. But you’re not a punishment at all. I can’t help that I’m a guy and I act stupid. I’m sorry. Now hold my damn hand and let’s be out and have fun together.”

I grabbed his hand, “Beautiful speech, but I still want to get on that thing.”

Almost an hour later in the bar they called out my name and Bobby started out a chant for me. I ran up there, grabbed the rail and hopped over.

The announcer shouted, “She will ride the bull or the bull will ride her ladies and gentlemen. If she keeps those sexy little legs wrapped around that bull
for ten or more seconds the lovely Vicki will get a shot on the house. If she cannot, she must sacrifice her bra to the wall of shame.”

I got on, fastened my legs tightly around the bull and swung my left hand in the air, clinging on with my right. For those five seconds, I felt crazy.

The announcer asked me when I got up from the ground, “How do you feel? He gave you a hell of a fling.”

“I didn’t feel a thing. I’d do it again!”

“That’s a champ ladies. Now unhook and step out.”

I handed over my black laced bra, and for the rest of the night people were buying shots for me.

I looked over at Bobby, grinned, and said, “Call me the rider.”

“Want to go back to the room? Let’s see what else you can ride,” he said.

“What do I get if I stay on longer than ten seconds?”

“You get to ride longer,” he winked.

Bobby called a cab and I could barely keep my clothes on in the cab. He slid my thong out from under my skirt and replaced it with his hand. I tried to push him back but he didn’t want to stop, and neither did the cabbie. Bobbie grazed his mouth along my shirt, and then ripped it back with his teeth exposing one of my breasts, which he immediately began sucking on. I threw my head back and grabbed at his hair as I felt him slip inside me. I felt like I was on a sugar high, addicted to every thrust, every bite and lick of my breasts. I felt the heat rise to my cheeks, embarrassed and turned on at the same time as I watched the cabbie’s eyes in the rearview mirror.
When we arrived back at the hotel the cabbie said, “Five dollars man. That’s all I need. You saved me my singles. No need for a titty bar tonight,” he winked.

Bobby and I couldn’t stop laughing. We were high on sex and alcohol. A few days later we were back on the road. Bobby convinced me to listen to the audiotape of Ted Kennedy’s book *True Compass.* I had been arguing with him in the hotel before we left that I just wanted to listen to music and let my mind wander. By going back to New York, my problems would be real again. I wasn’t speaking to my parents, I had to work more hours to pay for my cell phone bill, and I kept wondering if I should have left the way I did. Everyone in my family had sent me emails telling me that Bobby had told my father to go fuck himself. As I reread the emails on my Blackberry I couldn’t believe how they teamed up against Bobby. Bobby would never have disrespected my father that way. He had just met Bobbie. Even if my father pushed and pushed.

We rolled right through Mississippi and Alabama and I looked out the passenger’s widow at the long blades of grass and the lack of existence. Life seemed to stop in the South. Everything was slower. Even our time driving through the Southern states was slower. Every four or five miles I would spot cows on a hill or horses grazing. I lit a cigarette and lowered my window. Bobby grabbed one of his from his coat pocket and joined me. That was what made it so hard to quit. Smokers are like wolves. They smoke in packs. If Bobbie lit a cigarette and I was sitting there without a smoke, the urge begins to coarse through my body.
We sat side by side in the car, windows down and Ted Kennedy’s book blaring. The voice of the narrator was the only voice heard for several hours until we stopped at a rest stop. When we got out of the car I looked over at Bobby and he returned my gaze. I could tell that he was aware I had been stewing over something during the ride.

“What is it?”

“Should I call them? I feel like such an asshole.”

“What? Why should you feel like an asshole? Your father was the one who got drunk and decided to embarrass you and me in the restaurant. No way. Let him suffer a little before you even think of calling. He told you he was done with you, now let him feel what it’s like to be done with you. You need to show them that you’re in control of your life. Otherwise babe, they are just going to keep interfering in our relationship and in your life.”

“I just am so lost right now. I mean here we are headed home. What if they confront me or come to the dorms?”

“Then you confront them back. Jesus you need to grow up Vicki!!”

We didn’t really talk for the rest of the twenty-two hour car ride. That’s a long way to go without speaking. Even at rest stops, we more or less grunted at each other for decisions on food and drinks. I felt as if I had really screwed things up with my parents. After all, if things didn’t work out with Bobby, they would never forgive me for choosing him over them in the restaurant. I had publicly embarrassed them. On the other hand if things continued to work out with Bobby they would never forgive him. Not as if he needed forgiveness. But I knew my
father well, and he would twist the situation and warn me that if Bobby did not apologize, he would not be welcome in his home or the homes of his family. I was stuck between growing up or staying stagnant in an unhealthy relationship with my parents.

I chose to grow up and my relationship with my parents was never the same. When I got back to New York, my parents eventually ambushed me on my way into the cafeteria of my school. They hugged me and explained how the words they had said that day were words of anger. They assured me that they would never abandon me or wish to go without me in their lives. However, when I mentioned Bobby their attitudes changed. Just as I expected my father wanted an apology, and I knew he would never receive one.

After I graduated, my parents insisted that I pay off all of my undergraduate loans before deciding to move into an apartment. They suggested moving back home. This was obviously out of the question. Moving back into the belly of the beast would be the worst decision possible. I would be forced to tell them where I was going, and who I would be with, and for how long I would be with them. My relationship with Bobby would surely diminish because they would forbid him to come to the house unless he apologized, which he would never do. I knew I loved him too much to let him go.

Did my parents raise me to fear? Each time something was new in my life they warned me to be cautious. My father would tell me every day when I was growing up, “Be careful what you do and say in life because life bites back.” Maybe his underlying message was to be careful what I did and said to him,
otherwise he’d bite back. It was certain that if I left for New Orleans with Bobby my parents would stop assisting me in paying off my loans, but maybe it was time for me to grow up and say, so what! I was born and raised to worry.

* * *

Bobby walked through the door, kissed me on the forehead and said, “You still mad at me Vick? Are you still stewing?”

I looked up at him. Maybe we would struggle in New Orleans. I knew I would struggle mentally with the thought of my parents’ disapproval, but I would eventually outgrow the invisible crib they had me locked in for years.

“I’m game,” I said. “Let’s do it. Let’s move to New Orleans. I’ll start looking for jobs and you start looking for apartments.”

“Don’t joke with me Vicki!”

“I’m not joking. You were right. What am I going to do, live for my parents or live for me? I want to do this with you. I want to be with you. You have to understand though that despite how crazy my family is, I can never cut ties with them. I still love them. I don’t ever want to hear you say that again.”

“I know. I was out of line. But they are pretty crazy. I just want you to see that you don’t need to rely on them. You have me. I love you, and I’m not going anywhere.”

While Bobby walked off into his room to get started on our apartment search, I looked down at my cell, pushed it, grabbed it, put it back down, and turned it off.
Here we are, two years later, and I am several times removed from my parents, but I am still stuck in this Bermuda Triangle searching for their approval. What I can’t figure out is why I need it.
“Stuck”

Whenever people ask me where I’m from I always hesitate. I don’t want to say New Jersey because it is then followed by every possible cliché I have heard all my life about New Jersey. So instead, I say North Jersey, right on the border of upstate New York, as if to say, my air is clean because I am so close to the ski slopes of Hunter Mountain and far from the pollution of Newark. Then I get the immediate nod of approval.

I grew up in Ringwood. My town is so small that it only has one main road running through it. I used to beg my father to take the back roads when driving me to school in order to create some diversity. I attended a small parochial school, the only one that existed in the ten mile radius that is Ringwood. Nothing about my town came in pairs. There was one Chinese place, one coffee shop and dinner, a video store, a huge supermarket and a somewhat decent pizza place. The slices were always too thick and the sauce too acidic but the mozzarella cheese was always draped over the slices covering all of the other flaws. For any of your other necessities you always needed to head out of town and take the highway twenty minutes south towards civilization. This was how the townies liked and wanted it to stay. I remember protests with signs when the first McDonald’s moved into town.
The summer before fourth grade, I sat down by the lake with my boyfriend. I was dipping my feet in and out of the water trying to play mind games with the tadpoles swimming around.

He turned to me and said, “One day we are going to get married and live here forever. I wanna live right here on the lake.”

It was at that very moment that a ticker went off in my mind. I didn’t want to stay here forever and I didn’t want to marry Dan. He looked at me as if waiting for me to jump up and gush like a typical eight year old. When he saw he was getting no response out of me he began leaning towards me, his hand inching closer and closer to mine as his lips puckered. I grabbed his hand and twisted it backwards and upwards. Dan ran away crying to his mother and I sat their frozen. I splashed my foot violently into the water and ran across the bridge toward the island part of the lake. It was forbidden grounds. I was crossing teenage territory. But I dashed over anyway, climbed the high dive, drowned out the parental screams, which trailed my trip to the summit of the board, and jumped.

Of course when I got out of the water my mother grabbed me by the arm and dragged me down the beach in an embarrassing display, screaming every profanity she could think of. I didn’t care. It was worth it. When we got home she sat me down on the kitchen chair and her and my father sat across the table. It was as if I was on trial as they looked at me glaringly for my defense.
“What the hell were you thinking? First of all, little Danny Saum’s mother called us up. She thinks you have some kind of violent streak, and secondly you know the boards are for capable swimmers!”

“But I am a capable swimmer.”

“You are a capable swimmer when I say you’re a capable swimmer little lady,” my father shouted back.

“I just needed to jump!”

“Why did someone dare you to do that? Was it one of the older kids?”

“No, I just, I dunno. I just wanted to.”

“Spit it out! Tell the truth or you’ll be grounded for the rest of the summer.”

“I’m just afraid. I’m afraid I’m never going to leave this town. I’m going to grow old here, and get married here, and die here.”

My parents simultaneously shifted back in their seats. For five minutes we all sat in silence. I stared up at the ceiling waiting to hear my sentence for the remainder of my summer. Out of the daunting dead air, my father began to laugh.

“Where in the hell would you get an idea like that? I mean you’re eight years old. You are eventually going to leave Ringwood.”

“I don’t know. Danny told me he wanted to marry me and live here forever. And then, he tried to kiss me, so I did what you told me to do if any boy ever tried to kiss me. I twisted his arm up and over, and it worked. He didn’t kiss me.”

“Why the hell would you teach her to do that Patrick?”
“Why the hell not! That little pervert. See these kids are starting younger and younger Charisse.”

“Well that’s besides the point. We’ll discuss that later, but honey you need to realize, you are so young right now. Once you get through elementary school there’s high school and then college. We don’t have either of those in our town. You are going to get your chance to see the world and see plenty of places. You will never be stuck anywhere. We aren’t going to live here forever either.”

“That’s right. Your mother and I moved here because we thought it would be the best place to raise you. They have all the good stuff for you kids right at your fingertips.”

I knew they both meant every word they said, but they glanced at each other puzzled and a little terrified.

I served a seven-day sentence, finished out my summer, and started fourth grade. Fourth grade was a dark period in my life. An odd age to begin becoming a cynic, but I had decided in the last week of my summer while getting fitted for uniforms that I absolutely hated Catholic school; the prison uniforms, the homework, the nuns who were strategically placed in the back of the room to create a sense of the presence of Christ.

To make things worse, two weeks into school, my mother had decided that the gap between my teeth was no longer acceptable. She took me to the orthodontist who decided braces were needed. Braces, believe it or not were the cool thing for a fourth grader. You could change your colors and everyone had them. However, mine were only on my four front teeth. I looked at myself in the
mirror after the orthodontist finished. My gums were bleeding, and in between the blood, the black and orange rubber bands glared back at me. I had asked for black and pink. I ran back to my chair and sat down.

Dr. Perin looked at me and said, “What’s up kiddo?”

I thought to myself, ‘What’s up kiddoo. Hmm well maybe you just made me look like a fricken walking Halloween advertisement. Maybe that’s what’s up!’

Instead I politely said, “I asked for black and pink. You gave me black and orange.”

“Well you’ll fit right in. That’s what all the kids are asking for. It’s Halloween soon. Now your teeth are in style.”

When I walked into school the next day, I looked intently at every metal mouth’s face. Obviously the dentist lied, and I wasn’t in style. Tim, the most obnoxious, clay eater in my class was the first to knock me.

“Hey metal mouth, you look like a jack-o-lantern!”

I stood there, contemplating my comeback. Earlier that morning on the way to school, I had heard my Dad say fuck off to someone on the phone that obviously pissed him off. It seemed to work because the guy hung up and my father looked content when the conversation ended.

So, I brazenly turned to Timmy and said, “Hey Timmy, fuck off!”

Just as quickly as it came out I was hoisted by my backpack by Sr. Gertrude. She dragged me so fast down the hallway to the principal’s office mumbling under her breath the whole time that I was a miscreant and my mouth
should be soaped, whatever that meant. Twenty minutes later, my mother and the principal sat before me. I knew I was in deep.

“What’s wrong with you?” my mother screamed.

“I don’t want to wear these on my teeth. I look like a jack-o-lantern. That’s what Timmy said.”

“I don’t care what Timmy said to you. Since when do you use that kind of language?”

“Well Dad said it in the car today and the guy who was being nasty to him on the phone stopped. So, I figured...”

“You figured way wrong young lady. What are we talking here Sr.? Is she getting suspended?”

“Well, if you can figure out the proper punishment for her at home, then she will only have to stay two days after for detention. That should suffice.”

My mother found the perfect punishment for me. She took away the outdoors. Not only was I trapped in my tiny town, and my tiny classroom, but I was trapped in my house. Staying home proved to be a blessing and a curse. My mother, who was a stay at home mom decided that she would tutor me. After my first successful vocabulary quiz, she also decided that I had potential. Even a month after my punishment was over, it never really ended. I was still enrolled in sports for the weekends, but during the week, I became the one kid on my block always sitting in my house, at the kitchen table, memorizing vocabulary. The voices of my laughing and screaming neighborhood friends ran through the yards and my mind.
My mother would always look at me, tilt her head and say, “They can play now, but when you have a job and they don’t, they won’t have any money to play with. They’ll wish they had a mother who told them how important it was to think about their future.”

It was at this point that I began to have a love hate relationship with my mother; to resent her every step of the way, through every single study session and project. She would always gain my love back of course by coming to all my games and cheering me on, or by making my favorite chocolate chip cookie bars for study breaks. But one day I really lost it. It was the end of my fourth grade year, and we had to be inventors for our final project. I told her that I really wanted to make a jewelry holder. She came up with the idea for me to make a mold out of my hand and decorate it. We made our trip to the craft store and picked up the mold, but since it was expensive, we only could afford one, and I couldn’t afford to screw it up. The one thing neither of us did was read the directions on the back. In order for my mold to come out, I would have to sit still for an hour and a half with my fingers perfectly spread apart. I don’t care what anyone says. There is no eight year old who can sit in one spot, let alone keep their fingers spread apart for that long.

So there I was, hand in the mold, and then came the itch that was impossible to scratch.

“Ma...”

“What? What is it? You didn’t move did you?”

“No, but I have this really bad itch.”
“Alright where is it? I’ll get it for you.”

“Well it’s on my pinky finger. Not the left hand, that one,” I said as I nudged my head toward the mold.

“I don’t know what to tell you. If you move that hand your project will be ruined. You’ll fail this project and that will be fifty bucks down the drain. You wanna do that to your father. Waste his money like that?”

“No, but...”

“Don’t but anything. Just don’t move your fingers. You have thirty-eight more minutes and then you can take your hand out and scratch all you want.”

I hated when she did that, still do. She always tries to guilt trip me into things or blame me for things that aren’t my fault. Even today, she blames me for things beyond my control. I am the reason she has grey hair and gained weight. It’s my fault that she is unhappy, and she is unhappy because I am not living my life the way she wanted. Even at eight years old, I realized that my mother was becoming a little too crazy about all this school nonsense and I wanted to stop her before she got on the crazy train with all the other Catholic school moms. This wasn’t my project anymore, it was hers, and she was in it to win it and show up the other parents who did all their kids work. Spitefully and out of necessity to cure my itchy finger, I rubbed my ring finger next to the pinky. I felt the mold move between my fingers, and for the remaining time I sat there terrified to remove my hand.

Her scream that day was probably heard from a few blocks away.
“What the hell did you do? You ruined it. This is no good. It’s a piece of shit. You’re not going to get an A on this. You have three fingers to put rings on and then what is this. What the hell do you make of this?”

I stared blankly at her. Frankly, I almost pissed myself. That’s how scared I was of my mother. I had never seen her look so mean and so angry. Her hair looked as if it were standing on end and her eyes looked glazed over with a fiery fierce glare of dissatisfaction.

“Are you going to answer me? What the hell are we going to do with this? You had to itch your finger! Really?”

“How about bracelets?” I muttered.

“What? What did you say?”

“Bracelets? We could put bracelets around the two fingers I guess.”

“Whatever. That’s what we’ll have to do. Go to your room and I’ll try and salvage this project.”

I sat in my room and stared blankly at my wall. My father knocked on my door, came in, and sat next to me.

“You okay kid?”

I shook my head.

“You know she doesn’t mean it right. Your mother loves you. She just really wants you to do good in school.”

“But I hate school.”

“Yah well one day you’ll appreciate it. Trust me.”
As he got up and patted me on the head, I sat there for what felt like hours. I looked at my sponge painted pistachio colored walls and all around at the toys and dolls that filled my room. I realized how untouched everything was. I realized my mother was controlling. I promised myself I would never be controlling. I wouldn’t go crazy over homework assignments, or tell my daughters that they couldn’t touch the hair on their dolls because then they wouldn’t be worth anything. I wouldn’t be like her.

But here I am fifteen years later, looking in the mirror, terrified at just how much I have become my mother. I became her perfect student, and her organized mess. I’m just a more rugged cut out of my mother’s mold, but with all the same traits. Don’t get me wrong. My mother is a woman to love. That jewelry hand still stands on display in her bedroom. She is and always will be my greatest cheerleader; but, on the other hand . . .

* * *

A few weeks ago, it was my mother’s birthday and the first time I was going to be heading home in about four months. I knew what I was in for, which is why as I began getting closer to Ringwood, I started driving slower. As I drove, I began imagining what she would say to me when I walked through the door. She would insult me, then compliment me, accept my gift, and then complain two seconds later that if I am going to get her something that next time I should consult with her.

I got her a new bowling ball this year since she had been in a league for years using the same ball. Technically, this is the gift she wants. All she has
done for the last few months is complain to me that her ball is outdated and out of style; or, she would tell me how her friend Janice on the opposing team has such a wonderful daughter who brought her a new ball and new shoes for her birthday. But I knew that even though I had hit the nail on the head for a gift idea, it would either be the wrong color or wrong size. This is just the way my mother is. She doesn’t mean anything by her dissatisfaction with me. In a way, she sees it as raising the bar for me to be better and more well rounded. She wants me to always expect the unexpected or some shit.

I made a left and began driving up my street. There it was, my little blue house, with its welcoming beveled glass French doors. I spritzed myself with perfume to hide the smell from my chain smoking and popped a butterscotch in my mouth. As I walked to the door I prepared myself, closed my eyes, and rang the doorbell. She stood before me, looked me over and then her words followed.

“Why do you have a butterscotch in your mouth. Were you smoking? I thought I asked you to quit smoking. You’re going to die young. I hope you know that. I can already see the wrinkles. See that there by your lips. Come here and look in the mirror! Those are smokers wrinkles.”

“Happy Birthday Ma!”

“Come here let me smell you!”

“Mom, I smoked a cigarette.”

“See I knew it. Did you hear that Pat. Your daughter is a smoker!”

“I love how you call her my daughter every time she does something wrong. Hi honey how was your trip here?”
“Riveting Dad. I just couldn’t wait to get here.”

“Was that sarcasm? What’s with that face and the eye rolling? Aren’t you happy to see me? It’s been quite a while. I’m surprised I still recognize you,” my mother said in a sassy aggressive tone.

“It’s only been four months Ma. Plus I talk to you on the phone at least two times a day.”

“Well I can’t see you over the phone. I don’t know why I brought you that MacBook for your birthday. You don’t ever video chat with me. Maybe if you did, then four months wouldn’t have seemed so long.”

I didn’t even bother with a comeback. It was her birthday and I was not going to be responsible for ruining it. My mother led me into the kitchen, which she had just redone, turned to me, and waited for my response.

“Well?”

“It looks great Ma! Did you get all new appliances?”

“Yah, I did. Why? You keeping tabs in your head of every penny spent?”

“No... I’m just commenting on the appliances.”

She mumbled something under her breath and continued to walk all around the kitchen pointing to the stainless steel refrigerator, dishwasher, sink, and stove.

“Now you see this stove? When you help me cook in a little while you have to be very careful with this stove. It’s all electric.”
I looked at my mother as if she had two heads and thought to myself, ‘She is really starting to lose it. She must have forgotten all the mishaps that stem from us being in the kitchen at the same time. There is no way I am helping her cook.’

Back when I was around nine or ten, my mom sat me down to watch her bake Christmas cookies.

“You’re going to be my little helper,” she said in a soft and endearing voice.

I was her little helper until I accidentally added three eggs to her butter cookie recipe instead of separating the eggs, using two for the bowl of butter cookie dough and one egg for her pecan delights. I coyly mixed it in, but of course when the dough wouldn’t go through the cookie press, she knew I screwed up.

“What did you do Jessica?”

“What? I didn’t do anything.”

“You don’t have to lie to me. Just tell me.”

I looked at my Mom and knew she was about to lose her shit. Her cheeks began getting flushed and her eyes grew intense.

Again I tried, “I didn’t do anything.”

“That’s it. I have to throw all this fucking dough out because you screwed it up. What a waste!”

As my mother screamed at me, I did all I could not to start laughing. I had adapted over the years to my mother’s screaming and ranting over the tiniest
things. When she yelled at me I could just shrug it off. I sat there biting my lip, forcing the curve of my smile to stay dormant.

Despite my best efforts, she caught a glimpse of a smile and really went crazy.

“You are so unappreciative. You don’t give a shit what we waste in this house do you. I gave you one simple task to put the eggs in the bowl and stir. I told you how many for each bowl. I mean where did I go wrong? Tell me? Where did I go wrong?”

I stared blankly at her, thinking she was neurotic and crazy, but knowing better than to let her know. I got up and walked out of the kitchen.

“Go ahead walk away. I hope you know that when you grow up, you will not be able to just get up and walk away from everything you fuck up.”

So, looking back on that memory fondly, I looked at my mother standing in all her glory amongst her army of new appliances.

“I think we would both have a better day if I just stayed out of the kitchen. I’ll do the dishes though after dinner.”

“Really? You don’t want to help me cook? I thought you like cooking?”

“Yah, I do. But you’re better at it. You cook and I’ll clean.”

My plan seemed to be working. All through the dinner preparation my mother and I stood side by side catching up while she cooked. I watched her as she measured each teaspoon and cup to perfection. Every part of her recipe was delegated and direct.

She made a delicious stir-fry with broccoli, onions, beef, red peppers and a brown sauce, all over a bed of rice. It smelt delicious.
“Alright, grab the plates and I’ll dish it out,” she said.

After dinner, my mom quickly got up from the table and put all the remaining food in tupperware. Then she filled up the wok with water and left it on the stove.

“Just let that soak before you get to it okay?”

“Yah sure. When do you want to have cake?

“As soon as all the dishes are done,” she laughed.

Then she proceeded to take out a special sponge from below the kitchen sink.

“All of these pots are stainless steel so you have to make sure that you wash them exactly as I say or they will get spotted. First you have to use this side of the sponge to rinse and wash the pot. Then you take this powder and get enough all around the pot. Scrub it, and when you’re done, shut the water off and dry it.”

“You’re serious?”

“Yes I’m serious Jessica. Is it really that difficult to do that you have an attitude?”

“I don’t have an attitude. I was just asking if you were serious. I can’t believe you do this every time these pots are dirty.”

“Well if you take care of stuff then it lasts. If you don’t...well you should know the answer to that one.”

I bit my tongue and scooted my mother out of the way. When I was done with the meticulous washing and drying I grabbed the wok by the handle to drag
it over to the sink. I didn’t expect it to be as heavy as it was and of course only used one hand to pick it up. The water poured out all over the top of my mother’s brand new electric stove. I began doing what I do best in a bad situation, panicking.

“Ma...”

“Yah Jess what is it? Are you finished?” she shouted from the living room.

“No, I kinda spilt some water. Can you come give me a hand?”

“Where, where did you spill water?” my mother asked as she frantically got up and began running into the kitchen.

“Holy Fucking Shit!” she screamed.

I stepped slowly back from the stove as my mother pushed me aside and grabbed the paper towel like a fire extinguisher. In a matter of minutes every piece of paper towel was laid out on the surface.

“It’s ruined! Do you not have any common sense? The wok is unstable. Why the hell didn’t you use both handles to pick it up?”

“What do you mean both handles? There’s only one damn handle.”

“Don’t raise your voice to me! Look here. What does this look like? Tell me Jessica? Is this not a fucking handle? You are so careless!”

“I was just trying to help. I didn’t spill it on purpose Mom. Sometimes things happen that are out of your control. The stove is going to be fine. What if water spilled from one of the pots while cooking? It has to be made to withstand that, right?”
“Oh sure, but not an entire pot filled with water. We’ll see. It probably will lose all electric capabilities. And don’t lecture me about things being out of your control. I could write a book on that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re not going to start are you?”

“Start what? Start talking about how it is completely out of my control that my daughter is dating an asshole who hates her family? Or how she doesn’t care enough to do anything about it? How we hardly see you because him and his family are more important than me and your father?”

“What? You are really out of your fucking mind you know that? First off he’s not an asshole and he doesn’t hate our family.”

“Oh really, then why did he treat your father with such disrespect when we took him out to dinner two years ago?”

“Do you hear yourself? You are talking about how he acted two years ago. Maybe if you both weren’t so goddamn analytical, and critical, and nasty, then he wouldn’t have felt uncomfortable.”

“Oh so you’re taking his side then?”

“I’m not taking anyone’s side. I just want to be happy. He makes me happy. If you want to exclude yourself from my life by hating him then that’s your prerogative and your own fault.”

“Get the fuck out of my house. Not only have you ruined my birthday but you break my heart every time I see you. You are so unhappy and you don’t even realize it.”

“What are you talking about?”
My entire body began to shake. I wanted to tell my mother I hated her. I wanted to say that if I was unhappy that the only reason stemmed from her constantly judging my life and parading around with sarcastic rhetoric about my boyfriend and her distaste for him. I really wanted her to know that she was the root of my anguish. She was the person that I stayed up nights being unhappy about because I know that she will never get over her hatred and her psychotic idiosyncrasies. Instead I grabbed my coat and bag and walked out the front door slamming it behind me.

* * *

I sat down on the front steps and looked up at the sky. The stars were so much clearer here in Ringwood. I hadn’t seen stars in a while. When my mother and I used to have vicious fights when I was a kid I always used to put my coat on and come outside. I had believed back then like any kid that wishing on a star got you somewhere. But none of my wishes ever came true. Here I am twenty-three years old and in the same seat wishing my mother would change. I know that she loves me but she has such a weird way of showing it.

Whenever I talk to my dad on the phone while my mom’s out of the room he tells me how my mother is secretly proud of me. The conversation is always the same, but the scenery and the people change. It’s almost like my father is trying to convince both himself and me that she cares.
“You know today when you’re mother and I went out we ran into Vicki at the grocery store in town. Remember Vicki? Erica Moore’s mom from grammar school?”

“Yah Dad, I remember Vicki. What happened?”

“Well she asked how you were doing and your mother couldn’t say enough nice things about you. She told Vicki that you’re working a full time job and going to graduate school. She told her all about how well you are doing and how great you are at managing your time. She sounded so proud Jess.”

“That’s nice Dad.”

“I’m just trying to tell you, even though your mother doesn’t say it enough, well, she’s proud of you kid.”

“I know Dad.”

“Then why do you sound miserable?”

“I’m not miserable. Thanks for letting me know. Love you!”

“Love you too Jess. Talk to you soon okay. Be good.”

I think my father knew that I believed him, but I think with each conversation he slowly caught on to my exasperated attitude. I always wondered why my mother couldn’t just get on the damn phone and tell me herself how proud she was. Instead, when I got on the phone with my mother I would ritually take two Advil first in preparation for the headache that would ensue. I used to call my mom when I was relaxed, hoping that the relaxation would make me kinder and less apt to lose my temper when she said something to me like, “You know smoking causes wrinkles. You are going to look thirty before you are
thirty. In fact, I hate to say it but I noticed last time you were home that you are starting to get a little crows feet around your eyes.”

I began to find that being relaxed when talking to my mother didn’t work. I went from relaxed to instantly enraged in a matter of seconds. A few weekends ago, I was lying in bed with my boyfriend. We were reading Freakonomics together on our iBooks and it was around three A.M. Neither of us could fall asleep because we had each popped some Percocet early on in the night. I was perfectly at peace in our own little world until my screen turned black and began to vibrate. Momster flashed across my screen. I debated answering. It was either a neurotic phone call or something was actually going to be wrong on the other end of that call. I didn’t know if I was prepared for either.

“You should just get it,” Greg said.

“Alright but if I’m in a bad mood after I get off this call, remember that you told me to get it.”

“Answer the phone Jess.”

“Hello Ma. What’s up?”

“What’s up? Gee I don’t know Jess. I haven’t heard from you all weekend why don’t you tell me what’s up?”

“Mom, it’s three in the morning.”

“Well you’re obviously up. Why are you up?”

“I’m reading. I’ve been really busy this weekend. I had a ton of work to do and me and Greg had a wedding last night on top of everything else.”
“Is he listening to our conversation? Because I don’t want him listening to our conversations!”

“Mom, we are lying in bed together and you are screaming at me. He has no choice but to hear you.”

“Then get out of bed so we can talk.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow. Why am I going to get out of bed? What is so important that you need to speak to me right this minute? Please tell me!”

Greg nudged me in the arm and gave me his signature ‘You are being an arrogant bitch look.’

“Fine you don’t want to talk to me, then don’t bother even calling me tomorrow.”

“I just want to go to bed Mom. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Whatever. Do what you want! It’s funny how you were wide awake reading when I called and now you want to go to bed. I bet he’s nudging you to get off the phone.”

“What? Why do you do that? Why do you make up these scenarios in your head about Greg and then believe them. I mean you actually will believe them whether I tell you they are true or not. He’s the one who told me to answer the damn phone.”

“Yah I bet he did because he’s so curious to find out what I think about him and to monitor our conversations.”

“You sound fucking crazy Mom. You know that right? I wish you could hear yourself.”
“She hung up on me,” I said, turning to Greg.

“I’m sorry babe. Just ignore it. Don’t let her get to you.”

“It just pisses me off how she hates you for no reason. I mean she really has no reason. I don’t get it. And then she wants to know why I don’t want to come to family functions and I don’t want to go home. Well maybe she would see me a lot more if she didn’t make up bullshit lies to my family about you.”

“I know. She’s still harboring a grudge that you are close with my family. It’s hard. You are her only child. You’ve gotta understand that. It’s like a possession issue. She has only child syndrome.”

“Yah well she could see me a lot more if all my invitations to weddings and family parties didn’t have Jessica with guest crossed out. It’s like my normal family hears her crazy babble bullshit, believes it, and then crosses out any opportunity to see for themselves and judge for themselves about you.”

“Well that’s probably because your family doesn’t see this side of your mother. They just see her good side, the part you got from her. And your Dad, well shit, if I were him I wouldn’t go against her word because he has to live with her. He’d never hear the fucking end of it.”

I sat on the steps wondering if I should really get in my car and drive away. Was it worth hurting her the way she hurts me all the time? I knew that even though she told me to leave, she really didn’t mean it. It’s sick and twisted but I know my mother thinks that her criticism and her harshness towards me are beneficial. She feels like she is contributing toward making me have a thicker shell.
A few minutes later my father opened the front door.

“You’re still here huh kid?”

“Yah still here Dad.”

“I’m sorry..about your mother. The stove’s working fine. I got all the water up and moved it out. The electrical board wasn’t damaged because none of the water went in that hole in the center of the console. Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is she shouldn’t have gotten all crazy.”

“But she did. She told me to leave. I’m just debating it. I’m probably gonna go.”

“Don’t go Jess. I’m gonna go inside and talk to her. I’ll be back. Please don’t leave.”

“Alright. I’ll wait here.”

It felt like I was sitting on those steps for hours. I looked at every crack in the pavement and watched the ants walk up and down the steps on their way to the little mound of sand at the base where the walkway met the entrance. I watched two squirrels play fighting across the lawn and on into the trees. That was the one thing I missed about Ringwood. Everything lives and breathes around you. Nature moves alongside you in such a way that you know every season solely on how your surroundings change. That’s the one thing about New York. Everything changes so quickly and my life is spinning so fast that by time things change, I never really notice. One day there are leaves and then the next they’re gone. I never catch them when they are that brilliant fiery red or glowing yellow.
The front door behind me creaked open again. I could tell from the silence it was my mother, so I didn’t turn around. She came up alongside me and sat down. I felt her eyes glaring on the side of my face but I did not turn my head to engage her look.

“I didn’t mean to get so angry at you Jessica,” she said in a softened voice.

“It’s just sometimes you really don’t watch what you are doing. Not just because of what you did in the kitchen, but in everything. It really worries me. It’s like you are going through life blind, and I feel helpless. I’m never there anymore to tell you what you are missing and what you don’t see.”

“Mom, I see everything, and what I don’t see I probably choose not to see. But all of that is up to me. What I do see is that you are right about one thing. I am unhappy. But it’s not Greg, or my job, or school. It’s you.”

“What! Why me?”

“Because I love you Mom and I want you to be in my life. But you push and push to get this point across to me that Greg is no good. He never did anything to you. He never said an unkind word or treated you with disrespect...”

“But...”

“No, let me finish. He never did anything. And I know you dislike him because I sleep over there and that’s unacceptable to you. And I know you were pissed that I spent a holiday with him. But we have been together for four years. When are you going to get over all this petty bullshit and lying?”

“I just don’t like the guy.”
“Well maybe if you took the time to actually get to know him instead of believing all the lies you create about him, then you’d realize he’s great. I wouldn’t still be with him if he wasn’t. You have to start trusting my judgment.”

“Well what if you’re wrong?”

“If I’m wrong then I fall and pick myself back up again. I know how to take care of myself. But what if you’re wrong? What if you excommunicate yourself so far out of my life that I don’t want to let you back in. Don’t you want to at least try and get to know the guy I love?”

“I guess if you’re that serious about him I could try. But I’m not ready yet.”

“Well get ready Ma because if you want to see me more you are going to have to accept that you are going to see him more too.”

“Alright. Let’s just drop this. Come back inside okay?”

“I really hope I made a dent. I love you, but I can’t take this craziness anymore. I’m not built for it.”

“I love you to Jess. I’m going to try okay? Can you accept that?”

“Yah I guess trying is better than nothing.”

We walked inside and I looked at my father as he was placing the candles on my mother’s birthday cake. He looked up and winked at me. I smiled back. As we sang Happy Birthday to my Mom I realized she was never going to change. Her eyes glistened as she looked up at my Dad and me by her side. She was in her perfect world, her circle, and her family. Outsiders enter with caution.

“Make a wish!” I said.
I hoped at that moment that I was really right about wishes because if I knew my mother, she would wish that Greg would disappear so that she would never have to overcome her ingrained idiosyncrasies.

She looked up at me, smiled, and blew out her candles.
“The Unexpected”

My boyfriend and I pulled up to my Uncle John’s house. The driveway was lined with a white carpet and rose petals for the guests to follow into the backyard. As we walked through the glass French doors I wasn’t the slightest bit surprised. The backyard had been transformed into a wedding scene. Chairs lined the handcrafted stone deck and above the pool a small gazebo stood handcrafted with flowers intertwined around each spindle. Behind the pool a waterfall was constructed from rock, completing the scene for a dream wedding. My boyfriend looked at me and started laughing.

“You’ve gotta be shitting me right?” he asked.

“Nope. My uncle never does anything without overdoing it.”

“Yah but this is ridiculous. Do you see that ice sculpture over there? And that water fall...was that always there?”

“No, he had it built,” I laughed.

I realized how crazy this all must have been for him, but I would not have been surprised if my uncle had built a mote around the house and hired someone to row the happy couple while violinists played in the background.

We took our seats and shortly after as the music began to play, I watched my cousin walk down the isle in her form fitting Chanel white lace dress. Her hair was swept up with little tendrils falling to the sides of her face. I noticed she had lost every pound of baby weight and her perfect figure filled out the dress. It
hugged every one of her curves, and as she passed me I couldn’t help but admire and envy the porcelain tone of her skin. I remember my grandmother telling Christine since we were kids that she was a classic beauty. But she never needed to be told. She knew it, flaunted it, and used it.

I looked at her with both jealousy and love, reflecting on the disaster my life had been, especially during the course of the last few months.

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The light from the morning crept in through the blinds, reminding me that I had forgotten to turn them upward to avoid the unwelcome sunny wake up call. I could have stayed in bed forever after the night I had; but time was pressing and I had to make it through the early morning commute to White Plains. I walked into the bathroom, turned on the shower and stepped in, letting the warm water sooth every part of my body. Reaching for the bar of soap, I began to lather my arms. The aroma smelt of him, and all of my senses were awakened as tingles surged through me, leaving goose bumps on the surface of my skin. I climbed out of the shower, grabbed a towel, and began to dry off. As I wrapped it around my body, I walked back into the bedroom and nudged Jimmy to get up and get ready for work. Under the covers, he didn’t budge, so I walked over to my big black leather chair, sat down, and gathered my mop of wet hair. Twisting a small towel around it, I began to methodically pat dry the strands. I looked over at the bed at the man I loved, but while I gazed in his direction, watching him sleep in a state of bliss, my feelings of love turned into surges of anger.
Sound asleep as if nothing had happened. Sound asleep as if he had no worry from the night before that he might lose me. That’s when I began to replay the conversation we had on the car ride to Astoria the night before. We were driving to visit some of his friends from work when something began to build inside of me. I couldn’t stop the wave of emotions as they pounded in my head. I began to break out in tears in the passenger’s seat.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked.

“I can’t take this anymore! This dry spell. It’s been months and nothing. You don’t even touch me anymore!”

“You can’t just expect me to want to fuck you every second! Jesus! I mean why don’t you try a little harder to turn me on?”

“By doing what?”

“If I told you that then I wouldn’t be turned on by it anymore now would I? I mean I don’t know! Come on be inventive! Tell me an erotic story. Maybe about you going down on another girl. You know that turns me on!”

“What the fuck Jimmy, are you fucking five? You need a story to get you off? Seriously?”

“What’s so wrong with that? You used to like it, but now every time I bring up another girl you turn to stone and roll over. So there goes my dick at that point. Shot down!”

“Well did you ever stop and think that the thought of me having to come up with a story about another girl might offend me. Or maybe did you think I’d
be annoyed that after all this time of not having sex that you can’t just be turned on by me to have sex?”

“Fine then. I’m just trying to help us out here but you’re being all defensive and not listening to my suggestions. So I guess we’re just never going to have sex again.”

“Well I don’t want to be with someone who’s an unaffectionate bastard!”

“And I don’t want to be with someone who’s a dramatic bitch!”

“I just want to have sex. I never thought I’d have to beg a man to have sex with me, especially one that supposedly loves me.”

“Well maybe that’s just it. You ever stop and think you make it too easy? We live together. You get changed in front of me every night. I see your tits, your ass, everything. Maybe you need to challenge me a little. Don’t just strip down and ask if I want to have sex. That does nothing for me.”

For the rest of the ride, I sat in silence, quietly brooding. I knew that my silence killed him, even if he didn’t say anything. My biggest fear, as we drove on was that I was starting to hate everything about him.

I snapped myself out of thought, and brusquely finished towel-drying my hair. In an attempt to tame the frizz and bring it under some sort of manageability I smooth a serum over my locks. As I headed into the bathroom I allowed my towel to drop to the floor and proceeded on toward the mirror to do my makeup. A few moments later, Jimmy knocked on the bathroom door. Without even waiting for me to answer, he barged right into the bathroom, grabbed me by the waist and moved me aside. His touch, although cold, unraveled me. I leaned
back against the sink and gazed over in his direction, waiting for him to look back at me.

As he reached one hand into the shower to feel the temperature of the water, he turned back to face me.

“Still mad at me?”

“I don’t know, maybe you can make it up to me,” I murmured.

Walking over toward me, he knelt down, picked me up and carried me into the shower with him.

“I want you. I always want you,” he whispered into my ear.

As our mouths met, I knew I still loved him, and I allowed myself to get lost with him inside me. The water beat down on our faces as the heat of the shower made our hearts race. He kept his eyes interlocked with mine and the passion between us was overwhelming, as we possessed one another. All my infuriation and all my worry slipped aside. The three cold months that passed without affection, without interest, and without sex began to culminate inside me. As I kept up with him thrust for thrust, I wrapped my arm around his neck, and pulling his hair and head back I released all my anguish. We finished showering, and after we shut the water off, he grabbed my chin and kissed around my face, tiny little love kisses.

“Looks like we are both going to be late today baby.”

I looked up at him, “This morning was worth getting fired over.”

“I need you to know that I love you. You need to know that, because when I get stressed, I can’t function. Between studying for the Bar and clerking, I
mean I think I got at least ten new gray hairs. But despite what you think, I only want you, and I need you Jackie.”

His tone was emphatic, and I knew he meant every word.

“You can say all the right things sometimes Jim.”

Leaning across the sink I kissed him gently on the cheek and began to get ready at marathon speed.

As I climbed into my tiny black coupe, I smiled to myself, completely satisfied, and pressed for time, but for the first time, I didn’t care if I was going to be late.

I arrived at the office with minutes to spare, but it didn’t really matter. None of the patients had arrived yet. On nice summer days they all show up on their own time.

“You’re late.”

Her voice screeched out from her office cave. I didn’t want to gratify her comment by walking into her line of visibility to express that I had made it to work with minutes to spare. I would get nowhere.

“Come back here Jackie,” she ordered gruffly.

Reluctantly, I got up and leaned against the threshold of her office, waiting for her reprimand.

“Why are you late?”

Barbara is the one person who physically makes me nauseous. I was never afraid of her, but I could never stand her. She has been the office manager going on fifteen years for the dermatologist office. Her thick Brooklyn accent
would shriek every time she opened her mouth. Her hair always looked screwed up, the part mangled, frizz at the tips and a big chunk of space where her roots exposed themselves, making the top of her head gray and the rest a dark unnatural coffee bean brown. The girls in the office would joke that her hairdresser must be blind as a bat because she fucks up her hair every single time.

I would always tell them, “You can blame the hairdresser all you want, but let’s not forget the idiot that returns month after month... Now who’s the blind one?”

As if the wrapping paper on the package wasn’t bad enough, she had a very annoying habit of standing over you whenever she had to tell you something you did wrong with billing or booking appointments. She would hover over you, her shadow cast over your keyboard, as she clasped her hands together, methodically tapping her nails, making you want to ignite in screams. She intentionally would try to make you feel like you were more of a servant who has been disobedient than an employee.

Everyone in the office has always been aware that Barbara is an organized mess but we have come to the conclusion that the only reason the Doctor keeps her around is because no one else could possibly deal with the insurance companies as smoothly as she does. She has her fancy degree from Columbia and knows how to work the system in order to get payment on bills backdated from 2009, something that very few people would be able to accomplish.

“I just want you to know, the next time you are late, I will dock your pay. You understand?”
“Sure Barbara, I understand.”

As I walked away I rolled my eyes at the thought of working for such an arrogant bitch. Even though she’s good at her job, I could never wrap my head around why she could not be replaced. She has nerve to comment on me being tardy, when she is hardly at work herself. Barbara is a walking accident with every ailment known to mankind. How is it possible for one woman to have food poisoning fifteen times in one year? Ask Barbara! She has had food poisoning from grapes, chicken, diner hamburgers, and even claimed that she overdosed on sugar packets one afternoon. The woman makes up every excuse possible so that she doesn’t have to come into work. She calls the secretaries her minions. There is not one girl in the office that likes Barbara. Even throughout the building, she is known as the wicked bitch of dermatology, or the office manager from hell.

Not only do I despise the manager, but also the job has been eating away at me day by day. We worked in the prissiest areas of Westchester. Our patients consisted of the rich and shameless, as well as their spawn, raised in their image to have no respect and to hound until their requests are met.

If they need a prescription filled, they need it filled. If they need to be squeezed in, they will hound and squeal until they get their just deserves. After all, they are important, and they won’t let you forget it. Most of them are also close personal friends of the doctor’s. It’s always funny when we tell him this because he has either never heard of them or can’t stand them.

On this particular morning, we were triple booked. The problem with our office does not rest with the manager, but also includes the doctor’s mother, who
overbooks us to try and make him more money. When Barbara is actually in the office, she and Janice debate incessantly over the schedule. In this instance, I find Barbara to be completely in the right. Janice’s overbooking was absolutely frustrating, and only made my days at the office worse. All she did was answer the phones. She never had to do any of the medical billing, or stay late because he was not done seeing his overbooked list of patients. But at the same time that we all loathed Janice for overbooking, it was hard not to absolutely love her. She had flare and killer style. Her advice was aged like a fine wine, and she brought the best birthday and Christmas presents for all of us. She was a doll. When we ask her how she is, she is always fabulous! She’s never good or fine, always fabulous! She is 72 years old and kicking like a live electrical wire. No one can tell her what to do, and in a way, it’s admirable. Barbara despises her, and we all despise Barbara, so it makes for an interesting tangled tango when they argue back and forth.

Barbara does all she can to stop Janice from overbooking the Doctor, but she is hardly there to enforce it. Whenever she is out, we always guess which food has nabbed her this time. The reoccurring favorite she liked to use was the diner hamburger. She always tells us how it must not have been cooked right. She retired that option when the Doctor told her to stop eating the diner hamburger unless she was a glutton for punishment.

The day dragged and I eyed the clock. The Doctor’s goal is to finish seeing patients at four. I looked at the clock and it was only 3:30 P.M. As soon as I looked away the phone rang, and Janice jumped to answer.
“Dr. Goldman’s office. How may I help you?”

“Are you a patient of ours? ... Oh my heavens, Shingles! ...You poor thing! ...You come right on over!”

I didn’t even need to look to my left to know that Barbara was slowly creeping out from behind her desk, ready to pounce on Janice for booking a patient.

“Janice, what do you think you’re doing?”

“She had an emergency and she’s a patient. What was I supposed to do, let her suffer Barbara?”

“I’m sure if she had Shingles, she had it all day long as well. Patients know our policy is to call first thing with an emergency so we can work them into the schedule. She called at the end of our day.”

“Yah, and he will see her.”

“No one likes when you overbook Janice. The girls have to stay later. They hit rush hour traffic. He argues with his wife over getting home later than usual. Sometimes you have to say no.”

“Not to someone with Shingles. And the girls don’t mind the extra pay. Where else do they have to be? Right girls?”

She looked over at Kelly, one of our nurses and me. We both knew better and kept our heads down.

“Don’t look at them Janice. Look at me. You always do this. I put in the computer do not triple and what do you do? You triple! I tell you not to add on emergencies for new patients and to reserve emergency slots for our established
patients. What do you do? You add on an emergency appointment yesterday for acne! Acne!! That’s not even an emergency!”

“Well the girl couldn’t go to school her acne was so bad, so it was an emergency for her.”

“You are so thick headed. He is not the only dermatologist in Westchester!”

“So what are you going to do? Yell at me in front of the patients. Try and make a fool out of me? How about you fire me? I’d love to see you try!”

Barbara began to slowly retreat. Janice was untouchable. She believed her son was amazing; the best Doctor among doctors. There was nothing he could not diagnose, no patient he couldn’t see, and no basil cell carcinoma he could not treat. He was her baby, and we heard of his perfection every day. Dr. Goldman’s patients on the other hand, knew he was the best, but they were patients with no patience.

Knowing I would be late I excused myself and stepped outside to call Jimmy. I walked outside, reached into my scrubs pocket and pulled out my cell.

“Hey, baby how’s your day going?”

“I thought I told you not to call me at work!!!”

I pulled the phone away from my ear. What the hell was that outburst all about?

“Well I just wanted to call you and let you know I’m going to be home late. I still want to go to that movie tonight though. Maybe you can check movie times and we can go to a later show?”
“I’m busy Jackie, shit, you need to grow up. You’re living in this fantasy world. You can’t just expect me to come home and want to go out after a long day of work.”

The phone went dead, just like my feelings. I pulled my pack of cigarettes out from my other pocket. I walked over toward the steps and sat down. Packing my cigarettes I repeatedly pounded them into my hand, causing my whole hand to turn beat red. His personality has become so mercurial during the last few months. I knew I didn’t deserve to be treated this way. I was determined not to return home. If he wanted to treat me like shit then I would leave him in the dark, worrying for once about me. I looked down at my contacts and found the one person I could rely on to meet up with me. While walking back into work, I texted Rich and asked him if he wanted to go for coffee.

When I finally finished my night at the office, I got in my car and headed towards the city of White Plains to meet up with Rich. I parked, paid the muni-meter and watched with jealousy as a young couple locked hands and lips as they passed by me on the street. I missed that feeling, the rush from a kiss, the comfort in a hug, the pleasant feel of drowning in a sea of love and affection; it was all absolutely amazing, yet so fleeting.

I began to feel lightheaded and dizzy, as if all the life was fleeting out of me. I stopped and held onto a street light for balance. My mind raced and my eyes began to blur. Suddenly a hand reached out and grabbed me from drowning in my thoughts. It was Rich, and he looked even better then I remembered. Like
a skyscraper, he stood above me, leaning against the post. His eyes glowed a deep dark blue and he smelt like clean crisp sheets blowing in the summer wind.

“Yes?” I looked up.

With a smirk, he looked down at me and said, “What’s up kid? You look a little dizzy. You been drinking or does seeing me make you nervous?”

“Oh, you know me. I’m never balanced,” I said, while managing a wink.

Locking his arm with mine we began to walk toward the nearest Starbucks, down toward the end of Main Street. Before going in we opened the door and peered in to assess the crowd. Since it was pretty quiet we decided that it was a suitable place to get some coffee and talk.

Walking up to the counter the barista greeted us.

“Hey, what can I get for you today?”

“Um, can I get a Double Espresso?”

“Rough day huh?” Rich looked down at me like the grand inquisitor, ready to probe and dissect my thoughts.

“You have no idea,” I sighed.

Rich was one of my favorite people. He saw right through the cool facade I manage to pull off for everyone else. I watched him, wondering if he’s a man I could love. Unaware I was observing he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a pair of thick black-framed glasses. Before putting them on he looked over to me and smiled. His smile always made my knees weak as I watched it curve up to the right displaying that irresistible deep dimple. I began to run a check list in my mind, thinking to myself, ‘He is outgoing, motivated, works two jobs, we
can talk about anything, and we have this underlying surge of sexual chemistry
every time we around each other.’

“Ten dollars for your thoughts?”

“I was wondering when you started wearing glasses,” I lied.

“You are terrible at hiding your thoughts from me. Out with it Jacks!”

I broke out into laughter. To laugh after the day I had felt like a miniature
orgasm throughout my body. Then Rich grabbed me around the next and pulled
me in tight against his chest. We grabbed our coffees from the counter and went
and sat in the corner farthest away from the window. The big red comfy couch
was a perfect fit. I was just about to spill my day all over him when he touched
my hand. It was the smallest graze but it sent tingles up my arm. Looking at him
I saw something inspiring. He was full of life, smiling at me as if I was the center
of his world at that moment in time. Catching my gaze, I quickly looked back
down, and before I could even utter a word in my defense he grabbed my chin and
pulled my face toward his, kissing me lightly on the lips.

“I’m sorry,” he said, while fumbling to grab his coffee from the table as a
distraction.

I should have felt guilty or mad but neither of the emotions occupied me.

I took a sip of my mocha frap, looked up at him and uttered softly, “Don’t
be.”

“You know Jacks, I remember two years ago when I met Jimmy. You
were all smiles. You were happy; not a care in the world.”

“Yah he was smiling too.”
“Hell yah he was. You two couldn’t keep your hands off one another. You were whispering in each other’s ears, kissing each other and holding one another. I had never been so jealous of any man.”

Rich looked at me as if he was hungry. His eyes were pinned to mine, and then slowly they followed the flow of my hair, which billowed down past my breasts and toward my hips. I had changed into a red silk top and black form fitting skirt before meeting him, and I could tell that he was enjoying the view. My emotions mirrored his as I followed his tie down his black pressed dress shirt and toward his charcoal gray dress pants. Noticing his excitement, I tried to distract myself and began to fumble in my bag for my cigarettes. My hands were so shaky that as soon as I grabbed my lighter, it slipped right out of my hands and onto the floor. Before I could even get up, Rich reached across me, grabbed my lighter off the ground and as if he were drawing, he pressed a line into my calf and all the way up my thigh, stopping at my hip.

“This must be yours,” he said smugly, handing me my light.

“Yah, it is,” were the only words that I could manage to speak.

“I know you’re vulnerable right now and pissed off, and I would never press you to do something you don’t want to do, but I have this uncontrollable urge to be a part of you right now, right here.”

His words brought a flush of red to my face and I began to cough in between small bouts of laughter.

“That’s the smoking, it’ll kill you. That would be a funny story to write about huh, death by laughter and cigarettes.”
“I don’t want to do this just because I’m unhappy with Jimmy. I want this to mean something if it actually happens. I still love Jimmy. We are just fighting. If we did this, and believe me right now my subconscious is kicking me, I would be leading you down a dead end. We’d lose our friendship.”

“But he forgot how to make you feel. Let me just show you how to feel again. Let me let you use me. I’m begging you!”

My stomach began to tighten and flutter and from my abdomen down I felt a pulsating want emanating from deep inside me. I glanced down at my cell phone. There were no missed calls, no texts, and no concerns from Jimmy about where I was and what I was doing. Deep down I knew he was intentionally ignoring me, so I clicked my phone off. I looked up from my black phone and into Rich’s deep, darkened blue eyes.

He looked into me, knowing all of my emotional baggage and surrendering his services to help me carry it.

“I don’t want to leave,” I whispered.

“I just want to do what you want to do.”

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Let’s order food. Chinese?”

“Do they let you eat in here?”

“Sure, as long as you have your meal with a side of latte.”

I listened as he placed the order, remembering all of our favorite dishes from when we used to go out to eat after school. It scared me, but I liked it. Things were starting to look up; however, I kept thinking in the back of my mind
about Chris. Excusing myself, I walked to the back bathroom. Leaning over the sink, I looked at my face in the mirror. So many thoughts were dancing in and out of my head. I looked happy, but inside I was a mess. I knew if I cheated on Jimmy, I wouldn’t be able to stay with him. He had been there by my side through so much. Where did it all go? As I ran the water, I heard a knock at the door.

“Be right out,” I shouted.

“Open the door,” asked Rich.

I was done thinking. I unlocked the door, and he slipped into the bathroom. I embraced him, and he picked me up into his arms. He kissed me, this time more brazenly, and I didn’t hesitate or pull away. He dropped me down onto the sink, grabbed my hair and pulled it back, breathing heavily as our lips locked. I began to caress his arms and pull him down forcefully, so that I could feel his chest squeeze tight against mine. I wanted my breath to slip away from my body. My thoughts scattered, dispersing to every nerve ending in my body. Every touch, every grasp, made me tingle. I had never wanted someone to take every inch of me as much as I had wanted Rich to in that very moment. Whispering in his ear I asked him to take me away. Pulling off my shirt, Rich began kissing every inch of my body. Then he flipped me around and unzipped my skirt cautiously as if waiting for me to stop him. He met no such blockade. I pushed down his hand, encouraging him to pursue his desires. I knew that if he stopped, my thought would catch up with me and all of this would end.
My breathing heightened as the thoughts in my mind pounded to escape. Jimmy’s name repeated in my mind, haunting me in my ecstasy. Then Rich lifted my body off the sink, and pushed me up against the wall. Connected, we moved together in synch. I threw my head back, and as I felt the sweat dripping down the nape of my neck, my sense awakened. I knew in my mind that I had just boarded my second ride, blindfolded, not knowing how I would feel when I got off. Throwing all of my emotional feelings out the window, I began to thrust my body harder on top of his. Her arms and legs began to shake, and as we sank to the floor, Rich no longer capable of holding me up, a tear began to ride down my cheek. He picked up my chin, looked into my eyes, and then began kissing each tear that fell.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, that was amazing, nothing is wrong, I just feel different. I can’t explain it.”

“I’m not asking you to explain it,” he said, as he handed me back my shirt.

“Thanks. No, it’s just that I don’t know what to do with Jimmy. I don’t mean to bring that up right now, it’s just I can’t think about anything else.”

“I understand. I’m not asking you to do anything though Jackie. I like you, I do. I don’t want this to be a one-time thing. I want to be with you. I want you to see we can be right together.”

He pulled me close and I rested my head on his shoulders. Rich and I got up and walked out of bathroom, one at a time. We met at the front of the store, and clasped hands as we headed for the car. Neither of us wanted to leave each
other, so we decided to rent a hotel room. We walked two miles to the Best Western on Central Avenue and stayed the night. We didn’t have sex anymore that night. Instead, Rich just held me while I slipped away into my dreams. I began to find myself in a familiar scene that I had dreamt about before. I was in a field of sunflowers, alone. Lying down amongst a sea of tall yellow guardians, I began to roll around. I stood up and looked around, but no one was there. I began calling out for Jimmy, running in different directions through the flowers. I couldn’t find him. I couldn’t find anything. As I began to get increasingly frustrated, I pushed and bent the flowers in my path until I ran right into a mirror. As I gazed into it, my reflection looked horrified and stressed. I hit the mirror, cracking it, and waking myself out of my sleep.

It was around 5 in the morning when Rich’s alarm went off. He reached into his pocket to shut off his phone. I had not fallen back asleep since I awoke from my nightmare. I waited for him to fall back asleep and then I slowly got up out of bed. I began to gather my things and I picked up my phone, taking it into the bathroom with me so I wouldn’t awake Rich with the noise of turning it back on. I closed the bathroom door behind me and switched on my cell. I had ten missed calls, two voicemails and three text messages. Dialing my voicemail I heard the pleading voice of Jimmy on the other end of the phone.

“Hey baby, it’s me. I know I was mean to you earlier and I’m sorry. I don’t know, this job has been stressing me out, plus the bar prep. I know we haven’t been on track for a long time, but I want to make things right. Please come home. Please call me back.”
I hung up the phone. I didn’t want to hear anymore. I had just spent the entire night with another man. Rich had been my best friend for years. I felt amazing in his arms? Was that enough? Should I end an entire relationship because of one mistake, one night? Was it a mistake?

“What is it” Rich asked as I walked out of the bathroom.

He knew my mind was no longer our hotel room. He knew it had escaped me the moment we had started having sex the night before.

“I need to go home now.”

“Am I going to see you again? How about dinner tonight?”

“Well I have to work late tonight. I have a long day ahead of me. Maybe Friday,” I lied.

Rich could see right through me. He knew I wasn’t going to call. I walked over and kissed him on the cheek. Then I grabbed my things, walked toward the door, pulled a cigarette out from my bag and began the two-mile walk back to my car. The city of White Plains was still asleep, and the streets were quiet. It was nice. I needed the silence. I arrived at the car and twenty minutes later I arrived home. Fumbling for her keys, I looked up towards the fourth floor of my apartment complex, not sure of what awaited me. On the way up the steps my heart raced. I had no idea what I would tell Jimmy, or even how I would tell him. Should I even tell him? Standing in front of my apartment door I placed the key in the door. When I walked in I saw Jimmy asleep in my favorite chair, phone in hand. I went up to him and kissed him on the forehead. With sleepy eyes, he looked up at me.
“Where have you been? I’ve been calling you all night!”

Kissing him, I shut his words. I had no other answer. He picked me up and dragged me over towards the bed. As he undressed me, taking off my shirt, all I could think about was how much I wanted him to show me this much love each day. I never would have done what I did with Rich if Jimmy hadn’t stopped showing me the affection I needed. He kissed my neck in the same places Rich kissed me. Holding me tightly he whispered that he loved me so much. Without responding, I kissed him again. I could not speak without forming tears. I couldn’t breathe without feeling guilty. The sweat poured down from my forehead to my cheeks as Jimmy made love to me.

“I love you,” I whispered.

At that moment, I decided I could not tell Jimmy about Rich. I loved Jimmy and refused to let him go. I loved him so damn much it hurt. My nails dug into his back and I screamed in pleasure and pain. The pain of letting go, the pain I knew I would have to live with, the pain of guilt that would plague me for the rest of my life if I stayed with Jimmy. Afterwards, Jimmy repeatedly kissed me on the lips, telling me time after time he loved me.

Jimmy’s alarm clock began to go off. Both of us looked at one another. We got up from bed and walked towards the bathroom. As I got into the shower, Jimmy followed behind me. The water was scolding hot, and as it hit my body, I felt as if it was burning all the remnants of my cheating night away. Holding my face, Jimmy looked into my eyes.

“Where were you last night?”
“I told you I wasn’t coming home.”

“I know, but where were you?”

“Starbucks,” I blurted out.

“Starbucks is not open all night Jackie! Where were you after that?”

“I don’t know where I was, does it matter?”

Truthfully, I didn’t really know where I was the night before. My mind had lost control that night, and so did my heart. I had been playing off of emotions, and my emotions screamed in pain. Rich was like a Vicodin. He made my mind numb and acted as a form of relief for my body and soul.

“I went back to the office. I worked on my thesis all night and fell asleep there. You should see my stories. They came out amazing. I may have finished my first few chapters.”

“That’s amazing baby. I want to see it. I can’t believe you fell asleep in the office,” he laughed.

“Yah, I know, I just kept writing. I was really inspired for the first time in a long time.”

“Well don’t get your hopes up till someone in the publishing world gets a look at them.”

“Yah, I know Jimmy,” I said, exasperation returning to my voice.

Getting out of the shower and leaving Jimmy behind, I began drying off. Jimmy’s caution irritated me more and more. He just didn’t believe in me. With Rich, I at least felt like I had someone who supported and believed in me. But I didn’t want to be with him either. I just wanted to be with myself for a little
while. I needed to be completely on my own. As I got dressed I went into the kitchen and called Barbara.

“I need to take my vacation time. I know I am supposed to give you at least two weeks notice, but I need to take it now. I would really like to talk to you. I have no one else right now.”

“Alright. Come in. I’ll see what I can do.”

I didn’t know why I was turning to Barbara. Maybe it was because in some odd way as much as I despised her, I looked up to her. She might be a mess on the outside, but what I always envied was that Barbara had control over her life, knew what she wanted, and always went after it with zeal. I needed Barbara to open my tear swollen and confused eyes. Throwing on my coat and grabbing my purse, I rushed out.

“Baby, don’t you need to get ready,” Jimmy shouted out from the bathroom to an empty apartment.

“Baby?”

Jimmy must have walked out and saw that I had left because he began calling my cell, and I forwarded each of them to voicemail. I know that the way I had left him would only fill him with insecurities, making him think that I had lied to him about everything.

I finally arrived at the office. No one was in White Plains yet. They were all still in Bronxville finishing up the morning. I walked back to Barbara’s office and stood in the doorway.

“You look like shit,” Barbara said as she looked up at me.
“I cheated Barbara, on you, on Jimmy, on myself. I’m so fucked up. I need you to help me.”

“You didn’t do anything to me Jackie, your work here is always amazing. So what the hell are you talking about?”

“I never wanted to work here. I’ve been looking for a new job in publishing,” I pulled out the first few chapters of my manuscript.

“I know you want to work somewhere else. Why else would you have gone back for your Masters Degree? I don’t expect you to stay here forever, but the job market is not at a great hiring point right now.”

“I know, but the people here drive me crazy. I hate each day of work.”

“Well all I can say is that from what I have read of yours, you have a gift for words. But, I’m just being honest with you, unless you know someone, you are not going to find yourself in Manhattan working a publishing job anytime soon.”

Sinking in my chair, I smiled. I wasn’t happy that I couldn’t find another job, but I was happy that Barbara slammed the truth out into the open.

“As far as Jimmy goes, I don’t want to know details. If you cheated that’s your personal business, all I can give you is a way out. I want you to take off. Why don’t you go down to Austin and visit your family. You can come back when you’re ready. You’re job will be here for you. Does that work?”

“I can do that. I think I need to do that. I don’t know how to thank you Barbara.”
“Please don’t. I’m not doing anything for you; I’m doing this for the office. We don’t need you moping around or mouthing off to patients out of frustration.”

As I got up to walk out, Barbara smiled. She did care about me. Barbara just felt that she needed to approach me with a hard solid attitude.

I made my way back to the apartment. When I got to the door, I fumbled for my keys in my bag. So many things were racing through my mind from the night before and the morning. I picked out my keys from the abyss and opened the door to the apartment. I threw my bag down on the chair and headed towards the bedroom to begin packing. When I opened the curtain that separated the living room from the bedroom I was taken back. My desk drawer was lying on the bed, my locked desk drawer! All my business cards and loose notes were scattered on the floor. I fumbled through my scattered pieces, but when I saw one loose business card sitting by the windowsill, I dropped everything. It was Barbara’s card.

The blood rushed to my head.

‘He didn’t trust me,’ I thought to myself.

‘Not like he should trust me. But this...I would never do this to him.’

I picked up my cell and dialed Barbara.

“Barb...”

“I figured I’d be hearing from you. Jimmy called because he wanted to know where you were last night Jackie. I confirmed your lie. Now get packing and go. Don’t hesitate, and do not think for one god damn second about his
feelings. If you don’t take a few weeks off you’re fired. Do you hear me? Fired!”

I listened to the dead air for a few seconds before hanging up. I never thought I’d hear Barbara threaten my job if I didn’t take off. I moved towards the closet pushing all my dresses and t-shirts to the side and pulled out the biggest suitcase I had. Pulling as many dresses as I could off their hangers, I folded them, and shoved them in. I picked up my only pair of black leather cowboy boots and placed them neatly on the top. It was completely unnecessary to go to Texas with heels or anything else excessive.

Moving on to the bathroom, I snatched up my cosmetics case from the floor. As I came back up I paused to look at myself in the mirror. My Aunt Lisa had always told my cousin Christine that if she couldn’t look at herself for more than ten seconds in the mirror than she would know it was time for a change in her life. I began to count to five and then turned away, hoping that when I returned, I would be able to stand my own company for longer. Once I was all packed, I slipped into a pair of jean shorts and a red flannel button up tank. Then I slid on a pair of flip-flops. I combed my fingers threw my hair and then grabbed up my bags, rolling them into the hallway. As I closed the door to my apartment I dialed my father.

“Hey you!! To what do I owe this surprise?”

“Dad...I’m leaving for a trip to Austin to get away for a few weeks. I know this is short notice, and a lot to ask, but can you please pick up the remainder of the stuff in my apartment.”
“What? Are you leaving him Jackie?”

“Yes, no time to explain. I just need you to do this for me, please.”

“Call me when you get to the airport alright? I want to know when you’re safe. I love you kid. You know everything will work itself out?”

“I know...and Dad, please tell him I’m sorry if you run into him.”

I knew it was wrong. I should have stayed and told him myself. In a way I owed it to him. We had been together for years and this is how I chose to end it, with an empty apartment, and my Dad saying goodbye in my place; but, I just couldn’t face him.

When I arrived at JFK with all of my luggage, I called Barbara.

“Are you fired yet?”

“No! I’m all packed outside JFK.”

“Well then why the hell are you calling me?”

“I just wanted to say thank you.”

“Oh Jesus Christ, what a cliché,” Barbara laughed. “You’re welcome.”

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When I got to Austin, I made myself at home in my Aunt Maria and Uncle Johnny’s ranch. A week into my time there, I realized that something had forgotten to come with me to Texas. I hadn’t gotten my period. I was late. I walked into the kitchen and asked my Aunt Maria where the nearest drug store was.
“Drug store? It’s not far. I’m going into town in a little bit. What do you need?”

“Nothing,” I shouted.

“Then why do you need to know where the nearest drug store is?”

“What, I can’t ask a question? Does there have to be a reason behind everything. Maybe I just wanted to know.”

“Oh my gosh.. you think you’re pregnant,” Aunt Maria shouted back.

“What!! No! Of course not. Fuck!”

“Yes you do otherwise you wouldn’t have freaked out like that. Well if you are do you at least have a supportive guy for this mess?”

“Well, I did. I don’t know how this could have happened. I’m on birth control.”

“None of that shit is full proof honey. You wanna go to the store. I’ll go with you? You need someone with you for this.”

Two hours later, I was crouched over the toilet and holding the pregnancy stick between my legs. I crouched there for two minutes, but nothing came out. It was as if my body was too afraid of the result and was refusing to pee. I stood up and turned on the water hoping to initiate the flow. Going back into position, I waited, till finally, I peed on the stick. After drying it off, I pulled up my skirt and placed the stick on the sink. I glared down at it. One little stick, just $14.99 was about to determine my future. If I was pregnant there was no turning back.

Aunt Maria knocked on the door.

“Jackie, you wanna open the door? Did you pee on the stick?”
“Yah, I peed on the stick.”

“Well can you tell what color it’s leaning towards?”

“I don’t know. I’m not looking.”

“Okay, open the damn door.”

“It’s open...”

Aunt Maria barged in only to find me holding my knees to my chest next to the bathtub, vigorously biting my fingernails to the bitter ends.

“Pick yourself up. Let’s look at this thing. Has it been five minutes?”

“More than five.”

Aunt Maria picked up the stick from the sink and looked down at the blue smiley face staring back at her.

“What is it? Is it fucking smiling?” I shouted.

“Yah..it’s smiling hun. You’re pregnant.”

“Uh shit! Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Violently I combed my fingers through my hair. The last time I had had sex was with two different guys in the same day.

“It can’t be Jimmy’s because he pulled out. He always pulls out! Plus he wore a condom. But Rich didn’t wear a condom. What the hell is wrong with me? I wasn’t thinking.”

“Two guys! You slept with two guys recently?” Aunt Maria questioned disapprovingly.
“Ugh. Yah it’s complicated. I was dating Jimmy but Rich is my best friend. That was an accident. I wasn’t myself when I slept with him, and me and Jimmy were on the rocks.”

“So why don’t you tell Jimmy it’s his?”

“What? No. I can’t do that. I know it’s not his. He pulled out, had a condom on and I am on birth control. That combo doesn’t fail. It has to be Rich. We were too caught up in the moment and he didn’t have time to pull out.”

“So who’s this Rich? You like him? Can you see yourself with him?”

“I don’t know. He’s the guy who has been my best friend since high school. Of course I like him, but can I see myself with him, sharing a family? I don’t know.”

“Well if you don’t want to lie to Jimmy, and you don’t know about this guy Rich, you have two choices. Get an abortion or be a mom on your own. I think one option is more realistic. I mean you’re young Jackie. You have your whole life ahead of you to be a mom.”

“You’re right. I know you’re right.”

Two weeks later, after letting the idea sit, I decided to go through with the abortion. Aunt Maria drove me to the clinic and walked with me inside. As I sat down, filling out the paperwork I started tensing up. The pen in my hand began to shake. I put it down, stood up, and ran out of the clinic, Aunt Maria trailing behind me.

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When I got back to New York, I called my cousin Christine. I needed someone to talk to, and since Rich was no longer that option, she was the closest person to me, and she was family. We decided to meet at Panera Bread for a bite to eat. I arrived early and grabbed a seat in the back of the restaurant. I looked up from my coffee to the sound of the bells on the door jingling. There she stood, big black sunglasses still on her face, clutching onto her gigantic Louis Vuitton bag. She spotted me and as she walked back she slid her glasses off and tossed her long back hair to her back. Sitting down across from me I could tell she knew something was wrong. Her nose twitched and she began squinting her eyes at me.

“What is it Jackie? We might as well cut to the chase and then enjoy our lunch.”

“I’m pregnant. I found out in Texas. I don’t know who the father is. I almost aborted the baby. I’m a mess.”

“What do you mean you don’t know who the baby is? You have been dating the same guy for I don’t even know how long. Did you go slumming?”

“Why do you have to put shit that way? I didn’t go slumming. I messed up. I slept with Rich.”

“Finally! You guys always had that awkward sexual chemistry.”

“Yah, well I’m almost positive the baby is his. He didn’t wear a condom.”

“Ugh, dirty. How could you let that happen?”

“We were in the moment. It happened. Get past it!”

I looked at her from across the table. I searched for judgment and disapproval, but she reflected neither.
“I need you Christine. I am going to have this baby!”

“Fine. I’ll help you through this, but there is no way in hell I am going to be there when you tell your parents!”

“No, no! Of course not. I wouldn’t expect you to be there! That will be a nightmare!”

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I watched as Christine stood at the altar, in her gorgeous gown. As the priest began the ceremony, baby Jack began to cry. I looked down at him, unbuckled the strap holding him into his car seat, and picked him up in my arms. I looked over at Rich and smiled in disbelief at how far we had come in the last few months. We had a child together, and were already starting to blossom as a couple. He put his hand on my thigh, and baby Jack reached down grabbing his father’s pinky finger. We both burst out laughing. Christine turned around sharply and looked at us, throwing me a wink. If it wasn’t for her, I doubt I would be sitting here right now, with my little boy and the man I can truly see myself spending the rest of my life with.
“Just Bearly”

After scouring around the campus for two hours in search of parking I found a spot near the entrance of the school. I pulled in, shut off the car and took the keys out of the ignition. I picked up my phone to call my mom, who always makes me call every time I find parking at school because she’s terrified of the area and wants to make sure I’m safe. When I looked down I saw that I had three missed calls. Just then, the phone vibrated in my hands again. I picked up and heard crying and exasperation on the other end.

“Mom? What’s wrong?”

“Why haven’t you picked up?”

“I was looking for parking. I just found a spot. Is that what you’re so upset about?”

“No Julianne. It’s your dad.”

“What? What happened to Dad?”

“He was in the backyard. Bears attacked him Julie. He’s a mess. His arm was just dangling...dangling.”

“Bears? Are you serious?”

“They shot the big one. They got her. I called in time. I did good. I saved him. I did.”

“Okay Mom. I’m coming. I just have to run inside and tell my professor what’s going on so he knows why I’m missing tonight.”

“No. You should go to class. There’s nothing you can do here. Really...”
I just ignored her. She was delirious. She was completely in shock.

“Which hospital? Where is he going?”

“Valley,” she said in a monotone voice.

“I’m coming Mom. You tell Daddy I’m coming.”

I sat in my car for a few minutes and looked down at my phone. I couldn’t cry. Tears were not coming and I couldn’t understand why. This was my dad, my world. He was hanging on by a thread and I wasn’t crying. Then the next thought that came into my mind was how I was going to tell my professor.

Ringwood was a far off place. Nobody really knew much about it, let alone knew the frequent bear encounters we have up there. I was about to walk in and tell my professor that I couldn’t come to class because my dad was attacked by a bear. It would probably be a first for him – why a student couldn’t be present.

I didn’t cry as I walked through campus, but as I entered the main building, my feet started to get numb. The numbness began climbing as I rode the escalator to the sixth floor. By the time I got off on the sixth floor my entire body started to freeze and my heart raced. I walked through the halls in a daze until I reached the seat outside of my professor’s office. Sitting down, I felt a stinging in my chest. Nerves were knocking around my brain, and then finally one single tear fell from my eye. I waited on that bench for ten minutes as people I knew walked by waving. I didn’t wave back. I just stared. Nobody asked me what was wrong. Why would they? I wasn’t crying.

I tuned my ears into the back room as I waited for the student my professor was seeing to finish. All I heard was garble. Finally, when the talking
wouldn’t stop, I stood up and walked toward the back. I couldn’t wait any longer. The door was open. I stood in the doorway. This girl from my class stood up. I didn’t know her name but I knew who she was.

“Alright well I’ll see you in class tonight,” the professor said.

“Hey Julianne! How are you?”

“I can’t come to class tonight.”

As these words left my mouth a surge from inside broke and the tears came streaming.

“My dad... he was attacked by bears. He’s being rushed to the hospital.”

I started to shake as I watched my professor’s eyes widen.

“Where do you live?”

“Ringwood, New Jersey. It’s all the way up in the mountains by Harriman state park. We have bears all the time, but this, this is a first. My dad was cleaning up the yard, the leaves and stuff. All I know is he was attacked pretty badly by the mother bear and one of her cubs. My mom said his arm was dangling.”

At this my Professor cringed. He hated any mention of blood and gore. It made him squirm right down to the bone.

“Okay, well he’s going to be okay. Everything will be okay,” he said as he patted me on the back.

Hearing these words only made my crying worse. I could see the mascara running down my cheeks as I looked down at my shaking hands.

“Yah, I know he’s gunna be okay. It’s just he’s not okay right now.”
“Well you go to the hospital and be with your family. Are you okay to drive?”

“I’ll be okay. I’m gunna pull myself together in the bathroom.”

“Well, I’ll walk you out,” he said.

We walked together down the hall and as we turned the corner, my professor made a joke about bears. I was an emotional mess but I remember laughing.

I turned to him and said, “You’re really the only person who could probably make me laugh at a time like this.”

He gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Let me know how everything goes—okay sweetie?”

I kept walking toward the orange bathroom doors across from the elevator. I pulled the door open and just as I had hoped, it was empty. As I made my way toward the mirror I grabbed a few paper towels and scrunched them in my hand. I was burning up, so I ran the cold water and soaked them in the sink. Looking up I saw everything I felt staring back at me. There in the mirror was fear, sadness, and questions. My eyes were blackened from my eyeliner. Taking the wet paper towel, I swiped it across my eyes and took my make up off my face. I knew there was no point in trying to touch it up. Then I picked up the other wad of paper towel and patted my neck to cool myself off.

Fumbling through my bag, I grabbed for my keys and sunglasses. I always despise it when people wear sunglasses indoors, but now I know why some of them do. I joined the group and put my sunglasses on for protection. I
didn’t want to be asked what’s wrong, what happened, or why are you crying. All of those questions were catalysts for my emotions, and I didn’t need to be any more upset before I began to drive back to Jersey.

I had to walk all the way across campus to get to my car. The whole way all I could imagine was my dad’s terror and pain. I began crying again as I recreated story of what happened in my head. When I finally got back to the car, I opened the door and all my emotions froze. I started the engine and drove. I had anticipated traffic headed over the George Washington Bridge because it was close to rush hour, but I flew over the bridge and onto Route 80. As I began getting closer to Paramus, I started to slow down. I don’t know why, but my foot kept getting lighter and lighter on the pedal. That’s bullshit. I knew why. I was afraid to see my dad. He was always the picture of health, strong as hell. He worked out every day and he wasn’t scared of anything. Now he was torn apart. For the first time he had no control over the situation. I didn’t want to see him in pain. All I wanted was for him to be okay.

As I pulled into the Emergency lot at Hackensack Hospital, the lights from an ambulance were flashing into my car. The red and yellow lights hit me like punches. I imagined how my mom must have felt as those same lights pulled up in front of the house to take away Dad. She was never really good with high pressure situations. I’m surprised she was even capable of calling the police when she did. She saved his life. Our house is perfectly situated in town. We have the fire department two blocks away and the police station four blocks away. Their response I would learn was instantaneous.
I sat in the car for five minutes blankly staring at my phone. My legs began to freeze up on me again. I didn’t know what I was walking into and I was terrified. My mom wasn’t clear over the phone. I had no idea if there was brain damage. Would he be missing a limb? Would I be able to see him? Was he in critical condition? I took the keys out of the ignition and thought about dipping into my hidden stash of cigarettes. I had been trying to quit for the last three months, but my nerves were mounting. Instead, I opened the car and got out. If I smelt like smoke that would be one more thing for Mom to be upset about.

I walked in and checked in at the front desk.

“I’m looking for Patrick Kellar. I’m his daughter, Julianne.”

“He’s in critical condition at the moment Miss but I can take you back to your mother.”

“What do you mean critical condition?”

“Meaning you cannot see him Miss.”

I wanted to call her a fucking bitch, but I held back. What a snippy attitude she had. No sympathy. I guess that’s what happens when you work in a hospital for too long. One of the other nurses came from behind the glass and took my hand.

“I’ll take you back Julie.”

When I looked up, I realized who was holding my hand. It was this girl Megan McDowell whom I had gone to Paramus Catholic High School with. I didn’t recognize her at first without the black hair and piercings in her face.

“Megan? I’m so sorry. I didn’t recognize you at all.”
“Don’t worry about it. I figured you’d be pretty zoned out. Your Dad’s in critical condition, meaning that right now they are trying to make sure all of his vitals are in order. I’ll tell you what I know so far. The blood is overwhelming. The bear tore off the skin on his upper right shoulder and his right arm is broken. He also managed to break three of his ribs and he is having internal bleeding there. Everything else is secondary right now. We need to stop the bleeding.”

My eyes welled up and I plummeted into hysterical crying. I grabbed at Megan’s arm until she embraced me and brought me into one of the bathrooms nearby.

“Pull yourself together. You need to be strong for your mom Jewels. She’s a mess. She hasn’t spoken to anyone. He’s going to be okay. I promise.”

I knew she was right. I didn’t even have to see my mom. Her image was in my mind as an emotional basket-case.

“Okay, okay. I’m good. Where’s my mom?”

“Come with me. She’s just down this hall right here in the family waiting room.”

As we walked into the room my heart broke into pieces when my mother looked up at me. Her eyes were almost swollen shut from crying and her complexion was white as a ghost.

“Come here baby girl. Come here.”

I got down on my knees and fell into my mother’s lap. She wrapped her arms around me and rested her head on my back. We stayed in that position for what seemed like hours until one of the doctors who was operating on my father
finally walked in. My mother tapped my shoulder and I turned around and stood up. The doctor looked at both of us and then sat down.

“He’s stable now. He has three broken ribs and we were able to stop the internal bleeding. His arm as you already know is broken and he also suffered a hairline fracture to the neck. As for that upper shoulder, he’s going to need a skin graft. The surface layer was completely torn off. But he is going to be okay. He’s stable enough for you to go see him now.”

I waited and looked up at my mother. The woman who always had a question for everything was silenced. She got up and thanked the doctor and then grabbed for my hand. Together we walked toward my father’s room. We looked in at my dad from outside. I had never seen him like that in my life. He was vulnerable and completely helpless.

I opened the door and ran to his bedside.

“Daddy, I’m here Daddy. We love you. You’re gunna be okay. I promise.”

My mom stood next to him and brushed the hair off of his face. His eyes weren’t open. He was deep in sleep, still out from the surgery. The hours after seeing my father went by slow. I wanted to know the exact details of what happened. I wanted to know his rehabilitation time, the skin grafting process, if he would be able to walk, if there was any brain damage. I kept the questions to myself. My mother would ask them. I knew she would when she was ready.

We slept in the waiting room that night and I drowned out the noises of the hospital. The next morning when I woke up my mother was no longer beside
me. I walked toward the nursing station and found out that she was in conference with the doctors who had operated on my father. She was awake again and in rare form.

I sat in the waiting room until she returned.

“Well, what did he say?” I asked as she walked back in.

“It’s going to be months before his recovery. He has to stay in the hospital for the rest of the week for observation and then we can take him home. They say he’s completely capable of walking, but he’s not speaking. The doctor’s are saying he’s in shock. He’s going to need therapy for the mental trauma.”

“What do you mean he can’t talk? Does he have brain damage?”

“No. I asked. They said he is fine but he is in shock. I’m going to need your help Julianne. I can’t take care of him alone.”

“Okay Mom of course. What did you think I was just going to get back into my car and be on my merry way?”

“Don’t give me an attitude lady!”

“I’m not. It’s just it’s like you think I don’t care.”

“You know what I don’t care what you think. All I can think about is your father. He has to be okay. That is all that I can think about. Do you get that?”

I nodded my head. I knew she was projecting her anger onto me, but it was okay. If I had to be her release I was fine with it. I wasn’t going anywhere and even though she knew that, it was her fear of being alone that scared her the most. That day the calls from family came in, but nobody came to visit. On my dad’s side of the family they are a bunch of self-centered assholes. They voice
their concern and hope for the best, and that’s all I expect from them. Thanks for the kind words and check back next week.

After my dad was released from the hospital, my life became a blur. I called out from work for the first two weeks and stayed at home with my dad. One of the days while sitting next to him in bed, he reached over and held out his hand for mine. I looked at him and placed my hand in his and held on tightly.

“I love you Daddy,” I whispered.

He nodded back and closed his eyes. The next day my mother was able to get a therapist to come to the house. My father still remained silent.

**Week One:**

My mom began to fade in and out of depression. She would walk into the back bedroom and talk to my father for an hour about all the things she was doing around the house. He sat there, blank stare upon his face. He heard her but he didn’t have to listen. I bet he was relieved he didn’t have to respond. She would go on and on until I would come in to insist he needed his rest. My father would look up at me each time I did this. In his eyes I could see he was thanking me. Nobody wants to hear mindless babble when their mind is racing with thoughts of their recovery. That’s all he could think about. I could tell because when I went into the room to keep him company he made it a ritual of attempting to sit up more. Each day he made his way from a lying down position to an upright position. Bringing him to the bathroom was torturous. My father is a very strong man, strong willed and strong bodied. I would tell him to lean on me as we made
our way down the hall, but I hardly felt any of his body weight, and I could see
the strain in his eyes and face.

I began to get mad at him.

“Why...why can’t you just lean on me?” I asked.

He looked at me with a look I had seen a thousand times before. He didn’t
need to speak for me to understand that he was going to do what he was going to
do, and I wasn’t going to do anything to stop him.

Laughing I said, “You know you’re stubborn right? You ask me why I’m
stubborn all the time. Well now you know where I get it from.”

A smile. I got a smile.

**Week Two:**

I had to go back to class. I didn’t want to leave the house. Honestly, I
didn’t know if my mom could handle everything on her own. My dad listened to
me. Even though he loved my mom, he never listened to her. She would tell him
to sit still, and he would begin moving even more. Even before the attack, he
never listened to my mother. She grated on his nerves with her incessant
questions. Nothing was ever done without forty or more questions as a
prerequisite. Even when it came to something as simple as a grocery list. My
father always did the shopping in our house because he hated sending her into a
store. He would joke that it would be days before she would come home with the
groceries. I remember this one time my mother had a huge list of things to buy at
the store because her side of the family was coming over for dinner.
Sitting my father down, she said, “I need the chicken butterflied. Do you know what I mean by butterflied? It needs to be cut a certain way otherwise the recipe will be ruined. Can the butcher do that? Anyway when you’re done with that can you remember to get this specific type of cheese? If you don’t follow the list you’re going to have to go back out to the store. Do they have apple pie? Should I get store brought pie? Do you think my family will know I didn’t make it? If you think I should make it I’ll look up a recipe. Okay while I do that tell me, can you make sure this time that they slice the American cheese thinly at the deli? Last time it was way too thick. If they can’t do it don’t get it at all.”

She went on like this for a half an hour. I swear I don’t think she took a breath in between. My father sat there patiently. I’ll give him that. He never yelled. He would sit perfectly still and watch with a quirky smile as my mom asked and answered her own questions. I think in some weird way he loved this about her.

When I got into the car with my dad I said, “Did you get all that?”

“Do you mean did I hear your mother? Yah, I heard her. But she’s going to get what I get and she’ll make do like she always does. She just enjoys being thorough. I’m not going back out to the store though so we got one shot kid. Let’s get this over with.”

On that note, I knew as soon as I left, my father would take it upon himself to try and get up when he had to use the bathroom. I left for my translation workshop on Monday with a bad feeling in my mind. I had a fear something was going to happen but after class I looked down at my cell and I had no missed
calls. He had behaved himself for the night. It wasn’t until Tuesday after my
gothic literature class that the call came. I was grabbing a coffee in between
classes and I felt the vibration in my pocket. Looking down at the screen I saw
Mom, not Home, which meant that my mom wasn’t in the house. If she wasn’t in
the house my father wasn’t in the house either, which could only mean he was
back in the hospital. I slid the unlock button and picked up my cell.

“How bad is it, Mom?

“I had to call the ambulance. Dad got up on his own to go to the bathroom
and he took a fall. The bandage around his ribs filled with blood. I just...I dunno
what...I’m sorry Julianne. You stay at school you hear me. They just need to
check the area. I’m behind the ambulance now on the way to Hackensack.”

“Okay, love you.”

As I hung up, I knew I wasn’t going to stay for my second class. I
wouldn’t be able to focus. I had to be by my dad’s side. I could only imagine my
mother was downplaying the entire incident. I needed to see for myself. I
stopped by my professor’s office to let him know I had to go. He understood. I
walked back to my car and began to make my way back to Jersey. This time, the
traffic was jammed. I turned up my radio to drown out the sound of the city and
kept my eyes focused on the road. It took me about two hours to get to
Hackensack. I sat in the parking lot and flipped my visor down. My eyes looked
tired. I was mentally and physically exhausted, but I felt selfish for even feeling
the slightest bit sorry for myself.
I asked at the front desk for my friend Megan, but she wasn’t in. The nurse behind the desk took me back to my mom. Everything was different this time. I already knew he was going to be okay. I didn’t need reassurance.

“The stitches opened up,” my mom said as I walked into the room. “The doctor had to make sure the bleeding was stabilized because of your father’s history with blood clots. They re-stitched him up. They said he has to stay the night. I need to get a visiting nurse to the house. You need to get through a full work and school week. You can’t take on this burden with me.”

“Burden. This isn’t a fucking burden. Dad would do the same for either of us and more. You look at this as a fucking burden.”

“Calm down. That’s not how I meant it okay? It’s just a lot of work. I can’t expect you to be home every second. It’s going to take a while for him to get back on his feet. I mean can we afford a visiting nurse? Do you think the insurance company will cover that? You work with insurance companies right? Why don’t you ask the Dr. Goldman if he knows of someone who can take care of your dad? Maybe they could do it out of pocket if they are friends with the doctor? Hello?”

“Yah hello Ma. I heard your fifty questions. I work in dermatology. I don’t know anything about visiting nurses and insurance companies. I’ll ask the doctor. But for now, I’m staying home or at least commuting back and forth. I’ll go back to work and school, but I need to know you’ll keep me in the loop when I’m not around. No more of this ‘your dad’s in the hospital but you don’t have to come,’ cause clearly I’ll come no matter what.”
“All right.”

**Week 3:**

Driving back and forth from Jersey to Westchester to Manhattan and back again I started to get worn down. Between the traffic, long hours at work, long hours at school, homework, and the stress at home I began getting sick. I was working my normal ten hour shift at the doctor’s office and during the last hour I started to get light headed. I was on fire. The doctor felt my head and told me I was burning up. He told me to take Friday off and get some rest. By the time I got home I could barely walk up my front steps. When I got inside I collapsed on the bed and slept through the night and into the next day. I woke up to my mother standing over me with a cold cloth.

“You’re burning up Julianne. I think you caught a bug with all that running around.”

“Dad, how’s Daddy?”

“Daddy’s fine sweetheart. He talked last night. He talked to me for almost a full hour.”

“What did he say?”

“He asked about you sweetheart. He wants to know about you. He’s worried. You have run yourself ragged. Now let me take care of you. I spoke to Nana and she is going to help me pay for a visiting nurse. She starts Monday. This way when you get better and back on your feet you can spend some time at
home during the weekend and stay in Westchester during the week. This running around...it’s no good.”

“Okay...” I muttered, as I drifted back to sleep.

It turned out I had the flu, and getting through it wasn’t easy. I hardly ate for days and the empty stomach made me nauseous. Vomiting ensued and my energy slipped. Crawled up under the covers on my bed I shivered in a cold sweat. Every now and then my mom came in to speak.

“If you would have got the flu shot you wouldn’t be in that bed. You work in a doctor’s office. You should have gotten the shot.”

The third time that day that she came into my room, my fathered shouted from two doors down.

“You gunna leave her the hell alone Charisse. She didn’t get the dam flu shot because the last time she got it she got the flu anyway. She got the flu because she ran herself down. Now leave her alone. Let her rest!”

It took me two weeks to get the flu out of my system completely and get my voice back, which I had lost from all the coughing and vomiting. That Wednesday morning, as I got ready to go back to work, my Dad appeared in my doorway.

“Hey beautiful.”

“Hey Dad, glad to see you up and running.”

“Same to you kid,” he laughed.

“I’m glad you’re talking and walking again.”

“Well yah, slow and steady. I learned that the hard way.”
“So the therapist. Is she helping?”

“I guess. I mean I talked because I was ready to talk, not because of any of her babble. I was in shock. Shit, I was attacked by a bear. I wonder why the hell I got those guns. Should’a kept ’em in the shed,” he snickered.

“What happened exactly Dad?” I put down my flat iron and looked over at him.

“Well, I was cleaning the yard, preparing everything in case of snow. Anyway, I was trying to fix the lawnmower because it stalled out on me while I was halfway through the yard, so I went to the shed to grab more gas. When I was back there, in the shed, I felt that feeling you get, ya know, when someone’s staring at you?”

“Yah, I know. Is that when you saw them?”

“Well, yah I saw the cub, and I tried to move slowly and get the lawnmower off the entryway to the shed so I could close the door. I knew the cub probably wasn’t alone. And he wasn’t...that’s for sure.”

“What then?”

“Well it was too late, as soon as I stepped outside I saw the mother and I guess she saw me as a threat. I don’t remember much after that. I just remember pain and the sound of the gunshot. If it wasn’t for your mother well I guess I wouldn’t be here.”

“Shit Dad. I can’t believe this happened to you.”

“Well I’ll be better. I’m getting better. I just know where I’m keeping my guns from now on. One in the garage and one in the shed.”
His laughter made me start laughing hysterically. I walked over to him and gave him a hug on his good side.

“I love you Dadio.”

“You better get going, beat the traffic.”

I leaned over and checked myself out in the mirror. I still had some dark circles lingering under my eyes and I there was no color in my face, but I was functional. On the ride into work I popped in one of the mixes Dad had made me a few months ago. I was going on a mini road trip to Texas during the summer, and before I had left he made me a bunch for the ride. He put a collection of songs on but my favorite was the one he labeled “Our Song.”

When he gave me the cd he said, “That song there, it’s Elvis, ‘Bridge over Troubled Water.’ I decided that if you ever get married that’s the song we’re dancing to.”

“Dad,” I laughed, “that’s a long ways away.”

“You bet your ass it is, even though George is in my good graces now he still has to work his way to buying you one hell of a ring before he gets my nod of approval. But anyway that’s going to be our song.”

“Why is that?”

“When was the last time you listened to it?”

“I don’t know. Probably the last time you played it was when Grandpa passed away.”
“Well listen to the lyrics. You’ll understand why I played it then and why I want to dance to it with you on your day...when that day comes...years from now,” he said with a huge grin across his face.

I never got a chance to play any mix tapes during that road trip because it was George’s car and he monopolized the dam cd player with punk rock songs and Ted Kennedy’s audio book, *True Compass*.

I scanned through for track six, and turned the volume up so I could listen to the words. “Like a bridge over troubled water, I will lay me down,” resounded in my head, and for the rest of the hour ride into work I played the song on repeat.

When I pulled into the parking lot in Bronxville I called the house.

When Dad picked up the phone I said, “I get it.”

“Get what?”

“I get why that’s our song. I get it now.”

“*Bridge Over Troubled Water*?”

“Yah, I listened to it on the way to work. It’s because we are always there for each other. Although you’ve picked up my pieces a million times over.”

“And I would pick them up a million more times. You’re my little girl. I wouldn’t be getting through this accident without you. Are you coming home tonight or staying at your Grandmother’s?”

“I’m coming home. Ma wants to start putting up Christmas lights.”

“Alright well drive careful and have a good day. I’ll see you later. Oh and please just put the lights wherever she wants. I don’t want her coming to me with complaints.”
“You got it,” I laughed.

**Week Four:**

Things are starting to look up. Dad’s doing much better this week. He’s able to get up with very little assistance. He was also very happy to hear that hunting season on black bears had opened. If he could hold a gun, he’d probably be on Hunter Mountain with the rest of the gang. There’s always next year. Of course when things start to get better in my life I always sit back and wait for the bottom to fall out again. I guess that’s just my negative nature acting up. It always seems to find its way around during the last few weeks of the semester when due dates creep up behind me and my nerves heighten. Mom’s been all over my ass to start writing. During the week since I’m not home I get three calls, always at the most inopportune moments. I don’t know how she does it. The other morning, I had just gotten out of the shower, and as I stood in the bathroom drying off, I heard my phone going off. Running back to my bedroom I almost went right on my ass on the wood floor. When I got to the phone it stopped ringing. Five seconds later the voicemail reminder beeped. As I pressed play my mother’s voice was unleashed.

“Good morning Julianne. I don’t know why you aren’t picking up your phone. This call could have been important. Anyway, I’m just calling to say hi. You never called last night. I assume you were writing? I hope you were writing. You’re cutting it a little close to the wire. The end of the semester is approaching. Okay, call me back.”
I wasn’t going to call her back. She always makes me a ball of nerves this time of year. My dad started to keep his cell next to the bed so he could catch up on some business. I gave him a buzz instead.

“What’s going on? Did you get your mother’s call?”

“Yah I got it.”

“Please call her back. It’s her birthday week. I don’t need her in a bad mood.”

“Who still gets birthday weeks at the age of fifty-five.”

“Your mother...who else?”

His laughter on the other end of the phone set me off into a fit of laughter too.

“Okay...okay I’ll call her back. But if she keeps getting me worked up about finals I’m shutting my phone off for the rest of the day.”

“Deal. I’ll talk to her. Give her a call back around your lunch hour. She should be prepped by then.”

I waited till my lunch hour just like Dad said and then gave Mom a call on her cell.

“What’s going on? Did you get your mother’s call?”

“Yah I got it.”

“Please call her back. It’s her birthday week. I don’t need her in a bad mood.”

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“Deal. I’ll talk to her. Give her a call back around your lunch hour. She should be prepped by then.”

I waited till my lunch hour just like Dad said and then gave Mom a call on her cell.

“Hello Julianne Marie. I’m not going to ask you anything about finals I just want to know how your day is going.”

“Good Ma. How’s Dad? When is the physical therapist coming?”

“Probably around 2:30. She has another client before him. He’s doing good though, your Dad.”
“I know. I’m really happy Ma.”

“Thank you Julianne...for everything. I wouldn’t be able to be getting through this without you. I don’t mean to stress you out with school. I just get worried that because you’ve been spreading yourself so thin. You’re doing okay in school though right?”

“I’m doing great. My teachers know what’s been going on. They’ve been really understanding and flexible. I’m going to do just fine this semester. Then one more semester and I’m a few steps away from my Masters.”

“Me and you father are so proud of you.”

“I know. Thanks Ma! I gotta get back to work. Love you. I’ll see you later. We’ll do some decorating maybe play some Christmas tunes, get Dad in the spirit of things.”

“Sounds good honey. Love you too.”

That night when I got home my mom and I hung up the lights outside and decorated the tree while Dad sat on the couch singing songs from his favorite Elvis Christmas album. I reached into the ornament box and took out his favorite ornament, a little guitar that played ‘Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer.’ After I placed it on the tree, I pressed the button and the music began playing. A contagious laugh escaped my father.