

DON'T TELL MY MOTHER, BUT...

By

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*To my mother,
Who taught me that anything is possible through hard work, laughter, and a shit-ton of coffee.
Thank you for always believing in me, even when I gave up on myself.*

“The more a daughter knows the details of her mother's life...the stronger the daughter.”
— Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent*

Table of Contents

We Talked About This	1
We Never Talked About This	14
We Should Have Talked About This	29

We Should Have Talked About This

I. “*Operation: Pick the Rose*” is a go. Let’s go over the plan one more time...”

When Rose was a little girl, she had to hold her mother’s hand wherever they went or else strange men would steal her away and never return her home.

She was homeschooled until the state of Michigan finally forced her mother to send her to public school in the eighth grade. Although their house was on the bus route, her mother insisted on driving her to and from school everyday because she was too delicate to be breathing in all those toxic exhaust fumes.

As a teenager, Rose was always inside reading books or doing chores while her mother sang from the kitchen. She wasn’t allowed to leave the front yard by herself, especially if the neighbor’s boys were outside.

At age fourteen, she was the only girl in class that wasn’t allowed to go to Jack Johnson’s birthday party. Her mother screamed at her, “What are you going to do when he tries to shove his hand up your shirt or his hands down your pants and I’m not there?”

Three months ago, she started a secret relationship with Jack online and carefully revealed bits of her home life to him. She was always worried that he’d be too freaked out by her mother and leave.

Two weeks ago, she found a single, white rose in her locker with a silver ring delicately wrapped around its stem. The note attached was from Jack, *I promise to save you.*

II. “*After taking out ‘The Gardener,’ Rose will sneak out of the garden...*”

Rose is moving swiftly through the house, pausing every few minutes to listen through the darkness. The sound of her own shallow breathing mixes with the choir of bullfrogs and

crickets chirping outside, its usually comforting melody dissipated by the twinkling chime of the cuckoo clock in the parlor. It threatens to reveal her, tolling out the one o'clock hour with a groaning wheeze as its golden bird launches out with beady eyes staring accursedly at her. She needs to hurry up. Jack and Tyler will be arriving any moment. Rose steps cautiously through the maze of laundry baskets and oversized, vintage furniture—clutching the black suitcase to her chest—praying that she's put enough Ambien in the tea. The internet had told her two tablets would be sufficient, according to the weight and height she had provided, but she had dropped in a few extra, just to be safe. She nearly screams out as her elbow knocks over the bowl she had carelessly left on the kitchen counter—the hard plastic thunders violently against the wooden floor. She presses a hand to her mouth, trying to suffocate her gasp as the silence wraps around her, a thick blanket of dread. She listens to her mother murmur something from down the hall, the box spring whining as she turns over. Rose breathes out evenly.

A pair of headlights flash once through the kitchen window, five seconds pass, then they flash again: they're here. She waits until they repeat the signal once more, being careful not to shine the light too long. It's time. She steps over the overturned bowl and walks towards the garage door. She gently turns the door knob, listening to the soft click of the inner mechanism as it releases the lock—and her. She turns around one last time, taking in the novelty farm animals, the pruning yellow sunflowers on the table, and the photographs of her childhood proudly displayed over the broken ice maker on the refrigerator. She will miss it all. Rose takes one last look down the hall at her mother's room, its door opened just enough for her to see the sleeping form heaving lightly on the bed. She whispers, "goodbye Mother," before pushing open the wooden door and stepping out into the cool grey of the garage.

I. "Meanwhile, 'Silver' and I will be waiting outside the gate..."

When Jack was a small boy, his mother would read him bed time stories about brave knights that saved beautiful damsels from towers and evil witches.

He met his best friend, Tyler during Little league baseball in second grade—they both rode the bench for most of the season.

At age ten, Jack's father returned home after serving three tours with the United States Army. He built an obstacle course in their backyard, promising to make a man out of his *pansy* son.

During his ninth grade math class, Jack would draw intricate sketches of Rose and her tangles of pretty blonde curls. It took three weeks for him to finally build up the courage to put one of them in her locker. When he saw her the next day, her face was as red as her name.

At fifteen, Jack met Rose's mother when he went to her house and dropped off the sweater she had left on the back of her chair in the lab science room. Jack felt as if her eyes were trying to disintegrate him as he explained himself. She slammed the door in his face when he asked to see Rose.

Yesterday, Jack snuck into his father's room and stole the 'emergency funds' he kept hidden in his sock drawer. He considered it an even exchange for all the years he never received a birthday present.

II. "for you to come out and open the door for us..."

Jack chews at the hangnail on the end of his thumb as his eyes remain locked on the metal door, waiting for it to rise open like a drawbridge and reveal his princess. He glances at his watch for the twentieth time as he begins calculating how long it should take Rose to get through the house. They can't afford to waste a single moment. He secretly prays that his father doesn't wake up and see the sedan missing from the driveway—at least until they're a good thousand

miles or so away. By then the old man can scream and piss all he wanted, maybe even throw a punch or two at the wall.

Jack leans back in his seat and watches Tyler tap his hands against the steering wheel to the song playing softly on the radio. The thick frames of his glasses keep falling down his nose, forcing Tyler to pause his drum solo to push them back up, as he starts whistling the chorus. Jack is surprised at how upbeat Tyler is. Hell, the fact he's even here is amazing. Who would have thought that Tyler, the boy who practically has a panic attack every time Mrs. Connelly passes back their math quizzes, would actually be willing to sneak out at midnight and drive his best friend and his girlfriend to the train station like a pair of star-crossed runaways. Now that's true friendship. The song ends in a clash of cymbals and thumps before melting into a commercial for some breakthrough hair product.

Tyler looks over at Jack and smiles warmly. "You nervous?"

"Me? Nah bro, I'm good." Jack can feel his entire leg shaking like a wet dog and he quickly stamps his foot on the ground, hoping that Tyler can't see it through the dark. "Jesus, what's taking her so long? You think she'd never walked through her own house before."

"Easy dude. She's probably just making sure the drugs have had enough time to take effect. How long do they last?"

Jack slips a hand into his coat pocket and takes out the small white bottle. He holds it up to the glow of the interior lights and squints at the blue label.

"Um...take two tablets with water every four to six hours... blah blah blah... do not exceed twelve pills in a course of twenty-four hours...it doesn't say anything about effect time."

"I'm sure if Rose gave them to her they've kicked in by now."

Jack pauses for a moment and then looks out at the still closed garage door. They've been there so long that the car is chilled with the night air and Tyler turns on the heat, which at first brings more dust and moldy air into the car than it does heat. What if Rose didn't give her mother the pills? Jack brings his thumb back up into his mouth and starts gnawing it as the urge to get out and start banging on the closed door sparks in his mind. What if Rose got scared and told her mother everything: about them, the plan, their future? He would never be allowed to see her again.

Jack feels a warm hand around his wrist as Tyler gently pulls his thumb out of his mouth. He runs his fingers soothingly over Jack's hand, ignoring the wet gloss of saliva on his knuckle, and looks out the windshield. The garage door is still closed. Jack studies Tyler's eyelashes under the interior lights, admiring they way they perfectly curl into little crescents under his perfect eyebrows. It takes Rose a good forty minutes to get hers to look like that. He can smell his breath, a mixture of too many orange tic-tacs and Mountain Dew, as it puffs against his cheek in a warm cloud. They sit in silence for a few minutes, listening to the murmur of the radio and the motor shutter, as it finally releases heat into the car. Tyler starts humming as a catchy song flows out of the radio, his hand still wrapped around Jack's. Jack knows exactly what he is thinking. *Why not me? Why her?* Jack sighs out bitterly, sometimes he wishes he could share Tyler's feelings. He shakes his head absently. But right now, he wishes they weren't there at all.

Jack jumps a little as Tyler drops his hand and grabs the steering wheel. He looks out the window and sees the garage door inching open, the lights inside spilling out onto the driveway. His shoulders tense up as a slender leg emerges from the shadows, followed by a torso in a deep emerald sweater, all leading up to the golden curls of his beloved Rose. Jack shifts forward against his seat belt as Tyler slowly brings the car forward. The frost caking the corners of the

windshield sparkles as they crawl closer into the light. They're a few feet from the garage when Jack sees Rose's face cringe before she whirls around, turning her back to them. A black mass creeps out from inside the garage, swallowing Rose's shadow in its wake. Jack feels his heart charge into the inside of his chest as he quickly unbuckles his seat belt and grips the door handle.

"What the hell are you doing?" Tyler hisses.

"She's in trouble."

"I can see that dummy. You wanna get caught too? Your dad will kill you."

Jack holds the door handle for a moment and stares out at Rose. Her hands are up in defense, but she hasn't moved an inch. Without a second thought, Jack throws open the door and runs towards her.

"Rose!" he calls out.

Rose is shaking her head back and forward, her blue eyes shining like fog lights through mist. Her lips are moving but no sound is coming out. It feels like an eternity before Jack finally launches himself forward and wraps his arms protectively around Rose's waist. He quickly kisses Rose's curls, breathing her in before looking up into her terrified face. He follows her eyes into the garage. He instantly regrets it.

Rose's mother is standing in the middle of the garage, her bathrobe hanging undone over her flower print nightgown, a shotgun pointed at them. A sliver of silver catches the corner of his eye as a loud popping sound echoes out into the night, followed by a gasping thud and Rose's sharp scream— "Mother!"

I. *"Then we'll just put your stuff in the trunk..."*

When Norma Wilson was a young girl, she spent her days fishing and playing on the family farm with her twin sister until their mother came home from the diner at five o'clock—their father refused to let them inside before then.

At eleven, Norma whimpered quietly in her sister's arms, her blood and tears soaking them both, after falling off her pony and breaking her nose. Their father was too drunk to help.

In high school, Norma walked sleepy-eyed through her classes and worked nights as a waitress at her new step-father's restaurant. Her work would follow her well into the night as she went home to clean up the half-empty beer cans, candy wrappers, and popcorn kernels left by her three step-brothers on the living room carpet.

At nineteen, Norma's world crumbled when her twin sister said yes to her long time boyfriend and moved to a small cottage an hour away.

Four years later, Norma is talking to a sweet boy with stunning brown eyes at the local café—they elope six months later. After the honeymoon, Norma notices a dark change in her new husband as he breaks *another* piece of dishware against the kitchen wall.

Eleven months later, she testifies against her husband for the murder of their baby boy and the attempted murder of its twin. She tries to shush her surviving child, a little girl named Rose, as he says, *I just wanted him to stop crying.*

II. "*From there, we'll drive like hell to the train station...*"

Norma stares at the overturned garbage cans to her left, their rusty metal still humming. The smell of sulfur stings her nostrils as a wisp of smoke dissipates into the light bulb above her head. She has never fired a gun. Not until now. Norma sways slightly as a hoard of tiny colored dots attack her eyeballs. The blood is pumping in her ears like a syncopating bass drum, flowing into a smooth wave of sound. She can taste its overflow in her mouth. She had been asleep when

she heard the thundering crash, followed by hushed whispers and the soft patter of foot steps—kidnappers, she had thought. Her heart had pounded against her ribcage as she ran to her Father's safe and taken out the old shotgun from its dusty resting place. Norma had sworn to never use it, but there was no way in hell she was going to let these bastards steal her baby girl on her watch.

There's another sound too, like a car engine stuttering along the road. Norma swipes at the sticky residue on the back of her neck. Something is definitely wrong, but she can't figure it out. She tries to think but her mind is blocked off, as if her brain had been blended and now its remains were shifting through her mind like a puree of confusion. The dots are converging into a black slate before her eyes. She tries to blink them away but it only seems to smear them more. What was she doing? Norma can just make out two figures standing in a bright light through the inky darkness. One of them is faced towards her, talking in a strange tongue and throwing its arms around like a schizophrenic octopus. It comes right up to her face, and for a moment, Norma swears it looks just like her darling Rose. But that's impossible, my Rose is in bed, just as she should be on a school night. She smiles to herself, what a strange dream. Dream Rose is looking at her with tear-stained eyes, her mouth moving frantically. The sound is distant and doesn't match the motions of her lips. Something about the sun? Norma tries to focus, but it all gets lost as the dense blackness floods her mind and swallows her whole.

I. *“Once we're there, we'll change into our disguises...”*

When Tyler was a young boy, his father would take him to the racetrack every Friday night to to watch the speed of the neon cars as they raced in circles.

At age eight, Tyler would spend his afternoons building toy models of cars and castles with Jack to the music of Bob Dylan and Jimi Hendrix. The two were inseparable.

At age twelve, Tyler kissed Jack during a sleepover dare. It had started as a game, something to try, and it surprised him how much he'd liked it and wanted to do it again.

Two years later, Tyler realized he was in love with Jack while listening to him passionately describe his CAD project: the blue-prints for a Victorian castle. Jack had simply sat in his seat, letting Tyler's 'I'm in love with you' fade in the air before saying, *Oh...ok. I'm a little surprised and confused but...thanks. I guess.*

A month ago, Tyler's heart broke when he saw Jack and Rose kiss for the first time.

Three days ago, Tyler skipped gym class to meet Jack and Rose under the bleachers to figure out the final details of Rose's escape. As Jack handed him the spare keys to his father's sedan, Tyler silently prayed that he would change his mind before they got to the train station.

II. *"Then go buy the tickets using the money I got from 'General Douchebag'..."*

Rose is screaming at her mother, the sound bouncing off the walls like a racquet ball, "Mother what have you done!"

Jack is kneeling down at her feet, pounding pathetically on Tyler's warm chest. His hands are covered in tiny smears of blood as he continues to press his fists against his bleeding chest, cursing himself for not paying attention in CPR class. This was slowly turning into a bad horror movie.

"Tyler! Tyler stay with me. Tyler!"

Jack jumps back as Tyler grabs his hands with his own. He bites back a scream as Tyler's eyes snap open.

"Dude! Would you stop hitting me? I'm not dead."

Tyler slowly pulls himself up into a sitting position, groaning and hissing as he gently touches the bloody spot on his chest. Jack throws his arms around him, nearly knocking them both over again.

“I thought she killed you,” he whispers.

“She might as well have. Fuck! It hurts so bad,” Tyler says as Jack gently pulls back his shirt. Underneath the oozing blood, he can see the outline of a searing cut running diagonally across the right of Tyler’s chest.

“You’re gonna be ok.”

Jack quickly takes off Tyler’s over-shirt and twists it into a makeshift gauze—a surprisingly useful skill he learned from ‘the General’—before carefully pressing it down on the wound and tying it around Tyler’s chest and shoulder.

“There, that should last you until we can stop at a hospital or something.”

Tyler’s eyes are shimmering with pain as he bites his lip. “Fuck, Jack! What are we gonna do? I can’t drive like this.”

Jack softly runs a hand through Tyler’s hair and shushes him soothingly while repeating, “You’re ok, you’re ok.” He takes off his jacket and gives it to Tyler as he starts to shiver. There’s a rattling noise as the bottle of Ambien falls out of his pocket and rolls off into a puddle of moonlight. Jack reaches over to grab it and discovers the broken remains of the sedan’s headlight hanging out over the car’s bumper. The broken glass is scattered across the floor, twinkling like jagged stars in the soft glow of the working headlight. He pops two tablets out of the bottle and feeds them to Tyler. Within minutes, Tyler’s whimpers of pain become silent, although his body is still shaking.

Jack looks up as a crunching sound comes from behind the car. He can just make out a large figure running across the front lawn towards the house next door with its lights shining brightly. There's a silhouette standing inside one of the windows. It looks like a woman with a phone in her hand.

Jack jumps to feet and quickly pulls Tyler up from the floor.

“Rose! Rose we gotta go. *Now.*”

Rose is standing in front of her mother with her eyes focused on the gun. Norma is swaying slightly, her eyes blank, faintly humming to herself. Rose steps towards her, keeping her hands raised in defense as she softly inches closer. “Mother, give me the gun.” Her mother's lips purse with insistence as a sound, low and fluid-like, melts out between her lips. Rose slowly moves a hand towards the gun, the sound of her breathe seems to be getting louder, filling the garage and threatening to suffocate them all, as she finally grips the warm metal in her hands. She gently pulls the weapon towards her, with surprisingly no resistance, and then places it on the ground before sliding it into the far corner of the garage.

“Rose!” Jack yells.

“I can hear you,” She says turning around to see the boys staring nervously out the door. Tyler's chest is bleeding through the shirt—the bright red stain making the rest of his body look pale in the moonlight. He's trembling a little, but his feet are planted steadily on the ground like a warrior ready for battle.

“We need to get out of here,” Jack says. “Your neighbors are calling the cops.”

“Then what are you standing around for?” she asks running towards her suitcase. “Let's move!”

“Wait! What about your mom?” Tyler asks. “We can't just leave her like this.”

Norma is humming loudly as she twirls around the garage like a ballerina. She seems completely oblivious of the boys and Rose as she continues her routine.

“She’ll be fine.” Rose snaps. “Let’s go.”

“But look at her. She’s probably gonna hurt herself with like a rake or something.”

“Dude, are you kidding me right now?” Jack asks as he tries sweeping some of the glass out from under the tires with his foot. “That crazy bitch just shot you and you wanna help her?”

“I highly doubt she meant to. And besides, Rose! She’s your mother. I know you want to get out of here but surely not like this?”

Rose stops and looks at her mother, now sitting calmly on the floor. She’s staring at Rose with her head tilted, like a child watching television.

“Oh hello Dream Rose,” she says cheerfully. “You look nice today. But why are you outside? You know you’re not supposed to go out without my permission!”

Rose grits her teeth as hatred fills her body. Even when her mother was drugged off her ass, all she cared about was if she was locked up like some prized pony. All her life, Rose had been stuck inside the house, always dying to see the world but never aloud to. After all, she might get hurt or worst and how could her mother function knowing that? Rose smiles. Let her get hurt, she doesn’t care anymore. She looks out at the open garage door, the busted sedan shining like a carriage waiting to take her away.

“She’s fine,” she says gripping her bag. “Now come on! We’re gonna miss the train.”

“But Rose—” Tyler says.

The rest of his words are lost in the high pitched whine of a police cruiser as blue and red lights flash from outside the door.

III. “And then we’ll just hop on the train and live happily ever after.”

“Come out,” a voice demands.

Jack looks at Rose helplessly. “What do we do?”

Rose chews her lip. They should have talked about this. Their plan had seemed so perfect, so simple, that it had never occurred to them to make a backup version. Especially one that involved running from the cops. Rose takes a final look at her mother, swaying and humming to herself, in her blood specked pajamas. She looks like a five-year-old who’s just had strawberry jam for the first time. It’s grotesque and heartwarming all at once. She turns to Jack, her brave knight in a leather jacket staring at her mother as if she were a side show attraction. Tyler is calmly standing there, waiting for her next move. Even with his bloodstained shirt, he looks like the sanest of them all. She searching his eyes for answers, hoping that he will understand what she needs him to do.

The voice outside threatens that their forces are ready to take them into custody.

Tyler stares at her a moment, his eyes penetrating hers, then nods understandingly.

Jack is trembling as Rose walks over to him so their faces are inches apart. She gently smooths a piece of hair out of Jack’s face before placing a kiss on his mouth.

“Don’t worry honey,” she says. “I’m used to being locked up.”

Rose watches Tyler walk over to Jack and hold him in place before walking out the door, her boots softly crunching through the broken glass. A shot of cold air enters the garage, sending a wisp of smoke unfurling from the end of the shotgun as if her spirit hadn’t been trapped in the house, but had taken refuge in the double barrel of the gun. Rose holds her hands up in the universal sign of peace as she steps out into the liberating glow of the red and blue lights.

We Never Talked About This

It's a small bathroom: just a push out window, a toilet and sink, and a full length mirror on the back of the door. Cristina doesn't bother with the old fashioned turn lock—it's called knock before you enter. She quickly relieves herself before padding her soiled underwear with a clod of toilet paper. It's not that bad, she decides, before hoisting herself back onto her swollen feet. She turns and lifts up her yellow dress to stare at the smooth slope of her inflated belly in the mirror. She follows the bright pink stretch marks that hug her curves like elastics, seeming to keep her stomach in its round form. In the bright light, she swears she can see the outline of a little hand pressing out towards the mirror, towards her. She smiles.

There's a slight scraping noise as the door knob turns. Cristina yanks her dress down as Jane strolls in and shuts the door. "Having some private time, are we?"

"I was," Cristina snaps back. "Ever heard of knocking?"

"Oh please," Jane says pulling out a cigarette from her blazer pocket, "it's nothing I haven't seen before." She gives Cristina a quick smack on the ass before opening the tiny window and letting out a puff of smoke.

Cristina lets out an annoyed huff before properly adjusting herself in the mirror.

"Where's Sarah?"

"She's fine. She's coloring with that little red head that looks like she's from a musical. What do you call her?"

"Annie."

"Right."

Jane takes another drag off her cigarette before handing it over to Cristina. Cristina sucks in deeply before breathing out the sweet smoke. "Jesus fuck, do I miss these things."

“Careful Mama Cristina,” Jane smirks. “We’re not suppose to say bad words. Remember?”

Cristina playfully slaps her as Jane wraps her arms around her bulging form. She can feel Jane’s even breathing on the back of her neck—it’s much more soothing than the sweaty panting she’s used to feeling from Jane. She leans back into Jane and sighs as she kisses her neck. She can feel Jane’s hands toying with the bottom of her dress.

“Not now, lady.”

“Aw come on, we got time.”

“Time for what, exactly?”

“Don’t play dumb,” Jane says as her hands slide up Cristina’s thighs.

“You wanna get caught?”

“The door has a lock.”

“And if someone starts banging on it and we have to exit together....”

“Then we just say I was being a good, Christian woman by helping my very pregnant friend use the toilet.”

“Ah yes, because I always come out of the bathroom a hot, sweaty mess with smeared lipstick when I pee. Forgive me, I never have time to actually look in the mirror when I finish—nursing duties, you know.”

Jane immediately stops. “You’re a fucking buzz kill sometimes you know that.”

Cristina reluctantly turns around and places a sweet kiss on Jane’s mouth. “What ever happened to *thou shalt naught give into temptation?*”

“How the fuck should I know?”

“Aren’t you *a good, Christian woman?*”

“Yeah, like I’ve ever been to church.”

Cristina laughs. “Come on, it’s about to start.”

“MMMAAMMAA CRRRIISSTTIINNA!”

Cristina sees Sarah in an oversized PINK sweatshirt at a crowded craft table where Annie is already waving excitedly at the empty stool next to them.

“Hey hey, cupcake,” Cristina coos as Sarah runs forward and attempts to wrap her stick figure arms around her squishy thighs. “You ready to have fun today?”

“Yeah! I got my poster all picked out and everything. Right, mom?” she asks Jane who is currently typing away on her iPhone.

“Um...yeah baby. That’s fine. Just stay where Cristina can see you.”

Cristina crosses her arms, wishing she could smack Jane’s goddamn phone to the floor, as her work turns yet another moment of Sarah’s happiness into a frostbitten ball of disappointment. She shouldn’t be surprised by this. It’s how things have been since she first met Jane.

It’s not that Jane’s a bad parent. She’s always on top of Sarah’s appointments and constantly pesters the doctors with questions about the newest trial medications or surgical breakthroughs that she finds advertised online. Every Wednesday, she gets out of work early and takes Sarah and Annie out for lunch at *Panera Bread*—her own meal left untouched so she doesn’t smear her lipstick. Then they go and get their nails done, the conversation of the two girls (and the stylists) kept to a minimum, while Jane takes a conference call over speakerphone. She was born into a legacy of Harvard lawyers and big-haired, “Little Miss Texas” pageants—a world where even the smallest slip-up could inexcusably chase away a potential client or ruin a career. And sometimes, she just gets stuck in business mode. She always turns off her work

phone at exactly 6:00pm so she can cook dinner and read to Sarah, but she'll keep it in her pocket for the rest of the night. Whenever she and Cristina have a date, Jane makes sure to use her calendar app to mark down the exact day, time, and location—sometimes she even sets an alarm to an hour before to remind herself when to get ready. Once Cristina asked her if there was a fire and she could only save her work phone or her, which would she pick and Jane said, “You, obviously. I can always transfer my files to a new phone but I can’t find another you.”

And Cristina smiled and said, “Same here.”

But Jane likes to whisper her partner’s name, David, in her sleep.

Annie stops coloring when she notices Sarah looking pathetically at the sky blue poster hanging half-heartedly out of Jane’s hand. Her face turns bitter then determined, as she quickly gets up and snatches the falling poster from Jane, being extra careful not to crinkle the edges. She pauses to wipe away any excess glitter off the table with her sweatshirt sleeve before placing it, and a large box of crayons, in front of Sarah.

Sarah just stares at the poster quietly, her blue eyes shimmering like the sky before a rainstorm. Annie moves behind Sarah and gently wraps her arms around her waist, her bright orange curls shielding them like a mass of fluffy sheep’s wool.

“I like your poster.”

Sarah doesn’t say anything as she leans back into Annie’s arms.

“It’s a pretty color. I like how it kinda matches your eyes.”

“You’re just saying that,” Sarah says. “It’s ugly. I haven’t even decorated it yet.”

“Well start putting stuff on it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, like...”

The two girls start exchanging ideas while Cristina fishes out a picture from the Ziploc sandwich bag currently stapled to the left hand corner of the poster. The school's photographer apparently tried airbrushing Sarah's abnormally pale skin to a warm, tannish color, leaving the otherwise cute photo with a Dorito-orange hue.

"Do you like it Mama Cristina?" Sarah asks. "Mom does; she says I look like a perfect little doll."

"It's a...very nice photo, honey."

"You hate it."

"No, it's cute."

"You're lying! Your pants are gonna catch on fire!"

"Nuh uh! I'm not even wearing pants."

Cristina runs a hand through the shallow tuff of curls on top of Sarah's head; smiling at how tense her face is as she carefully writes her name in purple Sharpie. A dustpan scrapes across the floor as the event coordinator—an overly enthusiastic blonde with a bleached smile and too much mascara—sweeps up some fallen scraps from the checkered tile and tosses it in the garbage can.

"Let's remember to keep things tidy, gals! Just because we're having fun doesn't mean we have to be a bunch of pig pens too!" She flashes a bright smile before a glob of green paint splats on her cheek as Annie lifts up a paint brush. Annie nervously hands a paper towel to the reddening blonde as she wipes at her face, smearing the paint further.

A few people at the table pause their conversations to laugh, their giggles dissolving into rubbernecking looks as Jane finally struts over, taking the attention of a few men—and their

jealous wives—with her. One of them tries to give up his stool to her but Jane simply smiles and waves him off, presenting the seat to Cristina instead.

“Oh Sarah don’t put that on there,” Jane says as Sarah is about to glue down an old photo of them together. “I look awful.”

“But I like this picture. See, I’m wearing my pretty princess costume!” she says proudly, holding the photo up for Jane to inspect.

“Fine. Then could you at least cut me out of it? I don’t need a reminder of that hideous haircut.”

“But I don’t have any scissors.”

“You can have mine,” Annie says as she hands Sarah a pair of bright orange safety scissors.

“Thanks Annie!”

A faint blush colors across their faces as their hands touch. They stare at each other for a moment, smiling innocently enough, before Sarah leans in to tell Annie a secret—though not in words. Cristina stands up in shock as all the heat in her body rises into her mouth. Jane bites her lip, staining her pristine white smile with a streak of pink.

Sarah is kissing Annie on the lips.

One of Jane’s admirers coughs nervously while an older witness mutters a curse in disgust. The teens at the table simply shrug their shoulders before directing their attention back to their iPhones.

Sarah looks up at Jane, her blue eyes puzzled. “Mom, why are you all red?”

Jane’s mouth faintly twitches as her eyes scream to Cristina for help. Cristina shrugs; she doesn’t know what the hell to say.

“I’m just a little surprised sweetie...”

“*Your* surprised,” laughs an older woman with a golden cross hanging around her neck.

“About what?” Sarah asks tilting her head. Annie, noticing a pair of ladies staring and whispering at them, moves closer to Sarah until their shoulders touch.

“Well... because you kissed Annie on the mouth...”

“But Mama Cristina says you’re supposed to give kisses when people give you presents.”

Again, Jane turns to Cristina, her eyes begging her to jump in.

“That’s right honey,” Cristina says slowly. “But only with close friends or family. And it’s on the cheek, not the lips.”

“Unless of course they’re your third cousin,” the old woman says seriously. Cristina and Jane stare at her dumbfounded until she starts cracking up.

“Oh, I’m just messing with ya darlin’! Don’t you be looking so rosy faced either. I’ve got six grandkids of my own, and let me tell you, you wouldn’t *believe* half the stuff I’ve caught them doin’ with one another.”

The glossy warmth of her laughter thaws Cristina and her frozen face of shock. She nudges Jane to join in as her own chuckles sound like the playback of a bad studio sitcom. A few of the younger kids smile while their parents laugh understandingly. See, it’s just an innocent misunderstanding. Don’t kids just do the silliest things?

People around the table start returning to their own conversations as Sarah turns to Cristina with a troubled look on her face.

“But you and mom kiss each other on the mouth all the time and you don’t even give each other presents.”

Fuck.

The old woman twists the cross in her hand. “Are you ladies married?”

“You’re kidding right?” snaps a redheaded woman standing next to the man who offered his stool. “Of course they’re not married! That’s Janet Churchill. You know, wife of David Rosewood? They’re only the best lawyers in town.”

“Oh why thank you,” Jane beams.

“Although I’m not entirely sure what the hell this is,” she says gesturing her hands in front of Sarah, Cristina, and Jane.

“This,” Jane says, “is nothing more than just a classic example of ‘be careful what you do in front of your kids.’ My daughter here was just referring to a custom that my friend, Cristina, and I perform from her culture. Right, Cristina?”

“Oh...um yeah! In the Spanish community we kiss twice when we say ‘hello’ or ‘goodbye’ with our very close friends.” She turns to Sarah, “Your mom is kind enough to respect my traditions and do this with me, even though she herself is not Spanish.”

“Yes, because that’s how you become multicultural, by learning about other people’s traditions. It’s a great skill for when you’re dealing with a variety of different clients.”

Cristina mentally rolls her eyes as a few of the women look at Jane with pure admiration. Sarah matches it with a perfectly timed eye roll of her own.

“If it’s such a good thing then how come you never show Daddy how to double kiss? Maybe he wants know how to say ‘hi’ in Spanish too!”

The sound of coloring and cutting from the smaller kids—too naïve to understand what has occurred—becomes amplified as silence presses down on the table. Cristina can feel it, the pressure weighing her down to the core, making her ears ring. She did not just say that. Oh my God, she did NOT just say that. Cristina looks at Jane, her face a perfect mirror of shock and

disbelief. Now she really doesn't know what the fuck to say. Jane's phone lights up on the wooden table, the buzzing vibration cutting through the scribbles like a chainsaw as David's name flashes on the screen. The older woman has her head faced downward as if in prayer, the cross tangled around her fingers like a golden snake. Even Jane's admirers avoid eye contact, staring at the posters on the wall as if they had suddenly transformed into a fascinating art gallery of their children's joy and pain.

They are completely alone.

The dark circles under Jane's eyes look like bruises in the harsh fluorescent light, making her fiery blue eyes pop out. Her arms are crossed in composure as her foot taps out viciously. It's her signature pose in the courtroom.

They never talked about this; the possibility of exposure had always been an afterthought, like a shot of adrenaline after a successful date or hook up. It had always lurked in the back of Cristina's mind, entertaining her fantasy while she sat at the nurse's station between calls. She had envisioned it so many times, gone through countless scenarios of comebacks and arguments, of Jane's passionate reveal of their love and what it meant to her.

Cristina's heart cracks and oozes with bitterness as Jane just stands there like a cold, marble pedestal of indifference. It stings worst than any slur Cristina could have imagined.

"You are pathetic," she says.

Sarah is looking at Cristina as if she had just slapped her across the face. Jane snaps her head towards her.

"How dare you speak to my daughter that way!"

Cristina sends a lump down the sandpaper of her throat and into the fiery pit of her stomach.

“I wasn’t talking to her.”

Cristina hears a few gasps from around the table. She can feel their eyes, stalking greedily like a pack of lions surrounding a fresh kill. It’s thrilling and terrifying all at once. Jane stares at her, challenging her to make the next move. Cristina smiles, she wants to put on a show.

She turns to the redheaded woman. “You’re right, honey. Jane and I aren’t married. But we’re not just fuck-buddies either. Or at least, I never thought so.”

Jane is gritting her teeth as murmurs pop up around the table like firecrackers. Most are the basic waves of embarrassment and theory, while a few of the teenagers actually shout out encouragement. One of them, a girl with pink hair and an eyebrow piercing is speaking to the old Christian lady, “Oh lighten up, Grandma. It’s not like they’re gonna hook up on the floor.”

“Cristina, this is *not* the place for this.”

“Aw what’s the matter Jane? I thought you loved being the center of attention.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Oh careful now. We’re not supposed to use bad words, remember?”

Jane pinches the bridge of her nose. “Why are you being like this? Especially in front of Sarah?”

“Because I’m sick of having to keep everything a secret! That’s all our relationship feels like sometimes, just a big, amazing secret! And quite frankly, I’m tired of it. I want to love you without having to worry about if people see us or what they’ll say.”

She stops and looks over at the girls. Annie is holding Sarah as she cries softly into her shoulder. Her tears are just enough to calm Cristina’s blazing fury into a light simmer. She can feel her eyes burn with the steam.

“But most of all, I’m tired of hurting Sarah. For God’s sake Jane! She’s already got enough on her plate and look at what we’ve done to her!”

Jane presses the back of her hand against her mouth. She’s still in her courtroom stance, but it’s wobbling.

Cristina scans the room, meeting every pair of judgmental and sympathetic eyes. She goes in for the kill.

“Either you stand with me or we’re done.”

Jane pauses for a moment, as if she’s trying to pick out some loophole or hidden information from the silence around them. Their jury watches in anticipation, remaining perfectly silent as the children continue to write out their own facts on the sheets in front of them. Sarah’s soft cries are like a muffled lullaby in the background as Cristina feels the baby kick from inside. She gently smooths a soothing hand over her belly. The silence grows heavy as Jane finally meets her eyes. Cristina waits for her to speak, but nothing comes out.

She shakes her head.

Cristina turns away as the whispers around her flood the air like the tears in her eyes. She runs out of the cafeteria, leaving the doors open for everyone to see.

Six months later, Cristina finishes the vitals on her patient—Mr. Morris, an eighty-six-year-old male with the mind of an eighteen-year-old—as her assistant walks in like a cat approaching water.

“Cristina, when you’re all set there’s someone here to see you.”

Cristina gives her a questioning look, receiving an equally confusing grin in return. She gives Mr. Morris a gentle pat on the leg and reminds him to take his medicine at noon, before

walking out into the hall with his chart. She nearly drops the clipboard in her hands as her brain overloads from the sight in front of her—Jane is sitting in one of the plastic chairs, her legs crossed politely, with a magazine in her hands. Her former lover has gotten sloppy in her absence. The crisp, Gucci suit that Jane had always strutted around in has been replaced by an older, modest cut sweater and khaki skirt. There are deep bags under her eyes, highlighted by the grey streaks in her messy bun. Jane practically radiates warmth as she tucks a loose hair neatly behind her ear—she seems almost motherly.

Jane looks up from her magazine and pauses with her hand hovering over her head as if she's trying to shield herself from the bright lights overhead. They stare at each other for a few moments as the hospital bustles around them in a whirlwind of doctors, dripping iv's, and beepers.

Cristina clears her throat. "Hello Mrs. Churchill. What can I do for you today?"

Jane puts down her magazine and smooths an invisible wrinkle from her skirt. "Hello Cristina. Aren't you going to ask me how I am first?"

"How are you Mrs. Churchill?"

Jane's eyes winch as she smiles warmly. "I'm well Cristina. Although I'm rather shocked at your formality. Surely even hospital standards can give way to old friends?"

"It does—but we're not."

"Fair enough. I suppose you're right, we do have a far more personal history."

Cristina snaps her jaw shut as an RN rushes by with a medical tray, her eyes darting between the two women. Cristina is surprised by her own calmness; she expected herself to be a high voiced, bubbling mess by now. She breathes deeply out of her nose, trying to ignore the annoying, nasally wheeze coming out. This is the last thing she needs today.

“Was there something you needed from me Mrs. Churchill? If you’re looking for answers regarding your daughter’s care I suggest you go see, Isabella in A1. She’s in charge of her treatments now.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Jane says standing up, “but I’ve already spoken with Isabella this morning. Actually, Sarah is doing exceptionally well under her care—the doctors say she may even be healthy enough to skip her treatments for a few weeks.”

“That’s incredible!” Cristina says a bit too excitedly.

Jane smiles. “Yes it’s been quite a journey. Although, there is one thing that’s still bothering her. And unfortunately, you’re the only one who can help her.”

Cristina’s heart starts wringing with concern. Even after everything that had happen between her and Jane, she couldn’t deny how much she missed Sarah; and more importantly, how much she worried about her.

“What’s wrong with her?”

Jane steps forward so she is directly in front of Cristina, the space between them so much further now that Cristina has had the baby. Jane seems to study her for a moment, her eyes plotting behind their wire-rimmed glasses. She clears her throat.

“I’m afraid she misses you terribly.”

Cristina blooms like a frozen flower in spring, she tries to keep a professional mask over the joy bursting inside her.

“Aw, well that’s very sweet. Tell her I miss her too—she was one of my favorites you know.

“I know. You were always her favorite too.” Jane looks down at the floor and pushes another loose strand behind her ear. “You still are,” she practically whispers.

A gurney tumbles down the hall as a group of orderlies maneuver it into the empty room across the way. Jane and Cristina quickly flatten themselves against the wall, the motion causing their hands to brush up against one another. Neither of them move, allowing their breaths to mix and exchange as they stare at each other silently. The warmth from Jane's body seems to jump onto Cristina's skin, making Cristina pull back her hand as if she'd been burned. She moves away from Jane and they stand in silence a few minutes, letting the sounds of the hospital fill the void between them. It's funny; they had met in this hospital, loved in this hospital, and yes, even broke up in it. This cornucopia of death and illness had been their sanctuary—what happened?

Cristina's beeper goes off in a frenzy as a code thirty-seven rings out through the hospital intercom. Down the hall, Cristina can see the group of orderlies moving a defibrillator into the room where they had just rushed the gurney in moments earlier. She silences her pager and turns to Jane.

"I'm sorry, I have to go."

"I understand. Nursing duties right? They barely give you time to look in the mirror."

Cristina giggles. "Yeah. I can never tell if my makeup's on straight."

"It is," Jane says. "You look good."

"Thank you. You too."

The barrier between them starts to crumble as the sound of Cristina's pager rings out like an aggressive sledgehammer. Cristina can feel the warmth clearer now, it's like the soft glow of a children's nightlight, comforting and safe. She doesn't want to leave—not like this. The pager's insistence gets louder, urging Cristina to return to her world of order and medicine. She has to listen.

"I should go."

“Of course. Go do your thing.”

“Yeah.” Cristina starts stepping backwards down the hall. “Well it was nice to see you again, Mrs. Churchill.”

“Miss,” Jane blurts out blushing. “I mean, it’s Miss Anderson now. I’m recently divorced.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“No worries. Goodbye, Cristina.”

“Good bye, Miss Anderson.”

Cristina turns around and starts walking down the hall, trying to ignore the building pressure in her gut and get to the patient. She knows it’s a stupid idea—after all, just because there’s a chance doesn’t mean she should take it. Cristina can feel Jane’s eyes burning into the back of her. It’s a terrible idea. She shouldn’t be getting her hopes up like this over a silly little chance. Cristina stops as three more nurses run past her. She bites her lip and takes it anyway.

“Hey...Jane?”

“Yeah,” she says.

“I um... I get off at four. Would you maybe wanna go...grab a coffee or something?”

Jane smiles so brightly that her face becomes ten years younger in a matter of seconds.

“I would love to. Although judging from the commotion down there, I’ll assume it’ll be more like five?”

Cristina’s pager goes off again. “Better make that 5:30.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Cristina nods before racing down the hall, her heart soaring as her pager sings out joyfully amidst the chaos.

We Talked About This

The paper towel wrapped securely around Rebecca's wrist is all but shredded from her constant tearing and picking, allowing the tender flesh underneath to breathe through the holes. Rebecca notices the forgotten house key in the front of the wooden door and jiggles it back and forth until it finally slides out of the lock. She grips the door handle for a moment, her ear turned towards the dirty window, before slipping inside and hiding near the shoe closet. Brad is washing his hands at the sink, talking to Grandma Georgia as she pours a cup of coffee.

“The four-wheeler got stuck out back AGAIN! When the is mom gonna have it fixed—what the fuck happened to you?”

Rebecca tenses up as her Grandmother's eyes grasp onto the ragged makeshift gauze around her arm. She considers making up a fake injury. It wouldn't be too hard, and hell, it'd definitely buy her some time. But she can't keep this covered up forever.

Rebecca holds her bandaged wrist against her stomach. “I um... I got a tattoo.”

The sound of the water running fills the air as Grandma Georgia just stands there, blinking as if Rebecca's words were just floating around her ears. Finally, she does something shocking—she laughs.

“Oh sweet Jesus, Rebecca Lynn! You almost gave me a heart attack. Here we are thinking you've gone out and hurt yourself.” Her Grandmother is still shaking her head and laughing as Rebecca simply stands there gawking like an accident bystander.

“You're not mad?”

“Why would I be? It's your body, honey. I mean, I personally don't care for them but what do I know? Let's see what you got.”

Rebecca opens up the silverware drawer and takes out a pair of blue scissors. She carefully pulls back the remains of the paper towel, ignoring the wave of flaring pain as the matted down center resists, then peels back. The underside is stained with a kaleidoscope of leftover ink, greasy ointment, and blood. She throws it on the counter—and receives a disgusted look from Brad and his clean hands—before proudly displaying her wrist out towards them.

“What the fuck is that? An onion on wheels?”

A burst of rage surges through Rebecca as her secret explodes through the room like sunlight. “No, dumbass, it’s a carriage.”

“If you say so. What’d that set you back? Five-hundred bucks?”

“No! Why the fuck do you care what I paid? It’s not your money.”

“You’re right, it’s probably mom’s.”

“That’s enough,” Grandma Georgia says as she moves between them with her arms spread out like a crossing guard blocking oncoming traffic. The top of her head barely reaches their chests and yet, they can still feel the stern slap of her eyes as Grandma Georgia places a hand on both of their shoulders.

“Let’s watch the language, this isn’t a bar room. Now, Brad, you leave your sister alone. I know you’re upset but I’m sure you can square things away with your mother when she gets home.” She glances down at Rebecca’s wrist and adjusts her glasses. “It’s very nice dear. What did your mother say?”

Rebecca remains silent as she wipes the moist palms of her hands on her pants’ leg.

Brad smiles. “Mom doesn’t know does she?”

“Of course she does. She went with me to the consult.”

“No way! I remember the last time you dragged her out to get a tattoo. There’s no way she’d let you get another one after that.”

Rebecca pathetically swallows like a fish left out of the bucket on a boat. “Mom knew how to get there! How was I supposed to know she didn’t know the way back?”

They hear crunching gravel through the kitchen window as their Mother pulls in the driveway. Rebecca’s brain seems to shut down as she quickly yanks her sleeve down, then back up as a blast of pain radiates through her arm. She tries to hide her face but it’s too late—Brad’s smile gets bigger.

“Oh you’re SO screwed! I’m telling Mom.”

Brad bolts out the screen door and down the walkway like an oversized horse as their mother exits the car with a few bags of groceries. Rebecca watches behind the safety of the kitchen window as Brad greets her before making a sharp left into the opened garage door. Beside her, Grandma Georgia is calmly stirring a packet of sugar into her coffee.

“Well, it’s just about time for my Red Sox.” She reaches up to open the cupboard, making sure to place a shielding hand near Rebecca’s head, before taking out a half-eaten bag of circus peanuts.

“Can’t you just stay with me for a few minutes?”

“Sorry, dear; but it’s your problem now. You got it, you got to face the music.”

Rebecca paces restlessly as Grandma Georgia walks away. She wishes she could just run and hide under her bed like she did as a little girl.

The back latch of her Mother’s mini van echoes loudly as it slams shut outside.

Rebecca blows gently on her wrist as an itch starts pulsing through it. The intricate pattern of blue veins is gone now, covered up by the shimmering turquoise and sapphire of her

tattoo. She lifts her arm into the soft glow of the window until the artwork on her wrist becomes highlighted by the grease of the ointment. It's not her first one—that was on her back, in a place that kept it well hidden, a place where she could only see it if she painfully craned her neck in the bathroom mirror. Her mother had chosen the spot.

She had wanted this new tattoo for so long, had hidden money for months in her car's dashboard. That's what the first consultation had been for—to get the tattoo she dreamed of—a realistic glass slipper, not the cartoonish pumpkin carriage she had settled on. But her mother had insisted on checking the place out—inevitably flipping out when she heard the estimate. The shame Rebecca felt walking past the the shop's *NO FUCKING CRY BABIES* sign didn't come close to the rant she got on the way home. It wasn't her fault the design cost almost six-hundred dollars. Ok, maybe a little bit. She knew a tattoo from a shop with that many trophies was bound to ring up a hefty price tag. But that's what she had wanted.

She can still remember feeling the twisting cling of saran wrap inside her stomach as she made the consultation. Her Mother had been downstairs folding laundry, peacefully unaware of what Rebecca was planning. It was a delicious feeling that she had cherished in secret—until the night before her actual appointment. The exhilarating high of being her own person had crumbled when she remembered that she would 1) be going somewhere completely out of her twenty-minute driving comfort zone, 2) have to act like a badass in front of a bunch of tatted up and pierced out strangers, and 3) be imprinted with this thing forever. The anxiety had been too much—she ran straight to her Momma and spilled her guilty guts out. Just like she was about to do now.

Only this time, she wasn't going to apologize.

The sound of rustling plastic comes from outside the door, followed by a grunt and the jingle of falling keys. Rebecca musters up her best “good girl” smile before going outside to greet her Mother, whose hands are full of groceries, on the front steps.

“Hey, Becca. I picked up some Wendy’s for supper. I figured we’d take it easy tonight. You know, kick back. Maybe watch a movie or something.”

“Oh sounds good, Ma.”

All the macho man confidence that Rebecca had immediately drains out of her. She can feel the sweat pooling under her armpits as her Mother goes inside to empty her load. The sun beams down on her back like a giant neon sign advertising her guilt as she paces in circles. A crisp breeze blows through the yard, sending a few hairs into her mouth, and scattering the piles of gold and red leaves across the lawn. The brittle corpses float into a steady waltz across Grandma Georgia’s garden as a pair of hummingbirds seem to be dueling over a blue violet. They continue to fly at one another in a syncopated harmony, their wings a blur in the wind, until another smaller hummingbird with a blue breast swoops in and takes the flower for itself, causing the others to fly away in disappointment. Rebecca laughs quietly.

She quickly covers her wrist with her hand as Mother steps back outside. She knows she should just get it over with—just do it really quick. Like a band aid.

Rebecca hears the familiar click of a lighter as her Mother lights up a cigarette. “Aw look at the hummingbird!” she says pointing to the garden with her cigarette free hand.

“Yeah, you just missed the other two. They were fighting over that flower. That small one got it though.”

“No kidding.”

“Yeah it was weird.”

“I bet.”

There’s a crash from the garage as Rebecca looks up to see Brad peeking out of the small windows of the door. He’s smirking at her, waiting for the show to start. Rebecca runs a hand through her black hair and turns towards her Mother, her hand still wrapped tightly around the tattoo. Her mother’s instinct seems to kick in as she turns to Rebecca with a suspicious smile.

“Becca what’s the matter? You look like you’re hiding something.”

Rebecca thrusts her wrist in front of her Mother’s face—the tattoo beaming out like a bright blue sticker against her skin. The words that have been jostling around inside her suddenly explode out of her mouth like an aggressive waterfall,

“Mom I know you said no but I really wanted this tattoo so I went out behind your back and got it and I hope you’re not mad because it’s something I really wanted and I’m really proud I got it so pretty pretty pleased on’t be mad because I love it and I worked hard for it and I really really like it!”

Rebecca watches as her Mother’s face stretches in shock before scrunching back like an elastic band. “Oh no! Rebecca! We talked about this! I told you that was a bad spot. We talked about it. Didn’t we talk about exactly this?”

The sun seems to disappear as the Mother flings the front door open while Rebecca simply stands there, showering in the relief and shame as it washes over her. Brad runs past her yelling, “SCUMBAG!”, as he enters the house. She can hear her Mother slamming cupboards as she starts putting away the groceries. There’s some loud murmuring followed by the piercing insults Rebecca has been waiting to hear, “That’s going to be a fucking regret!”

Rebecca says nothing back, opting instead to just sit on the steps and let her Mother take her anger out on the food.

But her Mother comes back outside, pointing her finger in Rebecca's face. "If you can afford one of those, you can definitely pay your sister back the three hundred dollars she spent to fix *your* car."

Rebecca nods and then slips past her to get inside. Brad turns to her as he washes his hands at the kitchen sink, "You fucked up big time." The Mother storms back in, throwing more bags on table. She focuses on tearing open the white plastic in front of her, refusing to look at either of them.

Grandma Georgia shuffles in with her now empty coffee cup. "Well, Debbie, now you know how I feel when you used to come home with them."

"You're not helping, Mother! Look at it! She's got a big fucking blue thing on her arm."

"I've seen it dear. I think it's very tasteful, not like those girls that have half their arms covered."

Rebecca moves against the wall as their Mother passes her with two heavy jars of tomato sauce. She opens her mouth to something, anything to help the tension, but nothing comes out. Brad leans against the counter and swats at her with a dishtowel between his hands. "Oh come on Ma. At least it's better than my tattoo."

Their Mother snaps her head to the side to glare at Brad. "Why? What the hell did you get?"

"I got a popsicle stick on my ass."

Their Mother throws her hands up with a boar-like groan before going downstairs into the laundry room, taking Brad's weapon with her. Rebecca is stuck against the wall like a fly in trap paper. She knew this would happen—just not like this. She lightly presses the sensitive skin

on her newly decorated wrist as it turns pink from her touch. Grandma Georgia places her coffee cup in the sink before walking over and placing a kiss on Rebecca's cheek.

“Don't worry about it, honey. She'll cool down soon enough.”

The sun is casting a warm, orange glow over the landscape as Rebecca finally unsticks from the wall and heads outside. She sits down in one of the brown wicker chairs facing the backyard and watches the dog nip at a butterfly dancing around the flower bed. The smell of smoke draws her attention towards the red brick patio farther down the hill where her Mother is sitting underneath the ragged, blue umbrella of the glass table set—her iPhone in one hand and a cigarette in the other. Rebecca guesses that she's playing *Candy Crush*. She watches her Mother swipe, puff, then swipe again. She hasn't said a word to her all evening. Usually her Mother would just scream at her, walk away to cool down, then come back like nothing happened. No need for apologies, it's just how things went between them. But the silent treatment—it's a new beast. Rebecca doesn't like it.

The Mother's face is surprisingly peaceful as she absently plays her game. Every now and then, her fingers bring the burning cigarette to her lips, slowly retreating as she blows out a ribbon of smoke. It takes everything Rebecca has not to make a sound, a gesture, anything to get her attention. Frustrated, she picks up a half chewed water bottle from the recycle bin and starts playing with the dog, throwing the bottle in the opposite direction of The Mother. She wants to talk about it. This whole silent treatment nonsense is starting to gnaw away at her like a swarm of flies. At least when she was shouting she had something to grab onto and could try and make things better. But this? Rebecca sees The Mother's face scrunch up in concentration as she taps

out the ashy remains of her butt onto the ground. She'd give anything to know what she was thinking.

“Candy Crush! Objective: free all the bears!” I can't believe she got it there. I told her it was bad spot! But does she listen? Swipe, drag...puff. First she gets into an accident, and then she goes and does this shit? Swipe, swipe. So what if the guy's not gonna press charges? Swipe, “lollipop wand activated,” swipe. That doesn't mean celebrate! “Bear one found!” Swipe, drag...puff. Must be nice to go out and buy whatever you want. Swipe, swipe. I wish I had that luxury but no, I get stuck with all the bills. Swipe. Like she cares. She doesn't have to worry about nothing. Swipe, drag...swipe. Although she is the only one that helps out around here. puff. It wouldn't kill Brad to take out the trash barrels for once. Swipe, “delicious!” swipe. But at least he makes his own appointments. What's she gonna do when I'm not around to hold her hand? Swipe. “You, cocksucker!” Swipe. Does she really think she's gonna get a decent job with that blue shit on her arm? Swipe, “candy combo!” swipe. Then again, I guess her grades are pretty good. Swipe, swipe- “fucking A!”- swipe. Who am I kidding? I wish mine had been that good in school. “Bear two found!” Swipe. Well if she's so smart then why she'd do something so stupid. Swipe, swipe. I told her to go back to Renaissance but no! She didn't like them...tap... I guess Dave can be an asshole if you're not “buddy buddy” with him. Swipe. “Jesus Christ!” Swipe, drag...Probably went to some sketchy place in Providence. Swipe. Dumbass. Swipe, swipe... “fuck!” Swipe, swipe... I mean really? What kind of place would let a twenty-year-old...drag...

She's twenty years old...puff.

An adult...puff...

She didn't need my permission to be there...swipe...she saved her own money...swipe, "double candy combo," swipe...made her own appointment...drag... it would have been nice if she had waited a few weeks...puff...swipe, swipe. or at least paid Brittney back first...but she did it anyway. swipe. all by herself. Swipe. "End game: You found all the bears!"

Debbie jumps a little as the loud banging noise of Brad walking back into the house echoes through the yard. He probably wants something to eat. She's forgotten the burgers in the car—they've got to be garbage by now. She sighs. Someone needs to cook dinner. The soft barks from above have turned to growls as the poor dog has finally tired itself out, the crushed water bottle lying abandoned at the bottom of the hill. It's obvious Rebecca wants to just make peace and move on. But Debbie doesn't want to—not yet.

She throws the burnt carcass of her cigarette into the grass as her mother comes up the walkway from the garden, her withered cheeks flushed as she takes the chair across from Debbie. She breathes deeply, watching Debbie match the colored candies on the screen as a warm breeze passes through the yard. The Grandmother continues to sit in silence with her daughter until she hears the screen door shut as Rebecca finally goes back in the house.

"Aren't you being a tad childish, Miss Debra?"

"What? I can't sit around and play a game?" Debbie asks without even looking from her phone.

"Not that, I mean about Rebecca."

"What do you expect me to do, Mother? I told her 'no' and she still went behind my back and did it anyway."

"Oh please, like you and your sister didn't get into trouble."

“I know Donna and I did some fucked up things, but we never permanently marked ourselves.”

“And you think Rebecca has?”

“Clearly. You can’t look in me in the eye and tell me employers are just gonna ignore that.”

“Maybe you’re right. But you also have to remember that it’s a possibility she’s going to have to deal with. And she’s probably going to look to you for help.”

Debbie’s fingers start moving faster across the screen, “And what am I supposed to say? ‘Hey, sorry you can’t get a job because you made a terrible decision that I warned you against?’ That’ll go real swell.”

The Grandmother pauses to pull a loose thread from her sweater. She gently rubs the golden string between her fingers before flinging it towards the ground.

“Do you remember when you told me that you wanted to drop out of medical school to go for a cosmetology degree?”

“How could I forget? You’re still talking about it.”

“And do you remember who you went to when the loan collectors came knocking on the door?”

Debbie’s face turns a deep pink. “You.”

“And what happened when you asked me for the five thousand dollars you needed?”

“You yelled at me and said I was making a huge mistake.”

“But did your father and I leave you to the wolves?”

“No.”

“No, we gave you the money. It was everything we had saved for a new truck, but you came first.”

Debbie looks up. “No one said you had to give it to me.”

“Of course we had to! It’s a parent’s job to do what’s best for their children.”

“Well shipping me off to medical school clearly wasn’t the best fucking idea was it?”

“No one said you had to go.”

“Oh don’t give me that shit. You think I don’t remember how you used to *accidentally* leave RN pamphlets in plain sight? Or how Aunt Julie would come over and brag about how much money Gloria made as a nursing assistant—”

“—She’s still making good money. But you didn’t care about that, did you? You just wanted to do what you pleased.”

“Not at first. In case you forgot, I went through two years of hell before I knew what I wanted to do.”

“And yet, when the time came, you still couldn’t figure out how to explain it to your Mother.”

Debbie pauses and looks directly into Grandma Georgia’s face.

“Mom, I was making a huge life decision—and we weren’t exactly swimming in funds either. What was I supposed to do? Pretend like everything was fine and dandy until I burnt out?”

“Thank goodness you didn’t. But that doesn’t mean you couldn’t have said something to me earlier. At least Rebecca had the courtesy to actually talk to you.”

Debbie crosses her arms. “Don’t you turn this around on me! You’re not going to help her weasel out of this, Mother. Rebecca needs to understand the weight of her actions.”

“For heavens sake Debra, your acting like she went out and got herself pregnant.”

“Oh thanks Ma, like I really needed that image in my head.”

“You know what I mean. I just wish you weren’t so hard on her.”

“I’m not being hard on her! If anything you’re the one being too soft.”

“Oh please.”

“It’s true! You think I like looking like the bad guy? But Rebecca needs to learn that her actions have consequences—take her car, for instance. Just because we all chipped in to help get it fixed doesn’t mean she can just sit back and watch us pay the bills. She needs to help out too.”

Debbie pauses as a hummingbird with a blue breast swarms to the feeder above their heads, buzzing between them as if it were whispering a secret, before making a beeline towards the flower garden. The Grandmother frowns at the near empty container and the remains of its red, sugary liquid encrusted on the inside.

“Look, I’m not trying to tell to you how to raise your kids,” the Grandmother begins quietly. “But you need to talk to your daughter, Debra. Otherwise, she’s just going to repeat the same mistakes.”

The Grandmother stands up as the sun throws soft ribbons of yellow and orange across the table, stretching their shadows across the lawn like a picture of the past.

“And so will you.”

Rebecca goes downstairs to finally have breakfast in blissful silence. Brad had done nothing but whine about his precious four-wheeler the past two days, making sure to refer to her “rebellious mistake” in the light of his angelic good deeds. (Although how taking out the trash

for the first time added up to three-hundred dollar rims—courtesy of their Mother—Rebecca would never know.)

It's 7:25am and her Mother should be coming home from work soon. Rebecca pours Lucky Charms in a bowl. They haven't spoken since she revealed her tattoo. Her Mother is still making dinner for her, so she must not completely hate her. But Rebecca wishes she would say something—anything at this point. The silence has become even more unbearable than the harsh shouting she had expected. It makes her feel guilty. But why should she be the one to back down? She looks for the milk buried behind the cartons of OJ and coffee creamers.

The front door creaks behind her as Debbie walks in with a Dunkin coffee in each hand—their Sunday morning tradition. Rebecca turns around, the milk search abandoned, as her Mother moves towards her until she is standing directly in front of her with the coffees. For a moment, they don't do anything. Finally, Debbie holds out the coffee to her. Rebecca hesitates, then accepts. They each pull out a wooden chair from the green cotton cloth covered table and sit down. The tension is there, but there's a sense of childhood innocence to it—a desire to forgive that certainly wasn't there a few days ago. They start simply, the casual exchanges sound entirely scripted as they let their buttered tones fade out. They sit in silence for a few minutes, sipping their coffees. It's obvious things have changed between them. Rebecca knows it. Debbie feels it.

“Are we gonna talk about this?” Rebecca asks.

“Do we need to?”

“Well you're clearly upset about it.”

“It's a little too late now. There's no taking that back.”

“I know.”

Rebecca picks at the Styrofoam cup. She had planned this conversation in the bathroom mirror—a thoughtful speech on her adulthood and how she was old enough to make her own decisions. After all, she had fought her fears: she went to the consult, she paid the tatted, pierced stranger with *her own* money. Hell, she had even gone through the whole tattooing process without crying. So why was this so hard?

Debbie turns in her seat so she's facing Rebecca's arm and holds out her hands. "You gonna let me see this thing or what? I didn't get a very good look at it the other day."

Rebecca holds out her arm, keeping it limp as her Mother inspects the design from different angles. Debbie winches as she turns Rebecca's wrist face down—the edges of the tattoo are still visible.

"I'm not going to apologize."

"I don't expect you to." Debbie tilts her head. "It looks like an onion on wheels."

"That's what Brad said. It's supposed to be Cinderella's carriage."

"Oh...oh, ok. Now I see it. Does it hurt?"

Rebecca smiles. This is the most they've said to each other in days—she doesn't want to ruin things. "No, but it itches."

Debbie runs her fingers along the edges—careful not to touch the ointment with her hands as she looks for any small bumps or scabs.

"Did you put Bacitracin on it?"

"No, Cocoa butter."

"Cocoa butter? Are you out of your mind? A tattoo is an opened wound. You need to put real ointment on it to help it heal."

“Well, no duh! The artist told me to use it because Bacitracin has zinc in it and that will draw the color out.”

“Oh.”

Debbie leans back in her seat as the garbage truck rattles up the street. She can feel the tension silently building a wall between them, frustrating her even more. She taps the side of her cup as though she is trying to send an S.O.S. to the truck as it makes its way to the curb. Debbie frowns as it drives past the house, scattering their cans across the lawn. She can feel Rebecca’s eyes on her as she brings the coffee to her lips. She knows they can’t go on like this. Debbie counts to five, swallowing as much coffee as she can, before diving in.

“Where’d you go?”

“Trendicandy Tattoo.”

“Where’s that?”

“On Bridgewater Ave, across from the Payless.”

“You drove all the way down there by yourself?”

“Yeah.”

“Are they any good?”

“They have a five-star Yelp rating.”

“Hmm...”

Rebecca fidgets in her seat as her Mother takes another long sip from her coffee. There’s an urgency to her Mother’s sipping, as if she’s trying to drown her lungs with the syrupy goodness. Rebecca looks at the remains of her own tattered cup as it fails to catch the water droplets falling down its sides. The kitchen clock crows out the hour as the sun peeks its way

through the window. Its soft light shines on her tattoo, making its blues tones pop out against her pink skin.

The color had been her idea. At first, Rebecca had had doubts about the tattoo—especially when the artist had complained about working in such a small space. Not wanting to upset him, she had sat passively in the chair, agreeing to every design modification that the artist had suggested. After all, the man in front of her was going to be drilling into her with needles for the next hour or so. Who knows how painful he could make it? She had been all set to go through with it, despite her disappointment, but when the artist had filled his tiny plastic cup with black ink, something flared inside Rebecca and she quickly demanded that he change it to blue. The beautiful hues of sapphire and turquoise had made up for the shell of a carriage, so much that Rebecca had given her artist a hefty tip and a promise to come back again.

A surge of pride cuts through the tangle of nerves in her stomach as Rebecca notices Debbie gazing at it as well.

“So...are we good?” she asks.

Debbie swallows. “We’re gonna have to be.”

Rebecca frowns.

“Look Becca,” Debbie sighs, I’m not gonna pretend I’m pleased with it. I just can’t help wondering, what’s next? I mean today it’s a tattoo. Who knows what crazy shit you’re gonna get yourself into?”

“You really think that just because I got a tattoo I’m suddenly gonna turn into some criminal junkie or something?”

“You know what I mean.”

“What? That you think I’m stupid.” The heat sputtering in Rebecca’s heart suddenly ignites as her Mother looks at her in annoyance.

“I never said you were—”

“You don’t have to! I see the way you look at the kids at the Dunkin drive through. How *bad* you feel because they’re all drop outs. What *scumbags* they are for wasting what little money they have on tattoos.”

“I don’t care about their tattoos—”

“Oh really? Then why is this such a big deal, huh? Why are you treating this: the one, small, meaningful tattoo on my wrist like it’s one of their full fucking sleeves?”

Debbie looks down at the half-empty coffee cup between her weathered hands. “Because you’re my kid.”

The blazing angry quickly evaporates in her chest as Rebecca looks at her Mother. The invading sunlight seems to deepen the laugh lines and wrinkles in her face. It suddenly dawns on her how tired her Mother looks. She moves in closer as her Mother finishes off the last of her coffee, the caffeine making her eyes light up with the final boost she needs.

“I know you think you’re an adult now. And let’s face it, in some ways you are,” Debbie says slowly. “But you also have to remember that at the end of the day, you’re still my little girl. And that whatever shit you pull, I got to deal with it too.”

“I get that, Mom. But it’s not like this was an impulse buy. I planned this.”

“Yes and I’m proud you did. But that doesn’t change the fact that that money should have gone to other things.”

“Like what?”

“Like *your sister* who paid to fix *your car*! Don’t you think she wants things too?”

“Well yeah but—”

“But nothing! Do you know what six-hundred dollars looks like?”

“It didn’t cost six—”

“It doesn’t matter. You still went there willing to pay that much for this,” she says pointing to Rebecca’s wrist. “Which to you may seem like nothing. But in the real world, six-hundred dollars pays for the cable, the internet, our cell phones, and depending on whether or not you guys go over your data limits, even groceries. That’s way too much to be splurging at once—especially when you know insurance is coming up. Do you understand?”

“Yes, mom.”

“I mean it, Becca. It’s fine if you wanna buy things for yourself, but you need to learn to pay your bills first. And that goes for the whole car thing too! I expect you to pay Brittney back every penny. Got it?”

“*Yes* mom.”

Debbie watches Rebecca as she runs a hand through her hair with the tattoo-free wrist, her legs crossed at the ankles in a position of comfort and poise. It’s amazing just how much Rebecca reminds her of herself at that age. Debbie places her empty cup next to Rebecca’s tattered one.

“Did I ever tell you the story of how your Aunt and I “borrowed” Grandma Georgia’s car to go to the beach and “forgot” to tell her about?”

Rebecca looks at her with wide eyes, “No! When was this?”

Debbie smiles.

“It was the middle of June. Your Aunt and I had just turned sixteen...”