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ONE

Every night was just another night spent lying in bed as the thin red lines of the alarm clock illuminated corners of my bedroom. I listened to the sounds of the city filtering through the cracked window, and I would try not to think about the place I ran from. The life that existed before I moved north to the cold and constant wet of Seattle. I had lived in the gray for eleven years, but it had never quite become home. Over the smell of car exhaust and fresh rain I swear I could still smell the rural town I grew up in, even though I wanted to forget.

Hours passed as I stared at the patterns and shadows painted across my ceiling. I had not slept through the night for as long as I could remember. As a girl I would lie in bed listening to frogs, insects and often the reverberating sound of nothing. The silence made my ears

ring. I could smell the manure of cows and horses combined with the smell of fresh cut grasses.

When the alarm clock finally announced morning with its blaring greeting, I slammed my hand over the snooze button and continued to watch light take over the corners of darkness. Fighting against my own body's desire to remain in the warmth of the bed, I pulled my feet out of the blankets into the early morning air as I prepared to leave for work. My job was as a cashier at a second-hand bookstore in the Pike Place Market, peddling rare and used books to tourists and local market rats. I wrapped myself in a scarf and hooded sweatshirt to fend off the cold as I traversed the hilly streets to the market smelling of fresh fish and dried flowers

Every morning, as part of my ritual I stopped by a post office box I maintained specifically for contact with my estranged mother. Although I owned a cell phone, I preferred the less personal interaction of letters. While I could still feel the familiarity of my mother's handwriting and smell the Shalimar perfume rising off of the lined paper, I did not have to hear her raspy voice and answer questions in real time interaction of a telephone call. I could keep my distance, skip uncomfortable sections and ignore inquiries. In keeping my distance I was able to circumvent her manipulations and veiled insults. She had to remain civil and play up motherly concern, even if it was forced.

Her letters came in reliable two to three month intervals. She would write extensively about her latest

crafting projects: quilting, scrapbooks, decoupage, books she had read, the adventures she and my step-father experienced on nature drives and gossip about family and local business. Through her letters I learned of marriages and births of cousins I would never meet, a secret connection to my family I could never admit I wanted to maintain.

Even though the letters had stopped coming months ago, I checked the box every day. I battled with my stubborn nature, and it would not allow me to show her I needed her, even if I was worried. I was the rebellious uncommunicative daughter who lived miles away, in order to maintain my role, I could not show concern without showing a crack in the façade I had worked hard to create.

In the early mornings I was the only person in the post office, the usually crowded clerk windows chained behind a metal gate. Stepping in to the abandoned office I fumbled with my keys as I tried to open the silver box. I reached my hand into the dark abyss of gold lockers, surprised when I felt the shape of a thin envelope. The location of the post office written in my mother's familiar handwriting, the stamp the same standard issue American flag she always used.

While navigating the hilly streets towards the waterfront, I read the letter. The handwriting was shaky and foreign. She spelled out her illness, the hospital visits and the plethora of medications she was forced to take to control symptoms. I reread the letter several times, as I tried to figure

out what manipulative game she was playing.

I held the letter in my tattooed hands, frustrated and disgusted. I would not have been surprised, and maybe even expecting, a letter explaining she had breast cancer, osteoporosis or heart disease, anything normal. AIDS was the last disease I would have expected my mother to have. According to the letter, she had been HIV positive for years without her own knowledge. In most cases she should have become symptomatic within ten years, but by her own calculations the last time she could have contracted the virus would have been eighteen years prior, shortly before she met and married my step-father, Edward.

When I arrived to open the store, I was alone for hours with an occasional interruption from a customer. The solitude left me opportunity to read the letter several more times. Some of her thoughts were very contrived, as if she felt it was easier to spell out her symptoms in medical terms. While other parts showed conflict and turmoil with the disease gripping her life. She explained my step-father was not positive, she urged me to be tested for my own sake and to remain safe. It felt like a lie, an after school special for adults, but the letter was too real to be a joke. As she signed off she urged me to contact her.

Relief in the form of Rose, the afternoon girl, arrived half an hour late.

“Afternoon Tori, sorry I’m late, missed the first bus. Has it been busy today?” Out of breath, she pulled a black

book bag off her shoulder and dropped it behind the register. “Did you get the inventory of the nature section finished like Jack asked?” She paused and turned my direction “You look terrible, is everything all right?”

Without answering I started gathering my backpack, even though I was scheduled to work another two hours. I could have cared less what Jack, the owner, had asked me to do with the disorganized section on hiking and camping, but honestly I had forgotten I was even supposed to work on it in the haze of my mother’s letter.

Jack had never had a problem with my work ethic. I did half the work of Rose and Stephen, was scheduled for better hours and left early on most days. I knew Jack was only paying me to sleep with him and to open the store so that he could sleep in at home with his wife. I was pretty sure that Rose knew it as well.

“Jack’s going to be pissed.” She moved towards the hiking and nature section of the store, clearly disgusted I not taken inventory or organized at all. “Are you leaving?” Rose’s hands were on her curvy hips and her cropped black hair was a mess from the wind. She was not even trying to hide her annoyance. “Jack wanted the entire nature section done by the end of the day. I figured you’d be at least half-way through.”

“Sorry, call Stephen in to help you out. I can’t be here today.”

“Whatever Tori, when Jack asks why it didn’t get

finished, I'm telling him you didn't touch it and left early." She turned and stomped over to the books, pulling them off the shelf and throwing them into a pile on the floor.

I left the store and walked in circles through-out the city until night-fall. I kept moving, keeping my thoughts on destinations rather than the letter in my backpack. As the cold night finally seeped in to the corners of the city, I headed back to my shared apartment and ignored my roommate and her boyfriend's invitation join them for dinner as they pulled slices of pizza out of cardboard boxes. The entire apartment smelled like marijuana and pizza cheese.

In my bed my usual empty thoughts were replaced with fear and disbelief. My mother's face haunted my sleep and I was in and out of consciousness. In dreams, she would reach out her cold lifeless limbs, reaching out to me in death.

On the way in to work the next morning, I called collect from a pay-phone. My mother's voice was tired and listless. She seemed to be on some sort of drug, as if she was talking from a cloud. I felt as if I was waiting for the Candid Camera crew to jump out from behind the line of payphones, but was left alone in the cold fog of the morning as I listened to her talk. Her tone was not manipulative or angry, but was uncharacteristic in its sweetness and concern. Even though she was in pain and felt awful, my guilt was alleviated by the thought of my step-father taking care of her.

"Antonia, the doctors aren't sure of how much time I have. The virus has been working away at my system for

years, a lot longer than most people before they start in on a medication regimen.” She was holding back tears, I could hear it in her voice. “When can you come home?”

Even though her pleading was pathetic, I snapped. “I’m not coming home, I have a job and an apartment. I have responsibilities.” I mouthed “I’m sorry,” but the words were inaudible. “I’ll call you soon, I promise.” I placed the handset back in the receiver with a click.

I have always blamed my mother for my inability to maintain normal, adult relationships. While growing up my family never touched or hugged. My mother rarely told me she loved me, never hugged me or tucked me in at night. Even after she married my step-father I never saw her hug or kiss him. Every once and in a while I would see them hold hands in the car, and as I watched from the backseat, jealousy ripped through me. My step-father’s rough calloused hand gripping the soft skin of my mother as their hands dangled between the seats. We lived as three separate entities under a roof with nothing in common, no bond other than DNA and marriage.

Before Edward, the first ten years of my life were spent in line at church food banks augmented by the occasional welfare office visit. When I was five we rented a one-bedroom house from a fragile wheelchair bound woman. I hid behind my mother’s legs as the woman watched from her chair. It seemed there were not a lot of questions asked by adults in my early childhood. Everywhere we went everyone

felt sorry for my single mother.

When we moved our few belongings into the cold house we discovered the landlady had not removed all of her possessions yet. A note was taped to the refrigerator informing us she had packed several boxes in to the front closet and we were told to wait for her son-in-law to come move them for her. As soon as she read the note, my mother began snooping through the boxes. They contained smelly old lady clothes and chipped dishes, but one box was stuffed with food such as blue boxes of macaroni and cheese and cans of soup. In a hurry, my mother instructed me in hushed tones to take most of the food and hide it in my closet in the bedroom. I was nervous as my thin arms stacked the cans and rattling boxes behind the rusted water heater.

When the woman's son-in-law came to take the boxes away he smiled widely at my mother and winked at me. I did not want to let go of her leg as she smiled back at him, touching his forearm. My face was flushed red, hoping he would not discover our theft as he sifted through the boxes. My heart beat raced in my throat as he said "This box is nearly empty."

"Antonia, why don't you go play in your room?"

Although it was stated as a question, I knew better than to react any way but to scurry down the hallway to a nearly empty room. There was nothing in the room to play with, my toys were not unpacked. I could feel the food in the back of the closet, sense its presence as I heard my mother's

voice travel down the dark narrow hallway.

“Shut your door Antonia.”

I peeked down the hall and I saw her lead the man to the couch, still smiling sweetly and touching his forearm.

The food lasted us for weeks.

My mother never verbalized her disgust of our previous life, but she lived as if it had never happened after she married my step-father. Indulgences such as name brand food and eating out at restaurants became habit instead of luxury. They both drove new cars and we moved in to the biggest house in the neighborhood. My mother surrounded herself with things to help her forget the years she had no money. The years she spent moving us quickly out of houses and situations when they turned bad or when boyfriends suddenly stopped being nice to us.

When I left home, I was optimistic in my new life. As the years passed and the slow revelation of my naiveté increased I continued to try and create the person I wanted to be, rather than continuing to be the person my mother had created. I was forced to share her short stature and deep sunken dark eyes, but I wanted to change anything I could about my body.

When I was nineteen I decided to force drastic progress in my metamorphosis. I felt the process of change was moving too slow and I wanted to do something radical to push it forward. I elected to change my full name.

I was surprised at how easy it was to do. I thought I

would have to explain the what's and why's of my choice in front of a courtroom full of people, however it was a simple process and legally I was no longer Antonia Olivia Preston. I walked out of the court house smiling at my victory, clutching the piece of paper that declared my name was now, by law, Tori Liddell. On the same day I changed my name, I had my first tattoo inked. A dark red star on the back of my right hand.

It became a personal ritual to get a new tattoo every time I made a significant personal or lifestyle change. In addition to several more stars I have colorful fish, hearts, skulls and Celtic patterns covering and circling my hands and arms. Every image has a story and significance to my personal mythos. A permanent outward testament to my personal revolution.

I did not follow through on my promise to call my mother again, and spring and summer passed into fall. I stopped checking the post office box. I became bored with Jack and the bookstore job, as I had with so many others in the past. The Pike Place Market lost its charm, the tourists started to wear on me and I stopped caring if my sarcastic jabs left them storming out of the store as Jack's interests waned.

When I arrived on a late October morning Jack was waiting for me, cleaning up shelves and taking inventory. I knew what was happening before he could try to rationalize it. His thinning brown hair cascaded past his shoulder, and

his tie-dye shirt was faded. He would have fit in perfectly if it had been 40 years earlier, but he had only been a kid when Woodstock happened.

“Tori, you know I don’t want to do this, but sweetheart, I keep getting complaints from customers. My wife keeps getting complaints. I covered your ass more times than I can count with her.”

I sneered at his use of the word sweetheart. If I had cared, I would have fought for the job. I would have tried to seduce him into keeping me on the payroll. If I cared I would have threatened to tell his wife. However, as I watched him fold his arms over his gut he took on a fatherly quality. I pulled out my key chain and worked at getting the key to the store off the ring.

His hands reached out and touched mine as I handed him the key.

“I have a few minutes before I have to open the store.” His hand still lingered on mine. “Just because I had to fire you doesn’t mean we still can’t see each other.”

For a moment I considered his offer, his touch, but I turned and left. He yelled after me.

“My wife will never believe you, so don’t even try it”

I spent the day and several that followed meandering around the Market and all over downtown Seattle. I would wander up to Capitol Hill and then as far north as Greenlake. I left my apartment every day at the same time, deceiving my roommate into thinking I still had a job. I knew with the first

of the month quickly approaching I would not be able to pay my portion of the rent. I left the apartment every day living a lie while I avoided the inevitable truth.

I was not even looking for a job, I just wandered the city, and I was running out of money quickly. I pulled all of my cash out of my bank account, and let several purchases overdraw. My cell phone was useless, the contacts list full of ex-boyfriends and lovers. I let it cancel for non-payment. When I went to close the post office box I learned there were two letters held for me. My payment was late and I was not allowed access to my mail until I paid the kid behind the counter and closed out the account. All I could see of the kid was his sandy colored hair as he stared at my colorful hands. We exchanged my copy of the small bronze key for the letters.

One of the pieces of mail was from my mother, and the other from my grandmother. My mother still addressed all my mail to Antonia Preston even after I had explained my name change multitudes of times. It made me roll my eyes.

The letter from my mother was several weeks old. I pushed away feelings of guilt as she apologized for her lack of contact. The letter was unusually short, only detailing her doctor's visits and medication changes.

My grandmother's letter was only a few days old according to the postmark. I learned as I read the scrawling font my step-father had died in a fatal car accident, leaving my mother alone and hardly able to care for herself. My grandmother urged me to move home and take care of her.

The tone of the letter was desperate. I stood on the edge of the wet sidewalk as cars passed, gripping the edges of the paper with both my hands. My grandmother signed the letter with her phone number and a heart, just like every birthday card she had ever sent.

I found the nearest payphone and dialed the number.

“Hi Gramma, it’s Tori.” I waited for the confusion and following excitement to wear down.

“Can you buy me a train ticket home?”