

Salem State University

The Graduate School Department of English

My Life Through Travel: Family Struggles and Unforgettable Memories

A Thesis in English

By: Rachael Cefalu

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Single Ladies

This was not my first trip to Salem, Massachusetts. I'd been hanging out in this city since I was twelve-years-old and had worked in the downtown area for three years. This place was nothing special to me and I could never understand why people would fly into Boston from all over the world to make their way up the coast to Salem. I mean, people from *Europe* would travel here to learn about the witch trials. Seriously? And the fact that these tales were wildly misconstrued around the globe didn't help my disdain for tourists. Working in a tourist town made one cynical to all of the charm it held, even if it was worth exploring. The House of the Seven Gables was a place I'd heard customers talk about. They would discuss the secret staircase and how amazing it was to be in a home with so much history. Apparently, the house also inspired the famous book written by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Yawn.

When my grandmother suggested that we stay at the Hawthorne Hotel for Labor Day weekend, I wanted to make her happy. I knew it would be fun to spend time with her and my Aunt Maria, even if I wasn't thrilled with the city. Grammie was just like one of the tourists, eager to learn about the trials and immerse herself in the history, and the literary legacy of Nathaniel Hawthorne. She loved Salem for reasons I could not understand. I was fresh out of high school and recently passed the state board test for my cosmetology license. I wasn't particularly interested in the field, but it was a skill that I could use. I figured what the hell, I'm only eighteen and I have plenty of time to figure out what I want to do with my life.

We had named this trip the Single Ladies vacation. My grandmother had been widowed for over thirty years and never remarried. I'd broken up with my boyfriend when I was seventeen, so I had been single for almost a year. It felt like an eternity. My aunt, who was going

through a messy divorce, was experiencing her year from Hell. In January, her husband of six years (together for eleven) came home one night and announced that he'd been seeing a younger woman for months now and was leaving my aunt to be with her. There had been no fighting, no signs of unhappiness. She was completely blindsided and left with a twenty-two-year-old son to pick up the pieces of her heart. The next few months would entail a back and forth between getting back together and breaking up, a stint in the hospital after my aunt experienced horrible chest pains, a result of her not eating or sleeping for ten days, and a final goodbye from her husband because the chick on the side was now pregnant. This all happened as Maria was being laid off from her job. With nowhere to work, no husband, and no money, Maria suffered a breakdown. It had been nine months since this ordeal and she was gradually healing from these wounds. Maria and I had plans to scope out the town in hopes of finding new boyfriends. We tried to get Grammie on board with this endeavor, but she was adamantly against finding a companion.

“Been there, done that,” she would say sarcastically, “the last thing I need at my age is a man to cook for.”

Grammie had booked an overnight stay during Labor Day weekend in the year two-thousand and nine. After getting the time off of work, something my boss was not happy about because Labor Day weekend brings good business to an ice cream shop, Grammie and I drove to Revere to pick up my aunt from her new apartment. It was a twenty-minute drive to get her, so we were not far from our intended destination of Salem.

“She won't be ready,” said Grammie, “Maria is always late.”

She was probably right. My grandmother had a habit of being an hour early to everything, a trait that had skipped Maria. Sure enough, she walked out of the front door with wet hair fresh from the shower.

“Sorry, I just have to dry my hair. Give me ten minutes,” she said. “I’m running a bit behind.”

“Oh, Maria,” Grammie huffed, “you’ll be late to your own damn funeral.”

“Well, it won’t affect me much, Ma,” Maria stated as she climbed the stone steps back inside.

As she walked away, I noticed how frail she was. She’d always been thin, but this divorce had shed fifteen pounds. Her clothes were baggy and her bones jutted from her shoulder blades. I learned that she’d gone down to one hundred and five pounds on a five feet, one-inch frame. I remember the day when my dad and I had to rush to Maria’s house because she was in the midst of her psychotic break. It was a Friday night in June. I had plans with my dad to go out for dinner after I ran a few errands. I would pick him up and we would head out to eat. Prom was only one week away, and I was shopping for shoes to go with my ivory gown. It was a big decision, since the dress was knee length and the shoes would be showing. The things that I thought were so important in that time baffle me now. I pulled up to the house and honked the horn, waiting for my dad to hop into the passenger seat. I was ready to show him my new pair of silver heels, something in which he had no interest, but I was just so excited about my new purchase. I knew something was wrong when he emerged from the front door, waving for me to come into the house.

“I’m sorry, but we can’t go out. Aunt Maria is in a really bad way and I have to go and get her.”

“Get her? From where,” I asked. This wasn’t the first time his sister had needed him for a crisis, but my dad’s tone seemed much more urgent than it had in past times.

“She’s home now, but she went to see Derek at a baseball game.”

I knew this wouldn’t lead to anything good. Derek was her former husband and he played in a local baseball league. Apparently she ran onto the field while he was up at bat and caused a scene by confronting him about everything he’d done. She had to be dragged off the field, kicking and screaming.

I went with my dad to pick her up. The twenty-minute drive to her house felt much longer and my dad called her on the way to let her know that we were coming. All I could hear on her end was yelling and she was rambling so fast I could not understand what she was saying. At the end of the rant, I heard the words: “I’m not leaving, this is my house!”

“Maria,” my dad interjected, “I’m coming to get you and that’s that. You can’t be alone right now. You’re not staying there tonight.”

“Fine!” She yelled before hanging up the phone.

I looked at my dad with horror on my face. “She’ll be alright,” he said. “She just needs some time to heal. It takes a long time to come back from something like this.” His words were comforting, but the expression of his face was worrisome.

When we finally arrived at her house, I saw a plastic grocery bag sitting on her kitchen table with random clothes thrown into it. I guess she was packing. Maria was darting in and out of rooms, scrambling for random items to throw into the shopping bag. The items didn’t make much sense. I saw her throw two bras, a pair of socks, and some hair elastics into the “suitcase” she was using to bring to my house. There were no clothes or toiletries, things one would normally bring for an overnight stay. That was when I learned that Maria was really not in the

right frame of mind. She was rambling frantically about what Derek had done to her, and now she was being forced to leave her own house. My dad grabbed the bag and escorted her into the passenger seat of his car. He had to physically help her in and put on her seatbelt.

“Chris, my pills, I need my pills.” She said to my dad. “Did you pack them?” Since this ordeal, she was prescribed a powerful dose of anti-depressants and mood stabilizers.

“Shit. No, I’ll go get them. I saw them on the kitchen table.”

While he was gone, Maria buckled over and started sobbing. I sheepishly rubbed her back from the backseat, trying to calm her down. I’d never been in a situation like this and I didn’t know what to do. My dad was the comforting one, always knowing what to say in a situation like this. He hurried back with the pills and quickly drove away. That night, she slept at our house and gradually came to grips with herself. The night was long, and Maria spent much of it crying and coming to the realization that her marriage was over. There was no saving it and the reality of that was heartbreaking. Derek’s mistress was pregnant and he would be living with her, raising a child with a woman that he barely knew.

The thought of a divorce was devastating to her, considering it would be her second. Maria’s first husband was a selfish ego maniac who gambled away each paycheck she brought home. There were many nights that she went without dinner because her husband had to pay off his debts. Sometimes, he was completely broke and unable to pay at all. One morning Maria got into her car to drive to work, only to discover that her windshield had been smashed in with a baseball bat, a message from the bookie that his money better be on the way soon. When that marriage ended, nobody was surprised. My family was thrilled that she was finally dumping the loser. Derek was different. He was a good guy who swooped in and helped raise Maria’s son, becoming an assistant coach on his hockey team and dropping him off at school each morning.

The idea of him lying and cheating was incomprehensible, which was why this was so hard on her. Maria frequently referred to Derek as her prince, the knight in shining armor that helped repair her life. Now, that image had vanished, and Derek was the villain who turned her safe haven into ruins.

On the night of Maria's interaction with Derek at the baseball game, she'd slept at my house, in my brother's vacant room because of a sleepover. My dad drove her home the following morning, on the condition that she call every few hours to check in. This episode occurred three months prior to our Single Ladies vacation, and little by little Maria was getting used to her new life as a single woman. She still had her setbacks, but was well enough to live on her own. Her new apartment helped Maria shed the memories of her old life. She had lived there for two months and was gradually adapting to her new normal.

Now, Grammie and I sat in my car, outside that new apartment, wondering when Maria would appear. My grandmother checked her watch as we waited outside for her to be ready. She finally emerged with dry hair that reeked of aerosol spray and a large duffel bag.

"Maria," Grammie said eyeing the large bag, "this is an overnight stay, not a week-long getaway to Paris."

"Ma, I need options," Maria said as she struggled to push the duffel bag into the car so she could fit as well. "You never know who we might meet," she winked at me.

Grammie rolled her eyes as she slowly got out of my red two door Pontiac so her daughter could squeeze into the backseat with her bag. Even though Maria was petite and thin, my backseat was tiny and the oversized duffel bag made it hard for her to sit comfortably. It was a pretty cramped ride back to Salem.

Regardless of how I felt about the city, I was happy to be going on this trip. I knew it would be fun with them. It was a chance for Grammie to spend time with us, something she'd longed for since my aunt's ordeal. I think she went through the same pain as Maria did when Derek betrayed her. It was as if he had broken up with Grammie as well, and she felt the loss equally. When Grammie first heard the news that Derek had been unfaithful, she didn't even react. It was Maria's son that called Grammie, and she had to ask him to repeat the news. When he did, her expression was blank. It was unfathomable that Derek would do something like this. He and Maria did everything together, from watching movies on the weekends, attending Red Sox games regularly, and even competed in a weekly bowling league. When did he even have the time to see this woman? Grammie told me that this went through her head as she tried to process what she'd heard. When the sadness subsided and few weeks had gone by, rage settled in and turned Grammie into a different person. She was cold, unwelcoming, and even yelled at the people closest to her on several occasions. This was not the Grammie I knew, and everyone started to realize that not only was she heartbroken for what Derek had done to her daughter, but she was grieving as if someone had passed away.

On Friday nights, Grammie had a tradition of playing the game Double Dominos with a small group of friends. Each week, the six of them would gather at seven o'clock in the evening and play their game until at least midnight. This was the highlight of Grammie's week, and she always looked forward to being with her friends. When she learned about what happened with Maria and Derek, she stopped going to play dominos. A tradition that held for fifteen years had been broken because of the grief that she carried for Maria. One Friday night, when my dad picked me up from work, he'd dragged Grammie along for the ride. He said that she needed to get out of the house and focus her attention on something else. Grammie usually loved coming to

my place of work, considering it was a sweet shop and she always found something she liked. My dad encouraged her to come into the store and have some ice cream, but she refused to get out of the car. I looked out the window and saw her sitting in the passenger seat, blankly staring outside.

The anguish was visible on Grammie's face for months, and this is someone who has experienced loss in her life. At the age of thirty-nine, she had lost her husband to a sudden heart attack, leaving her alone with three teenagers, a mortgage, and a car that she didn't know how to drive. Her father had passed four years prior, also of a heart attack. Her mother died five years later due to chronic illness. In a span of nine years, she had lost the three closest people in her life, aside from her children. Several years later, her boyfriend of several years suddenly died of an aneurism. Sadly, Grammie was no stranger to death and developed a resilience that I can only hope to have someday. However, this was a different type of loss. A man had betrayed her only daughter in the worst way possible, and what's worse, nobody saw it coming. Everybody loved him, especially Grammie. It would have been different if she hadn't, but she was forced to grieve the loss of a person who not only cared for her child, but also the man she thought he was.

Even with all of this going on, we were determined to enjoy ourselves during our stay in Salem. Nothing, not even a broken heart, could prevent us from having a good time. Despite the chaos happening in Maria's life, humor was always present between the three of us.

"Maria, your tattoos are showing", Grammie said. It was a well known fact that she hated tattoos, and Maria proudly displayed all nine of hers whenever she had the chance.

"That's the point, Ma," Maria stated, followed by mock laughter. "Rachael is eighteen now, I think she should get one on our Single Ladies trip! Maybe a butterfly or something."

"Oh, Maria! We don't have time for that!"

“Why not? What else are we doing?”

Grammie didn't have an answer. To be honest, we didn't have much of this trip planned out. The only thing we knew for certain was where we were staying. Everything else was up to me, since I was familiar with the area. At least, I *thought* I was. Aside from where I worked and some restaurants I liked, it suddenly occurred to me that I'd never done any of the tourist-y stuff in Salem. I was at a loss for things to do. Something else that I failed to take into consideration was that Salem is a walking city, and my seventy-two-year-old grandmother had a hard time walking to her car in the parking lot, never mind traipsing through a large city. I guess we would play it by ear.

As Maria checked us into the hotel, Grammie and I sat in the lobby of the Hawthorne Hotel. I felt like I was in the Victorian era with a cozy fireplace and the large comfy chairs. Off to the side, I noticed a pub-style restaurant called Tavern on the Green and walked over to check it out. Inside, there was another fireplace for guests to enjoy and warm up while eating. The wood paneling throughout was exquisite, giving the restaurant an old-time atmosphere. I walked back into the lobby, wondering if I'd misjudged the attractions in this town. I sat down next to Grammie, and I could see her eavesdropping on the conversation happening on the couch next to us. We overheard an older couple complaining to the manager about their “horrible” experience here.

“It was just awful,” said the woman, “there was so much noise, people walking through the halls.”

I rolled my eyes. Apparently, hearing someone's footsteps outside their door was disturbing enough to alert the manager. I'd had enough of tourists and their ridiculous complaints.

“We will never *ever* come back here,” said the man. The manager looked stunned as she tried to console them, asking what she could do to make their stay better for next time.

That was the worst part about customer service; the customer is always right, even when they’re not.

“Okay,” Maria made her way back over to us, “we’re all set. What should we do?” They both looked at me.

“Well, um, I guess we can walk around and see what there is to do.”

“Okay,” Grammie said hesitantly. I could tell she wasn’t too keen on walking around on a hot day, but she’d rather die than be a burden or go against what we wanted to do. So off we went down Essex Street, taking breaks every few feet so Grammie could catch her breath.

We turned into tourists, asking employees of various local shops what some fun things to do might be. We settled on a trolley tour, something I’d made fun of since I started hanging out in Salem. Why would anyone care to see everything around here? I didn’t get it. Whenever I saw the giant red vehicle drive by, I’d laugh to myself and think about how those poor people had been duped out of their money. I grumpily got onto the trolley, my arms crossed and a stoic look on my face. I guess we will waste our money looking out the window of an oversized bus while some guy rambles on about the “spooky” city that we were in.

However, my frown quickly faded and my arms relaxed as our tour guide cracked jokes and gave us in-depth information about the town. I actually found his insight to be quite interesting. We went from Chestnut Street all the way to Salem Willows with many stops in between. I was not aware of all the history in this town. Chestnut Street is a beautiful road that showcases historic homes, a one-way street that was wide enough to accommodate a horse and carriage in the nineteenth century. The corner of Cambridge and Chestnut Street is home to

Hamilton Hall, a meeting place built in the nineteenth century for Federalist gatherings.

Today, it is recognized as one of the most well known Federalist buildings in the United States.

Chestnut Street also features the Philip's House, a home built in the year eighteen twenty-one but massively renovated in the early twentieth century. The establishment is currently the only house on Chestnut Street that allows public tours and gives tourists an idea of how families lived during that point in history. I took in the architecture and admired the craftsmanship of each home.

Everything from paint colors to historic shutters were meticulously planned to maintain the historic integrity of the homes. In all the time I'd spent in Salem, I never ventured down to this area.

As we made our way to Salem Willows, I found myself wondering what kind of history I would discover. The Willows was a park where I would hang out with my friends, but aside from that I didn't know anything about how it was established. I was interested in learning that Salem Willows gets its name from the European willow trees planted throughout the grounds in the year eighteen-hundred and one. Before the area was a park, it was a place for people with smallpox to recuperate. There had been a nearby hospital and the willow trees were planted to give patients a shaded area. Today, it is a large park with ice cream shops, places to eat, and a large arcade. The park overlooks the ocean and there is plenty of space to sit and relax, let children run around, and walk dogs.

As the trolley traveled back into the center of Salem, we decided to disembark at Pickering Wharf and explore the local shops. Grammie seated herself on a nearby bench and told us to take our time while she rested. Maria and I perused through the stores, turning into the most obnoxious tourists ever. In one shop, we found a rack of silly hats and decided to try on each one and take pictures. We got out our flip phones and snapped blurry photos of us in the quirky hats,

making faces and laughing. The sales woman looked less than pleased, but we didn't care. With the year my aunt was having, she deserved to have a little fun. We weren't hurting anyone.

After our encounter with the hats and a dirty look from the cashier, Maria was in need of coffee. She was an avid coffee drinker and needed her fix every few hours. I took her to Jaho Coffee and Tea, one of my usual stops when walking. The baristas knew me and gave me a warm smile as I ordered my peach iced tea. Maria gave the menu a look and asked the cashier if they served plain coffee. As we made our way to the cream and sugar, Maria looked around suspiciously and said, "keep a look out," as she grabbed a handful of Sweet'n'Lows and stuffed them into her purse. She was one of *those* people. I looked around to see if anyone had seen her do it, and thankfully they hadn't. I'd never be able to show my face here again.

We found Grammie on the same bench where we'd left her, looking happily at the water and the people walking by. She was perfectly content letting us walk around. We decided to head back to the hotel and rest a bit before going out to dinner. I decided to take them to Rockafellas, one of my favorites. I failed to consider that this was a quarter of a mile away and Grammie would once again have to walk. Back in the hotel, my aunt immediately cracked a window and lit up a cigarette.

"Maria!" Grammie screamed. "That's illegal!" Grammie was a stickler for rules and getting caught breaking them was her worst nightmare. My aunt was not a stickler for rules and getting caught was the last thing on her mind.

"Ma, it's fine. I do this all the time." She laughed.

"Easy for you to say. It's my credit card on the room!"

"Relax, no one will know," said Maria as she took a long drag and released it into the screen of the window.

“Oh my God, I can’t watch!” Grammie yelled as she sat in a large chair off to the side and opened her book to block the view. I sat on the bed and laughed. We were already off to a great start.

After resting for a bit and changing out of our sweaty clothes, we were hungry and ready for a great dinner. It was six o’clock and the air was cooling from a comfortable breeze. We took another walk down the cobblestone road, stopping every now and then so Grammie could take a break. It was Labor Day and Essex Street was filled with vacationers and locals who wanted to enjoy the night. We saw couples with young children in carriages, teenagers playing Hacky Sack near the fountain, and girlfriends arm in arm as they laughed and laughed like they didn’t have a care in the world. Salem is a town that attracts all kinds of people.

As we turned the corner onto Washington Street to the entrance of Rockafella’s, I noticed that the outdoor tables that were normally filled with people were folded up and chained. I walked up to the door and read a sign that said: CLOSED FOR LABOR DAY. Great. We were starving and I made Grammie walk all this way. She was sitting on a nearby bench catching her breath. I looked across the street and saw Upper Crust Pizza, a place that I’d never been to but once paid sixteen dollars for a small pizza delivery. I thought of Engine House, another local pizza joint, but that was still a walk for Grammie and not exactly the gourmet dinner we had in mind. Looking back on it, I suppose Rockafella’s would not have been all that gourmet either.

“Rach, is there something near the hotel?” Maria asked. “I don’t want Ma to have to walk too far.”

I thought of Salem Beer Works or somewhere near Pickering Wharf, but suddenly I realized that a cute Italian restaurant stood right across the street from our hotel. I’d only been to Bella Verona once a long time ago, so it didn’t stick in my memory, but immediately I knew that

Grammie and Maria would love the authentic Italian charm. So, after conducting this pointless walk all the way across town, we made the trek back, right across from our hotel, again stopping so Grammie could regain her composure. She was going to lose so much weight by the end of this trip.

“Ooh it’s beautiful in here,” Maria said as she took in the scent of marinara sauce.

“Maybe we will meet some handsome Italian men in here, Rachael,” she smirked as she walked up to the muscular host. “Three please,” she said coyly and batted her eyes. Grammie shook her head in disappointment and sat down at our wooden table. We munched on fluffy bread with a flaky crust which we dipped in a unique concoction of oils and spices. It was delicious. After finishing our meals, we were so full we almost didn’t have room for dessert. Almost. I wanted to take them to the shop where I worked, Maria’s Sweet Somethings, a shop with chocolates, ice cream, and tourist-y gifts that I knew Maria would love. Grammie had been in before to look around, but she never sat and had anything to eat. I was excited for Maria to peruse the fun merchandise and have some ice cream. I was hoping my less than pleasant boss wouldn’t be there, but that seemed unlikely seeing that she all but slept in that place.

We walked across the street to the hotel parking lot and hopped into my car. Well, Grammie didn’t exactly hop, but we decided that driving was a better option. The sun was setting and the sky was a combination of pastels, pink and aqua, and the air warm, with a perfect breeze. I parked in the lot on Front Street and admired the deserted road. Everything was closed so business owners and employees could enjoy a day free from labor. Everyone except for my boss and her unfortunate employees. Among the dark street with chained up tables and chairs, Maria’s Sweet Somethings was lit up with outdoor lights, patio seating, and a life-sized ice cream cone statue out front, creating the illusion of a welcoming atmosphere.

“Rachael, maybe *this* is where we will meet some men,” my aunt whispered in my ear as we walked through the front wooden door. I sincerely doubted it. I’d worked here for three years and hadn’t seen many prospects. As expected, I saw my boss standing at the register, eagerly awaiting customers. There were a handful of people casually browsing, but nobody was buying anything. I saw her give my outfit a once over with a disapproving look. At least I thought I looked cool in my ripped jeans and Red Sox snapback. She wasn’t used to seeing my outside-of-work wardrobe. I introduced her to Grammie and my aunt and we went upstairs to order our ice cream. I found it funny that my Aunt Maria was so warm and friendly, while my boss, Maria was quite the opposite. Aside from sharing the same name, they had nothing in common. My good friend Randy and a new high school girl named Cassandra greeted us. We settled on sundaes and I promptly went behind the counter to scoop. I always felt bad making my co-workers wait on me.

I scooped the flavors for each of our sundaes: Grammie’s Chocolate Almond frozen yogurt, Maria’s Pistachio, and my Coffee Kahlua Brownie, put gooey hot fudge on top (more than usual) and finished it with plenty of whipped cream and a shiny cherry. They looked amazing.

We sat down and started to devour our sundaes when I heard the chime on the back door. Even when I wasn’t working, it was an instinct to jerk my head to the door and look attentive. In walked a regular customer, a guy we deemed as “Mint Patty Man.” He came in almost every night and ordered the same thing: Mint Patty frozen yogurt with chocolate sprinkles on the top *and* bottom. Pain in the ass. The fact that he never tipped didn’t help my cynical attitude towards him. He was nice enough but loved to talk for hours about his job and politics, two subjects in which I had no interest. He was in his sixties, about six-feet-tall, thin with fine blonde hair and

glasses. He was wearing his usual attire of a checkered collared shirt, faded khaki pants, and white sneakers.

“Oh, hi ya Rachael, how ya doin’?” Great, I’d been spotted by him. “Rare day off?”

“Yup,” I said as friendly as I could muster, “I’m taking these two on a tour of Salem. This is Verna, my grandmother, and my aunt, Maria.”

They exchanged pleasantries as Mint Patty Man went up to the counter. Randy started scooping before he even put the order in. My spoon hit the bottom of my bowl and I was pretty disappointed. I made myself a large two scoop sundae, but somehow there was never enough ice cream on my plate. I looked at my aunt’s sundae, while she swirled the spoon around with a melting scoop of pistachio, the green cream mixing with decadent fudge. Clearly she was full. I couldn’t fathom wasting ice cream, but I’d imagine her stomach had shrunk tremendously during the year she’d experienced.

Since she was finished, I asked if she wanted to look around in the gift shop on the bottom level. We got up as Grammie finished her sundae and Mint Patty Man sat at the table next to her. We walked down the small staircase and Maria quickly admired the quirky sayings and signs on the wall. There were some cute ones for dogs and cats, and her beagle Logan had been a huge source of comfort during the divorce. When her ex-husband complained that he didn’t get to see the dog anymore, her response was, “too f*ckin bad”. And that was that, she got the dog.

I pointed to a sign I knew she’d appreciate: ‘If it has tires or testicles it’s gonna give you trouble’.

“Ain’t that the truth”, she said.

We looked at the display case of large chocolate truffles and assortment of bite size candies. We were both too full to eat anything else, but it didn't stop us from drooling. My favorite was the tiramisu truffle, comprised of a milk chocolate shell and a creamy center filled with coffee flavoring. You'd think after three years I'd be sick from looking at this everyday, but it was exactly the opposite. Not only did I crave sweets in the shop, I even had to have them on my days off. It was becoming a problem.

Maria admired our unique tea collection and random stuffed animals that nobody ever bought. I mean, who's going to pay forty-seven dollars for a stuffed pig, even if it does sing? She read the clever sayings on the mugs and looked at the Halloween witches that we were starting to put on the shelves. October, the month of doom, was almost upon us. Thousands of people, tourists and locals, would visit Salem during the month of October to partake in all kinds of events, such as spooky walking tours, the carnival, and haunted houses. Our shop was slammed during the whole month, and it took nearly two months to put out all of the cheesy merchandise. People actually spent hundreds of dollars on a single item, just to say they got it in Salem, Massachusetts. Maria and I spent about twenty minutes downstairs and decided to check up on Grammie. She was probably bored, sitting there all by herself.

As we approached the stairs, Maria stopped me. "Do you hear that?"

The sound was my grandmother giggling like a school girl. She was sitting next to Mint Patty Man and laughing at his lame jokes. We walked up to the table and heard them reminiscing about the good old days. I'll admit, he seemed much more interested in the conversation than she did, but she was enjoying herself nonetheless. I went behind the ice cream counter to make my aunt some coffee. It was time for another fix, even though it was almost nine o'clock at night.

The sound of Mint Patty Man and Grammie laughing filled the room. I'll be damned. Grammie found a man on our Single Ladies trip.

I handed Maria her coffee and sat back down at the table. Mint Patty Man got up to throw his empty cup away and as he did that, Grammie gave us the eye that she was ready to leave. I guess his charm had worn off. We said our goodbyes and headed back to the car.

"Ma, I can't believe you found a boyfriend!" Maria yelled as we got into the car.

"He's not my boyfriend! We were just talking. It's called being friendly, Maria. You should try it sometime." Grammie stated.

"Yeah, you were *real* friendly, Ma! We heard you laughing!"

We giggled as Grammie yelled that she was *absolutely* not flirting with Mint Patty Man. To this day, I don't know his real name.

We spent the night laughing our heads off about the events of the day. Grammie fell asleep reading in the chair, leaving Maria and I with our own beds. She fell asleep quickly and I stayed up watching random shows on television. Grammie is an early riser, so Maria and I woke up to the sound of the hotel room door closing.

"Where is she going," I asked Maria in my grumpy just-woke-up voice.

"Who knows, maybe meeting Mint Patty Man for coffee!"

We got up and dressed so we would be ready to go when Grammie got back from wherever it was she went. I was sitting on the bed tying my shoes when I heard the door open.

"Good morning," I heard in a cheery, unfamiliar voice, "I saw this lovely lady fumbling with cups and I figured I'd give her a hand."

It was the hotel manager carrying a cup of coffee. Grammie followed behind her with two cups of coffee, steam rising out of the white mugs. Maria exited the bathroom, spotted the

hotel employee, and waved her hands like a maniac before coming back into the room. She must have been smoking. She shut the door behind her and walked casually over to the chair.

“The woman looked around suspiciously, sniffing the air like a fox. “Did someone smoke in here?”

Grammie looked at Maria with daggers in her eyes, and it took everything in me to stifle my laughter. Before anyone could respond, the woman spoke.

“Don’t worry about it, I won’t say anything,” the woman laughed and Grammie let out the biggest sigh of relief.

“Thank God. I *told* her it wasn’t allowed! She aggressively pointed at Maria.

“Ma, relax!”

I couldn’t hold it in anymore. I was laughing so hard that I collapsed onto the bed.

The lady was laughing just looking at everyone’s reaction. “Just make sure you clear the smell out of here before they clean the room, or you will get a fine. Have a good day, ladies!”

I decided to take them to Red’s Sandwich Shop for breakfast. It’s the most famous breakfast place in Salem. Personally it’s not my favorite, but you can’t go to Salem for the first time and *not* go to Red’s. They have won countless awards and been in business for over fifty years. Even the former First Lady, Laura Bush has eaten there. This building was once home to the London Coffee House, which dates back to the eighteenth century. Inside, it looks like a Victorian home. The patterned wallpaper and small wooden tables makes guests feel as if they are eating a meal in an old-style, rather than a restaurant. They also have a counter with an open kitchen, making it easy to watch the cooks preparing breakfast. I must say, if I am in the mood for pancakes, I go to Red’s. They are so large that they flop over the plates, making it nearly

impossible to even finish one pancake. We were in and out of there pretty quickly, as they move people fast to accommodate the large crowds of people waiting to get in the door.

I took Maria into Rouge, a cosmetic boutique where I would spend half of my paycheck. I knew she would love it in there. We looked around at all of the makeup and tried on perfume. They recently started carrying Bumble & Bumble hair products, and the saleslady was having a ball explaining everything to me. She knew I'd be spending a lot of money. Maria listened intently as well, interested in the dry shampoo and styling mousse. I picked up my three products and headed to the register. Maria picked one up and looked at the price ticket underneath.

"I think I'll stick with Suave, but thanks anyway." She whispered in my ear.

We walked back up to Essex Street and found Grammie on her usual bench. We didn't have anywhere else to go, so we headed back to the hotel to get my car. Our Single Ladies trip had come to an end.

We drove Maria back to her apartment in Revere. She got her bag out of the trunk and we got out to say goodbye.

"Are you going to be okay," Grammie asked with a worried expression on her face.

"Yes, Ma. I have my dog. He keeps me company."

Grammie, who is not a dog person, did not find this to be an adequate solution. Maybe if it were a cat she would have been happier.

"Okay," she said, "call me if you need me."

"Bye, Rach," Maria said giving me a hug, "at least Grammie got a boyfriend out of this trip!"

"He's not my boyfriend!" Grammie yelled from the passenger seat.

One month after our single Ladies Extravaganza, I met my fiancé while out with a group of friends. Soon after, Maria met her future husband in the most unlikely of places. An uncle on my mother's side of the family had passed away unexpectedly, and Maria wanted to attend the wake. Although Maria is my father's sister, she wanted to pay her respects since she'd met my uncle many times at family gatherings. While we were talking and reminiscing about our unforgettable trip to Salem, my Uncle Paul came over to say hello to Maria. They too, had known each other for years because they'd been at family gatherings together. Paul was my mother's brother and had heard about Maria's divorce. He was also going through a painful split from his second wife. I thought I was imagining the spark that I saw during their conversation, because the whole thing would just be so weird. My mother's brother dating my father's sister, really? In the end, though, who was I to judge? They'd both gone through so much pain that if they made each other happy, what did it matter how they knew each other? Maria eventually moved in with him and his four children, where she would never have to worry about being lonely again.

The trip to Salem happened at a transitional time in all of our lives. I had just graduated from high school and had no idea what I'd be doing with my life. Grammie was grieving the loss of her ex son-in-law, a man she thought would take care of her daughter. Maria had been reeling from the greatest pain she'd ever experienced, and never thought she'd come back from the loss. Even though all of this crazy stuff was going on, we had an amazing time. None of the drama affected our trip. We'd taken a vacation that was fifteen minutes away from home and still managed to make the greatest of memories. I learned from that vacation that no matter where we were or what was going on in our lives, the bond we had would get us through anything.

Unexpected Love

Brandon and I met three and a half years before our first vacation together. While trying to plan something quick and easy, we finally agreed on Ogunquit, Maine even though we knew nothing about the town. I'd stayed there with my mom a few years before, and aside from visiting the beach, nothing was particularly memorable. All Brandon and I knew was that it was an inexpensive getaway that matched our minimum wage budgets. We were struggling twenty-something-year-old college students who didn't have the funds for an extravagant vacation. We just wanted to sit on the beach for a couple of days and forget about our jobs. It turned out to be a bust since we went during a tropical storm. Although Ogunquit means "Beautiful Place by the Sea" named by the Abenaki people, this phrase was lost on us. We watched the heavy rain fall from our hotel room and listened to the roaring thunder as we tried to plan some indoor adventures in the area. While the circumstances were disappointing, neither of us were surprised. Since the first night that we'd met, nothing had gone as planned.

I was eighteen and had gotten a call from my best friend, Tyla. She wanted me to go to the movies with she and her boyfriend, Aric, along with some of his friends. I had just finished a shift at work and found a string of texts, begging me to join. She did not want to be the only girl stuck with a group of guys. I opened up my flip phone and began typing old school, when it was required to click the numbers on the keypad with the corresponding letters. I typed NO as quickly as possible. No way was I sitting through a two-hour movie with her boyfriend and his

group of idiot friends. Knowing them, they'd probably get us kicked out. Plus, I knew that Tyla had been trying to set me up with one of the guys; his name was Lucas. She'd been not so subtly hinting that we would be great together. No thank you. She and I had very different tastes in guys, and I was not interested in her brand. She enjoyed the rowdy party crowd, people who drank into the early hours of the morning and couldn't remember anything from the night before. I enjoyed being in bed by ten o'clock so I could read a book or binge watch my favorite television shows. I had to admit, though, being the only one of my friends who didn't party on a regular basis was getting lonely. One minute after I sent the text, I got a phone call. I flipped the phone open with my chin as I walked to my car.

"I'm not going," I said, forgetting to say hello. I slammed the door to my red Pontiac coupe and abruptly started the engine. She was constantly trying to set me up with men in which I had zero interest.

"Please, Rach! It won't be that bad. This is a different group of friends; people that Aric went to middle school with."

Oh, even better. The only thing worse than high school boys were middle school boys. Even if they were older now, I wasn't buying it.

"Tyla, I really don't want to go."

"Well, what else are you doing?"

She had me there. If I didn't go, I wouldn't be doing anything. I'd gotten used to planless Saturday nights, but to tell the truth, laying in bed watching the third season of Grey's Anatomy was getting old. If anything, this gave me a reason not to stay in.

"Fine," I said reluctantly, "but I'm leaving right after the movie. I'm not coming up to the apartment for drinks afterwards, so don't even ask."

An hour later, I arrived at Tyla's house and hopped into her car. I didn't even change out of my work clothes. I had on my gray stretch pants with a New York Mets hoodie. If that didn't say "I'm not interested in dating you," I don't know what did. I did, however, put on some foundation so I didn't look like a complete slob.

On our drive over to Aric's apartment, Tyla gave me the lowdown on the boys.

"You'll like Lucas, he's really nice. There's this other kid going too, his name is Brandon. I can't stand him. He's always getting Aric going and it pisses me off. He'll say something about some video game or something and it will start an hour long debate. Plus, his face looks like a leprechaun."

Okay then, after that description, I figured I'd hate this kid. Also, my ex-boyfriend's name was Brandon, and I wasn't interested in dating another one. I'd steer clear of him.

We arrived at the apartment complex and pulled into a handicap space to wait for the boys. I wasn't moving from the front seat, so it would be interesting to see all three of them fit into Tyla's two-door hatchback. A few minutes later, they emerged from the front door and one of them caught my eye. From his silhouette I could see he had on a backwards baseball hat and a lip ring. Interesting. Maybe Lucas wouldn't be so bad after all. I saw Aric and who I assumed to be Brandon come out behind him, but I hardly noticed. Tyla lifted her seat back so they could squeeze into the backseat. They were basically sitting on top of each other.

"Rachael, these are the guys," she said as she pointed, "Lucas and Brandon."

When she pointed to Brandon, I almost burst out laughing right then. The guy I'd been checking out was the one I was supposed to hate. I wanted to dislike him after what she told me, but I couldn't help it, he was intriguing. I can't describe why, but I found myself drawn to him.

However, I already had dated a Brandon and that didn't end well. I didn't want to be reminded of him. Oh well.

We got to the movies and bought our tickets. We were seeing a film called *Surrogates*, a dystopian film starring Bruce Willis. If nothing else, I could look at Bruce Willis for a few hours. As we walked through the movie theater, I couldn't help but notice how nice the guys were. They weren't like Aric's other friends who cat called girls and drank in all their spare time. They talked about work and what they were studying in college, and actually asked about my life. I wasn't used to that with this crew. Aric's other friends usually ignored me after they discovered that I didn't fall for their tragic pick-up lines.

Despite the painful name coincidence and the fact that Tyla didn't like him, I couldn't help but be attracted to Brandon. He was nice, funny, and a little bit shy. His cheeks were rosy and would turn red when I asked him questions. When we got into the theater and took our seats, I was secretly excited that he sat next to me. I wanted to talk to him, but I wasn't sure of what to say.

He and Lucas were best friends, so they talked to each other during the previews while I tried to ease my way into their conversation. I was trying to find the opportunity to jump in when Tyla leaned over.

"So what do you think of Lucas," she asked while beaming. She really wanted this to work out.

"Um, he's nice I guess," I said indifferently. I was not at all interested in Lucas. He seemed nice enough, but I was so drawn to Brandon that I didn't pay attention to Lucas.

Just then, the lights went dim. The movie was about to start and I blew my chance to talk to Brandon. I guess that was it. I turned to face the screen with a sigh.

Twenty minutes into this bizarre movie, I needed to use the ladies' room. I guess that large Sprite was a bad idea. I got up, making Lucas and Brandon stand up and go into the aisle so I could get out. I came back promptly, considering if I missed too much of this confusing movie I'd never catch up. I hurried back and settled into my seat. I was right, I had no idea what was going on. I looked over at Tyla and was about to ask what was happening when I suddenly got an idea. I looked over at Brandon, who was staring intently at the screen. Screw it.

I tapped him on the shoulder. "Did I miss anything while I was gone?" And that was it. For the rest of the night, we talked nonstop about everything from music to movies, school, you name it. We barely watched the rest of the movie because we were too busy laughing about nothing at all. I even went upstairs to Aric's apartment and stayed for hours while they had a few beers. Instead of chugging their drinks or throwing back shots, Brandon casually drank his Bud Light over the course of several hours. I liked that he didn't feel the need to impress us by getting wasted. Although, I never understood why being blackout drunk would be impressive anyways. I wasn't much of a drinker, so I just sat on the couch with Brandon and sipped my bottle of water. Unlike most people my age, he did not berate me for not drinking. Our chemistry was undeniable to everyone, and Tyla was regretting everything she'd told me on the drive over. She didn't say anything, but I could tell this was not the result she wanted.

Brandon and I went onto the deck to talk a bit more in privacy. I learned that he worked at the grocery store, Shaws, but didn't like it because he worked outside bringing in the shopping carts. That showed me that he was willing to take on the responsibility of a job, even if it was something he didn't like. Brandon also told me about his schooling and future career goals. He went to college for computer networking, a subject in which I was not familiar at all. I was impressed with his ambition. His aspirations were a bit intimidating to me, considering I was not

in college at that point in time and still wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. Brandon pulled out his phone just as the sliding glass door opened suddenly. It was Tyla.

“Hey guys, do you mind if we go soon? It's getting kind of late.”

“Um, sure,” I said. She ruined the moment, and I wasn't sure what else to say. I could tell Brandon was about to ask for my phone number and she just killed the mood.

“Yeah, Tyla,” Brandon said abruptly, “let me just finish my beer and we can head out.” He turned and rolled his eyes. It was clear they didn't like each other. She closed the door without a word.

To be honest, as much as I loved Tyla, the fact that he saw through her immaturity made him even more attractive. She was my best friend, but she had some growing up to do. Brandon was already there, and it was refreshing compared to the other guys I was used to meeting.

We began talking again and five minutes later that door slid open even more violently than the first time. This time both of us rolled our eyes and didn't hide our annoyance from her.

“Guys, we really need to go,” Tyla scoffed. “Lucas's allergies are bothering him from the dogs and he said his asthma will be aggravated soon.”

That was it. We both stormed inside and got our things together. We both took a good look at Lucas and he appeared to be fine. I gave Tyla a dirty look, although she didn't even notice because she was on her way out the door.

Out in the hallway, Brandon pulled me aside and asked for my phone number. Finally! Even though the night ended on an awkward note, at least we would talk again. I went home that night on a high, knowing that he was different. I was impressed when he texted me the next afternoon, not playing the game of waiting a day to play it cool. For the next week, we texted

nonstop and hung out whenever we had the chance. Everything went very quickly and the following week we were officially a couple.

Seven years later we were still together. We'd been back to Ogunquit three times since that first trip and we were going back again. I planned an overnight stay as a Christmas present for Brandon because I knew how much he loved it. However, this time would be different. Instead of going as kids with no plans or ideas of what to do, we would be there as a newly engaged couple who were seasoned travelers of this town. We knew all of our favorite places of where to eat and shop. We'd only been there in the summer, so I was excited to experience Ogunquit during the off season.

On our first stay as struggling college students, it was the first time Brandon had ever been to Maine. This astounded me, considering it was only an hour long drive from Massachusetts. He was excited to explore a new city and the drive up the coast had been peaceful. Despite the roaring wind and the large threatening clouds, we held out hope that as we got closer to Maine, the weather would turn to sunshine and we would spend our days getting tanned and sitting on the beach. Unfortunately, the torrential downpours started as soon as I put my feet in the sand, forcing us to schlep our beach gear back into the car, soaking wet. Brandon drove back to the hotel, both of us feeling defeated. This was the first trip we'd ever planned together, and it was turning into a nightmare. Although the hotel was five minutes away, the drive took nearly twenty minutes because of the heavy rain. Pedestrians ran frantically across the street, darting into the nearest storefront to find shelter from the storm. We sat in our hotel lobby to regroup, looking through brochures to find any type of attraction that didn't require being outside. Turns out that a city thriving on beachgoers doesn't have much to offer if one can't go to the beach. There were a few indoor sites, such as the playhouse and the Ogunquit Museum of

American Art, but at that point in our lives we didn't have much interest in cultured establishments.

Going to the movies was the best that we came up with, despite the fact that we could do this at home, or anywhere on the planet for that matter. The only movie that both of us could agree on was "White House Down", a plot that involved the White House being invaded and the president being held hostage. Great. I was on vacation, supposed to be soaking up the sun and drinking margaritas by the pool, and instead I'm watching a movie about terrorism in our country. Not the memorable experience that I'd envisioned. To top it all off, both of us forgot our phone chargers at home, so each morning we would sit in Brandon's silver Hyundai to charge our batteries with his cheap car charger. It took half an hour for each of us to get an additional ten percent of battery.

Finally, on our last day in Ogunquit, the sun came out in the afternoon and we were able to walk around. The pavement was still slick from the storm and we had to dodge puddles every few feet, but this didn't stop us from exploring the city. Everyone must have had the same motivation, because the town was bustling with tourists determined to enjoy themselves. After two days of being cooped up inside, people were anxious to be outdoors and continue their vacations. Although we did not get to experience the full effect of the city during those few days, we fell in love with Ogunquit because of its small town charm. The scenery was mesmerizing and even though we were able to walk around on that last day, the vacation didn't feel complete. We wanted to go back. The following year, Brandon and I once again packed our bags and headed north to visit Ogunquit, a city in which we had unfinished business. This time, our planning was much better and we had an incredible time exploring and experiencing what

Ogunquit had to offer. Eventually Ogunquit became “our place” and whenever we wanted to get away, that’s where we went.

For Brandon’s Christmas present, we stayed in York, the next town over from Ogunquit, because I got a great deal at the York Harbor Inn. I recently discovered Groupon, and I learned that many of these local hotels offer significant discounts in the winter in order to receive patronage. It was January first, two thousand and seventeen and we headed up north to escape our lives for a night. Originally, the town of Ogunquit was a part of Wells, Maine. It wasn’t until 1980 that Ogunquit separated and become its own city.

When I planned this small getaway, I had not considered that it was New Years Day and that many places might be closed. I was most concerned about my favorite breakfast spot, Roost. During our first trip to Ogunquit, we stumbled upon this cozy restaurant, not knowing anything about it. We did not plan anything during that time and simply meandered around the town, taking our chances on restaurants. For the most part, that didn’t work out very well. We left a few places for dinner because we were significantly underdressed, and looking at the menu prices reinforced the fact that we shouldn’t be eating there. However, we got lucky with Roost, and every time we go to Ogunquit, one of my requirements is that we have breakfast there.

Brandon doesn’t understand why I love it so much. To be honest, I don’t either. There is just something about its atmosphere that makes me never want to leave. I even made a spontaneous trip to Ogunquit over the summer just to have breakfast at Roost! Inside, everything is made of wood, and the rustic environment feels like a cozy barn. Their menu is diverse, and I always order the Morning Glory: Two eggs over easy with bacon, home fries, and a corn muffin. The order itself is nothing spectacular. Maybe it’s just a sentimental tradition, but I’ve never had a desire to try anything else.

On the morning of January first, we arrived in Maine and got to our lodging spot in York. However, we drove right through the quaint little town and headed for Shore Road in Ogunquit to eat at Roost. I was praying that they would be open. As silly as it sounds, my vacation would have been significantly affected if they were closed. When we pulled up to the white house with black shutters that houses my favorite restaurant, I was excited when I saw the OPEN sign hanging up. I yelled in excitement and Brandon looked at me like I was the strangest person he'd ever seen. The fact that I had such strong feelings over breakfast baffled him. We walked inside and saw crowds of people in the dining room and the bar area. Not only were they open, they were bustling.

It was nearly noontime and we'd never been here at this hour. Maybe it was like this all the time, or perhaps people needed some comfort food from their New Year's Eve hangover. Nevertheless, I was happy to get a table. The hostess sat us in the bar area at a side table next to a window. We'd never sat here before so I never noticed how beautiful it was. While the dining room was quaint with an early twentieth century feel, the bar had been updated to accommodate a larger crowd. However, rather than being modern, the space held the same old-time charm. Sprouting out of the bar was a large tree with branches that stretched towards the ceiling. Instead of leaves, the tree was adorned with exquisite ornaments ranging from small snowflakes to large glittery objects. I even found a pickle ornament, something I'd recently learned was common to put on a tree.

Due to the large crowd, it took awhile to order and receive our food. I didn't mind, though. It gave me a chance to admire the ornaments and enjoy the atmosphere. When my meal finally arrived, it was just as good as always. When we were finished, I reluctantly got up and

exited the old-style home. As we drove away, I waved at the building and shouted “Bye, Roost!” just as I always did, and Brandon rolled his eyes just as he always did.

It was an unusual January day. While it had snowed a few days before, it was forty-five degrees with a promised high of fifty-two degrees. As we drove into York, we noticed many people out walking and enjoying the weather. We approached the coast and saw even more people on the beach, strolling casually and letting their dogs run around on the sand. We even saw a man surfing in the ocean. It might have been warm, but the water had to have been bitterly cold. Because it was such a beautiful day, I considered asking Brandon if he wanted to walk the Marginal Way, a beautiful path in Ogunquit that overlooks the water. The trail sits along the Atlantic Ocean, and on sunny days the water glistens while the soft waves create a hypnotizing scene. There were also beautiful homes to admire along the way that sat right on the water’s edge. Having that view outside one’s living room window must be captivating.

Marginal Way leads out to Perkins Cove, another quaint area of Maine surrounded by the ocean. The thought was fleeting as I realized it would be covered with mud and melting snow. Last summer when we walked down Marginal Way, I was sure that Brandon would propose. For some reason, I’d been expecting it during that vacation. It was the perfect place for us to get engaged, considering how much we loved the town. I’d been expecting the big moment at random times, but when Brandon insisted we take the walk, it seemed like a no brainer. We were holding hands and overlooking the ocean when I would occasionally bump into his side to feel for a ring in his pocket.

“Did you forget how to walk?” Brandon would ask me every time I did this. “That’s the third time you’ve bumped into me.”

“What” I asked innocently, “no, I was just looking at the water, sorry.”

He looked at me suspiciously, suspecting that I had an ulterior motive. If he was aware of what that motive was, I wasn't sure. This was not the first time I thought he was going to pop the question, but it certainly seemed like the most realistic scenario. We were walking right on the water's edge, in our favorite place. If this wasn't the perfect spot, then I didn't know what was.

There were so many people around. The summer day was beautiful and everyone wanted to take in the fresh ocean breeze. It was mid August, and in no time the weather would change and snow would be falling.

"Whoa, check out that out house," Brandon said as he turned to look at the mansion in front of us.

As he turned, I took a good look at his pockets. I couldn't see anything. Why did he have to wear black gym shorts? He turned around quickly and caught me spying.

"There's no ring on me, Rachael," he said casually.

"What? I didn't..."

"Oh, please!" Brandon said with a smirk.

Shit. I guess I was busted.

"I knew you would be expecting it during this vacation. That's why I'm not doing it."

He looked so smug, like he was so happy he pulled one over on me. The cat was out of the bag. To be honest, I felt relieved. It's not that I didn't want him to ask, but now I could enjoy the vacation without any added pressure.

"So you knew I'd be suspecting a proposal this whole time?" I asked. I guess my attempt at being discreet had not worked.

"Yup," he was beaming now. "I figured I'd wait until you were being nosy to let you know that it wasn't happening. I knew it would happen eventually."

Sometimes I hated how well he knew me.

“When I do propose, you’ll never suspect it.”

The day he actually proposed, he was right. I had absolutely no idea that it was coming. It had been a long day of babysitting. I was working as a nanny for two-year-old twin girls. As much as I loved them, being with multiple toddlers for ten hours could be daunting. While they were napping, I got a text from Brandon asking if I wanted to walk on a trail in Beverly when I got out of work. We had recently started walking more and discovered some trails close to his house. I didn’t want to go, considering I woke up at five thirty in the morning to watch the kids and the thought of a rigorous hike was exhausting. Before I could reply, he was calling me.

“Hey,” he said, “would you want to go for a walk in Philips Estate? I’ve been in an office all week and I want some fresh air. I haven’t really had a chance to be outside.”

Philips Estate was a place we’d gone once before. It’s an old mansion that burnt down years ago, but there is plenty of land and many trails to explore. I could tell he really wanted to go, so I’d suck it up and walk with him. I could use the exercise anyway.

“Sure, but I don’t have my sneakers with me. I’m wearing flip flops.”

“Of course you are,” he said sarcastically.

“You’re driving by my house,” I said, “you could swing by and grab them for me if you want.”

“Okay, I can do that.”

I should have known something was up in that moment. He would’ve done it, but normally it would have taken more convincing. His enthusiasm surprised me.

“Okay, cool,” I said, “see you when I get out.”

I got to his house at five o'clock that evening and texted him that I was parked out front. I was already in comfortable walking clothes, as babysitting two-year-olds requires that I wear attire that can get dirty. I saw him emerge from the front door with my black Nike's in tow. He was wearing a green t-shirt and cargo shorts, which was odd for hiking winding trails.

"Don't you want to wear gym shorts," I asked as he got into the car.

"Um...no. They're all dirty and in the hamper."

"They're just going to get dirty on the walk. Are you sure you don't want to wear them?"

"No I'm good. I don't want to go back inside," he said abruptly.

"Okay, suit yourself," I said, not understanding why he'd want to be uncomfortable.

Whatever.

I headed down Cabot Street in Beverly towards Philips Estate. As we were driving, I remembered another trail that I always saw on my way to babysitting in Topsfield. This one was called the Rail Trail, and I'd heard there was something called a "swamp walk" along the way. I wasn't sure what that was, but it sounded fun.

"Do you mind if we try out a different trail," I ask.

"I kind of like the one we were doing," he said.

I was surprised. Brandon is usually easy going and doesn't mind changing plans, especially for something as mundane as walking through the woods.

"Please," I asked, "I really want to see what this one is like."

"Fine," he said with a sigh, as we headed further down Cabot Street in Beverly.

We talked casually about random things and he put on a great front. We both complained about our jobs and discussed what we would have for dinner that evening, nothing that indicated what was to come. I told him later that he should have won an Oscar for his acting performance.

We drove up to the trail and looked down the dirt path. It was a straight line for as far as we could see. This walk didn't look like it would be anything special. I was disappointed, expecting to pull up to a creepy swamp with all kinds of winding trails. Brandon wasn't thrilled with the place either.

"This is a boring trail," Brandon said, "can we please do the other one?"

"Fine," I said begrudgingly. "Let's go for a drive first."

Brandon let out a deep sigh and sank into his seat.

We drove down Route 97 and took a long detour before turning around and heading for our original destination. We finally arrived at Philips Estate and parked in the small gravel lot underneath the trees. The evening was beautiful. The air had been hot and humid during the day, but the night cooled off, leaving a gentle breeze. We walked up the concrete pathway that led to the trails.

"Hey, I bet when you went to my house to grab my sneakers, my dad thought you were asking for my hand in marriage."

"Hand in marriage," Brandon asked with disdain, "are you from the eighteen hundred's?"

"I purposely used a fancy phrase, it was supposed to be funny."

"Oh," he said, "nice try but it wasn't funny. And I'm not proposing."

There were many branches and plants along the trails, and I constantly had to look down so I didn't trip and sprain my ankle. There was a steep downward hill that led to one of the trails, and the first time we were here I slipped and nearly fell all the way down. Luckily, Brandon was in front of me and grabbed my waist before I could plummet to the bottom. Even though he saved me from possible broken bones and a plethora of scrapes and bruises, he laughed at my clumsiness and brought it up frequently.

“Do you need me to hold your hand down the hill,” he asked smugly as we approached the infamous spot.

I shot him a look of disdain, but held onto his arm for support while we embarked downwards.

We walked quietly through the woods and I admired the large trees. This place seemed like a maze. If Brandon wasn't here I'd never find my way out of this place. He had an incredible sense of direction, and I had none. After a mile or so we reached Wenham Lake. There is a small clearing that leads to a narrow patch of sand, before overlooking the water. I stood there, admiring the nature around us. This reminded me of being on the Marginal Way in Ogunquit, just taking in the beauty of the water. To the left of us, we observed two men fishing.

“Let's go over here,” Brandon said, leading me in the other direction.

I wasn't sure why he was being so anti-social, but I followed him. I walked over to the small patch of sand and looked out at the lake. I stood there for a minute and admired the sun's rays catching the still water, allowing it to glisten. It's so pretty over he-.”

I turned to look at Brandon and instead of being eye level, he was on one knee with an open black box in his hand. A diamond ring sat in the center of the box, sparkling brighter than the water.

“Rachael Lauren Cefalu, will you marry me?”

A million thoughts ran through my mind. Is this really happening? So this is that moment that women talk about, huh? How am I supposed to feel? Am I supposed to burst into tears? Or shriek with excitement? Am I really getting engaged wearing no makeup and workout gear?

“Um...Rachael...yes or what?” I came out of my fog and saw Brandon still on his knee, panic stricken.

In my state of shock, I had forgotten to answer.

“Oh, yeah,” I stuttered. How romantic. “Obviously yes!”

He gave me a kiss and put the ring on my finger.

“So that’s it, then? We’re actually engaged now?” I asked. What a stupid question.

“Yup,” Brandon stated, so matter of fact.

“Okay then,” It hadn’t hit me yet. I felt like we were still out for a walk. “Should we finish the trail?”

Brandon laughed. “Why don’t we go back? When you realize what’s happened you’re going to want to call people.”

Oh yes, that’s right. I have to tell my mom.

“I have to tell my mom!” I yelled in the middle of the forest, and sprinted towards the car. I guess it hit me.

Brandon traveled quickly behind and we made it to the car in ten minutes. Every few seconds I looked down to gaze at my ring. It was a white gold band with a round diamond in a square setting and two smaller diamonds on either side. I’ve never had a real diamond before.

We got to the car and I was frantic with excitement. I wasn’t sure who to call first, but I wanted to tell my mom in person.

“Did your parents know?” I asked.

“Yes, I told my mom I wanted to propose soon and within the hour she had every jeweler on the North Shore memorized. I think she was more excited than I was. Oh, speaking of my mom, can I text her and say that you said no and we broke up? It will be funny.”

He said it so casually. His dark sense of humor would not go over well in this situation.

“Um, no. No way. She will kill you.”

“Come on, it will be funny!”

“No it won’t. She will probably start crying.” I said.

“Even better!” Brandon yelled with excitement. “Then she will be even happier when she learns the truth!”

“No.” I stated, making it clear that it wasn’t happening.

“Well, I guess now that we’re getting married I have to get used to you telling me what to do.” Brandon threw his hands up in the air, as if resigning himself to a life without choices.

“Get used to it,” I said while smiling, reinforcing his thought.

It was an amazing night traveling to various houses of our family members, showing them the ring and gloating in our happiness. The next few days were also spent in a dazzling fog. I’d look down at my ring every so often and realize that this was actually happening. Marriage had always seemed so far off, but now it was a reality. As the glow began to gradually taper off, we settled into our lives again and went about our usual routines. Brandon had recently started a new job at a software company and was working part-time until he earned his degree in December. We both had Mondays off and spent those days outside hiking or going to the beach. A week after we got engaged, we were bored of the same walks and wanted to do something different.

“I know,” I said excitedly, “why don’t we go to Maine for the day!”

“Sold,” Brandon said as he swiftly headed to the car without any further questions.

Of course, we ate breakfast at Roost and ordered our usual meals. We parked at a nearby lot and explored the unique shops. Brandon wanted to walk along Marginal Way and explore Perkins Cove. When we arrived, I meandered through some more shops while Brandon sat on an

outdoor bench with all the other boyfriends, husbands, and fiancés. I came back after fifteen minutes or so without any shopping bags.

“I really don’t understand why you look around in stores if you’re not going to buy anything,” said Brandon. He brought this up every time I went shopping.

“I just like to look,” I said.

“But *why*? You’re not buying anything, I – forget it. I guess I’ll never understand.”

When I went into the next storefront that caught my eye, I proved him wrong and bought a hat. It was pale blue with a small whale on the front and the words ‘Perkins Cove’ in white script. I put it on with pride and flaunted my purchase.

“See,” I said smugly, pointing to my hat, “sometimes looking pays off.”

“Yes, it’s great wasting money on a hat that you’ll never wear just to prove a point.”

Brandon was right, I never wore hats. He knew me too well.

We ordered smoothies at a nearby shop and sat on the rocks overlooking the beach. It was a hot sunny day in August and summer would be ending soon. In two weeks, we would both be back in school with no time for adventures like this. I pulled out my phone to take some selfies of us, something I rarely did and was not very good at. The photos either showed half of his face or my eyes squinting from the blinding sunlight.

“It’s hot and you’re sweating,” Brandon said, “do you want to head back?”

“Let’s just sit for a little while longer. Before you know it we’ll be shoveling our cars out of the driveway and wearing bulky winter coats.”

“Way to kill the moment,” Brandon teased.

He put his arm around me and we sat in silence watching the water, the sun’s beams reflecting off of the small waves.

Family Business

Georgia is a place that I've always wanted to visit. Going to the south has been on my bucket list for a long time, and Georgia was at the top of the list. I envisioned peach trees and green grass fields, red dirt roads and beautiful rivers. These were all elements I'd heard about in my favorite country songs, and when I went there someday I knew I'd see everything. That's not the way it went at all. This trip was never something I saw happening in the near future. It started when my brother, Chris, our good friend, Liz, and myself sent a text to our boss that we knew would change the course of our relationship. The name of the establishment is Maria's Sweet Somethings, a gourmet ice cream and candy shop with countless novelty items. We knew that Maria had wanted to sell the business for a few years now, as she is now a grandmother and watches her daughter's twins full-time. As a woman in her sixties, she is too tired to run the business and would like to retire. When we told her we were inquiring about purchasing the store together, it sparked an adventure that we never predicted.

Lots of people told us that our interest in the store was a bad idea. For one, none of us have ever owned a business or knew anything about what it entailed. Also, the fact that there were three of us sparked concern that the profits would sparse, never mind that making decisions would be difficult, and the three of us agreeing on everything were slim to none. Finally, the thought of my brother and I in business together was worrisome to our family. They told us that blood and business didn't mix well, and our relationship could suffer as a result. Despite these

concerns that we were all well aware of, we were interested nonetheless. Maybe we were crazy, but something in me thought that this could work.

Perhaps I *was* losing it, because the idea of my brother and I working together was my favorite part. I was aware of the potential risks, but my brother and I share a unique bond that gives us an edge in working together. It wasn't always this way, though. We are six years apart, which didn't bode well when I was sixteen and he was ten. He was still interested in Power Ranger action figures and Nickelodeon, while I was interested in boys and staying out past midnight. Needless to say, we weren't very close during this time. Christopher, known as Chris to everyone except the immediate family, started working with me at the store when he was fifteen. He desperately wanted a job, and after a year of me saying I didn't want him working with me, I gave in and brought him home an application. It wasn't that I didn't like him, it was just that work was a place that was mine, a place to escape my family life for a bit. Also, he was my kid brother, and I was used to him always wanting to tag along. I looked at him as a child who wouldn't know what to do in the working world.

However, I knew he was ready to make money and gain some independence. Despite my reservations, his work ethic was proven time and time again. He raked leaves around the neighborhood, carried my grandmother's groceries into her house when they went food shopping, and helped my mother clean the house every weekend (something I never did). To my disbelief, Christopher working with me was one of the best things that could have happened. He did everything he was asked and the customers loved him. He was friendly and attentive in a way that I wish I could have been. Since then, he and I have had a great relationship and had a rhythm that worked while working together. When the opportunity arose to run this place, we didn't want to do it without each other. Although, there were some challenges to overcome.

The store has a bit of a reputation. While one would think that a store that sells ice cream, chocolate, and quirky tourist items would be a cheerful environment, the employees, and sometimes customers, were less than satisfied. Maria, the owner, has a strong personality and does not believe that the customer is always right. In fact, I've seen her tell them on many occasions that they are wrong, and continue to explain why. I've witnessed employees quit on the spot because of Maria's explosive temper. Whether the employee accidentally made an oversized ice cream or forgot to charge for an extra topping on their first day, her over reactions were so over the top that the turnover rate was astronomical.

There were many instances where Maria's ego got in the way of all common sense and rationale. I once witnessed her chase a woman down the street because she stole a piece of candy worth thirty-five cents. Maria was gone for forty-five minutes, and when she returned, delivered an in-depth account of the woman going into a nearby convenience store and Maria confronting her about the stolen piece of chocolate. Nobody was going to get away with theft in that shop, even if the merchandise in question was worth less than one dollar. Despite the fact that following a thief posed all kinds of potential danger, Maria's judgment was clouded at the thought of somebody taking something that was hers.

Over the years, many people have asked me how I've managed to put in almost eleven years at her store. The truth is, I have no idea. I started working for Maria when I was fifteen. I had applied to dozens of establishments: grocery stores, restaurants, gift shops, fast food joints, anywhere I could think of. Nobody wanted to hire a kid who didn't have any work experience. My friend Tyla had worked for Maria in the past and quit after three days because of her massive outbursts. On her second day, Tyla needed help using the cash register. Maria had scolded her in front of the customer, explaining that after two days of work, Tyla should know how to use the

register. At fourteen-years-old, Tyla was so scared of Maria and her irrational temper that her mother had to call the store and tell Maria that her daughter would not be returning.

However, I was so desperate for money that I went in for an application. It was nearly September, and I had a feeling she would need people for the October rush in Salem. Considering the way she treated her staff, I had a feeling she would be in need of employees. I was right, and in a matter of weeks I had myself a job. Over the years, I quit three times and came back. I tried retail jobs at the mall, a cosmetics company, and esthetics during the times I'd left, but one way or another I always ended up back at the candy store. It's not something I can explain, but none of those other part-time jobs suited me the way Maria's did. It just felt like home. After all, Maria did have good qualities as well. She was accommodating to my school schedule, I was able to choose my own hours, and despite her negative attributes, she could be very generous at times. She used to drive me home to Peabody before I could afford my own car and she'd buy employees dinner on busy nights at the store.

I'd come to know Maria on a personal level. She would tell me what her daughters were up to, her plans for the holidays, and her lifelong goal of having many grandchildren. However, with two daughters in their thirties and no romantic partners, I'd seen her give up hope of ever having them. Finally, after years of anticipation, her oldest daughter underwent IVF treatments and became pregnant with twins. Of course, they were due in October, the busiest month of the year. Despite the timing, nothing would stand in the way of her being there for their birth, and in late September she drove to New Jersey, where she would stay for six months to help her daughter. It was during that time that I knew she was ready to retire. Before the pregnancy announcement, Maria's biggest priority was the store. For years, she was there seven days a week from open until close. Although she was starting to cut back her hours due to her age, she

was one of the hardest working people I'd ever met. However, the grandchildren gave her a certain fulfillment that the store never could, and little by little she was relinquishing control. There were many days where she wouldn't even call to check up on the store because she was spending time with her granddaughters.

Maria had been trying to pawn off the store to us for years, something we adamantly refused to do. Liz and I would daydream occasionally about the potential of the shop and trivially discuss things that we would do differently, but it was never something we thought of doing seriously. I'm not sure how it happened, but one day we were talking and thought, why not? Why couldn't we do this seriously? We knew everything about the store inside and out, probably better than Maria. We knew the potential for growth and our ideas weren't half bad. My brother had worked with us for four years now, and the three of us had a chemistry that we felt could withstand owning a business together. Never mind that none of us had any experience in running a business or how to go about it. Despite everyone thinking we were crazy and asking why we would ever want to own a business in this day and age, or that we had no money, we decided to send a group text message to Maria, inquiring about what we would have to do.

We knew she would jump the gun because that is her way, and within weeks Maria arranged to send us on a buying trip in Atlanta, Georgia, despite the fact that we had made no commitments. The event was two weeks away, and most people going to the show plan a year in advance. Just like everything at the store, we knew this would be a disorganized mess, and we were right. After looking at hotels for two hours, we finally found a Courtyard Marriott eight miles away from AmericasMart, the convention center. Little did we know at the time, this was the largest gift show in the country with hundreds of showrooms. Because of the short notice, we were only able to stay for two nights, giving us two and a half days at the show. Maria insisted

that we be there for five days, but that just wasn't going to happen, given the fact that we had less than two weeks to get time off of our other jobs. For all of us, working for Maria was a part-time position and our full-time employers required much more notice to get extended time off. Atlanta held one of the world's largest aquariums, an historic museum for Martin Luther King Jr, and the CNN Center, the world headquarters for the iconic news channel. However, we would not be doing any sightseeing during this "vacation".

So, on a Tuesday at four o'clock in the morning, Liz picked up my brother and I and we headed to the airport. It was the only flight available on such short notice. We threw our suitcases into the trunk and sat like zombies in the backseat of Liz's SUV. The plan was to land in Atlanta at nine o'clock and we would take a taxi straight to the show to shop for nine hours. This would be a great day on two hours of sleep.

Liz gave us our boarding passes that she printed on her phone and we got in line.

"Liz, this writing is microscopic," Christopher said. They always gave each other a hard time. When they met four years ago, I was surprised at how well they hit it off. Liz often described him as the little brother she never had, and if she ever had a son she would want him to be like Christopher. Liz had a type A personality, very regimented and extremely organized. She was a workaholic who had a full-time job during the day and worked at Maria's on nights and weekends. My brother was less than type A who would set his alarm clock five minutes before he had to leave and whose room was located somewhere amongst a heaping pile of clothes. Nevertheless, they were unlikely friends.

"It should be fine," she said. She was an experienced traveler, unlike my brother and I. "I've done this before."

We got to the front of the line and gave the TSA workers our passes.

“Too small, they’re not scanning. Please go over to the kiosk and print new ones.”

Christopher gave Liz a smug look and we schlepped our bags over to the kiosk. This was not a good start.

After getting through security and waiting in a half an hour Starbucks line, we headed over to our gate where they were already boarding. We were the last group to be called and headed down the aisle to find our row. We made it all the way to the end of the plane, a windowless row right next to the bathrooms. I got stuck with the middle seat, although it was not a big deal, considering there was no desirable place to sit.

It was five-thirty in the morning and we were stuck in the back of the plane with no view of outside. Christopher put down his tray, laid his sweatshirt on top and rested his head down. I felt bad for the person sitting in front of him. Liz promptly pulled out her phone and caught up with as many emails as possible before we took off. I sat there in the middle of them, wondering what the hell I was doing with my life. I was twenty-five, in graduate school to become a writer, with no money put away and I was considering buying an ice cream business in snowy New England. Would the novelty carry the day?

At nine-thirty, we landed in Atlanta and made our way through the airport. We found a taxi and started driving towards AmericasMart. It was pretty sad driving by the “Welcome to Atlanta” sign and knowing that the only sights I would see were the convention center and the hotel. On the horizon, I could see the skyline of the metropolitan city and attractions I’d read about online. The Coca-Cola Center was nearby, a museum that explores the history of the drink and offers an abundance of samples to taste. Even though I don’t drink Coke, I was dying to do anything tourist-y. We even talked about ducking out of the show early on Thursday to do some sight-seeing, but considering we had no idea what else was around, decided against it.

Three three buildings comprised the convention center with twenty-two floors in each. Maria had given us a list of places she'd like us to see and do some ordering. We were mostly there for Halloween and Christmas, but there were a few companies that have quirky gifts for all year round. I was on the lookout for the ridiculous dog and cat pens that the shop sold out of recently. They came in neon blue, green, and orange with a bell around the collar, so the pen would jingle every time it was used. The fact that these were popular astounded the entire staff. It was Liz's job to find a scarf that sold out during the Halloween season. It was bright yellow and said "CAUTION" in bold letters, resembling the caution tape used at crime scenes and construction sites. We mostly made fun of the stuff that Maria would buy at trade shows, thinking the merchandise was weird and too out there for people to buy. Maria always had the last laugh, though. Turns out that tourists in Salem will buy anything. Luckily, Liz had made a thorough list of the places we needed to see and categorized where we should go based on the buildings. Our plan was to start on the top floor and work our way down. Even though we had specific places to go, we were expected to check out each showroom to scout out new companies for fun and creative items to give the store a fresh look.

The convention center was overwhelming in size. Each floor was set up in a giant circle with showrooms on both sides. Certain companies had large spaces that took up an entire hallway, while others had tiny kiosks within larger showrooms. This place resembled a shopping mall, with merchandise in the windows, enticing customers to come in and explore. We were happy that Maria made us a list of where she needed us to go, because the companies would have been really hard to find.

"I'm hungry," said Christopher, "can we eat before we start?"

Maria informed us that there was a large food court with plenty of variety. We went up to the tenth floor to find it, expecting to see a delicious buffet with muffins, bagels, and an omelet station. We were pretty disappointed to find dozens of empty tables with a lone take-out vendor that was closed. Liz sat down at one of the tables and pulled out her laptop.

“We passed a Starbucks when we were registering,” Liz said, “I just have to make a quick call and then we can go there.”

I checked my phone for emails and missed calls, but I had no service in this gigantic building. My brother laughed and told me it’s because I didn’t have an iPhone and pulled up his SnapChat account to look at mind-numbing videos. Liz walked toward the window to make her call and emerged fifteen minutes later.

We took the elevator back down to level one and got in the very long Starbucks line. I noticed all the people in business suits and dress clothes. We looked out of place in jeans and sneakers. Luckily I had on a trench coat that made me look semi business-like, so I figured I’d keep it on the whole day to hide my ill-fitting shirt. Maria told us it was a very casual setting so we shouldn’t worry about clothes, but it seems like things had changed since the last time she went to a show. We knew she had never been to this particular venue. The show used to be in New York, something she enjoyed because she could make a vacation out of it. Maria would invite a friend or family member along and they would see a Broadway show, enjoy fine dining at upscale restaurants, and stay in a luxurious hotel on Fifth Avenue. She was a night owl and enjoyed being in a city where there was always something to do, despite what time it was. Apparently, Atlanta didn’t have the charm that New York held for her. Maria wasn’t interested in exploring downtown Georgia and all it had to offer. This wasn’t New York, so she didn’t want to go.

After eating, we headed up to the twenty-second floor to begin shopping. We had no idea where to start, so we just meandered around the large hallway. There were all kinds of showrooms, from balloons and ribbons to holiday and floral. We finally found a window with some Halloween items and went in to look. We were excited knowing that we had thousands of dollars to buy items and were able to pick them out ourselves. We spent that first day taking everything in and ordering from the companies that Maria had requested. We figured it was best to see how the process worked before picking out our own stuff.

Our last stop was DCI, short for Décor Craft Incorporated, which is a small company that features quirky gift items, such as the cheesy cat and dog pens. We didn't see the appeal with most of the merchandise, but for some reason the people of Salem responded well. We went looking for the goofy mugs and large wine glasses that hold an entire bottle, many items we usually purchased from them. Nothing in the showroom looked familiar to us, but we got sidetracked by the unique Halloween collection. We had a hard time finding anything fun for Halloween, so we were pleasantly surprised to see something creative. With the economy suffering over the recent years, large companies have cut down tremendously on Halloween décor. Instead of finding large rooms full of spooky items as we expected, Halloween decorations had been demoted to a small section of each showroom, with Christmas being the featured holiday throughout the majority of the space.

“Wow, I didn't know DCI offered Halloween stuff,” I said to my brother, “I wonder why she doesn't order from them.”

Liz went to go find a representative while Christopher and I looked around. We found beautiful witches, sparkly pumpkins, and cutesy ghosts, all items that flew off the shelves during our peak season in Salem. We were excited that we finally found stuff of our choosing, rather

than going off of Maria's list. It was fun to be in charge for a change. We can do this! Liz and the representative appeared and we began giving the woman our order. From the startled look on her face, it was clear that she was new at this, and each item she scanned with her portable register gave her an issue. Each employee was given a scanner to identify the items that buyers wanted to purchase. The process was as easy as hovering the device over the barcode and entering the quantity of each item. However, this method didn't make the process efficient if the companies didn't train their representatives on how to use the scanner. The poor woman would squint down at the screen, obviously wishing she brought her glasses along. We knew it was taking longer than it should. Then, we heard a beep from the machine and her eyes went wide.

"Hold on, folks, I'll be right back." She walked urgently to the customer service desk, waving frantically to try and get somebody's attention.

"She deleted our order," my brother said. He wasn't happy.

"Are you sure? How do you know?" Asked Liz.

"I saw the whole thing. The screen said DELETE ORDER? and she clicked YES by mistake."

Great. This had already taken way too long.

"I'm going to go look for the other items we need." I said to them. I couldn't stand there any longer.

I was getting antsy being in this place. I went looking for the merchandise we were required to buy from DCI so we could get this over with and move on. However, nothing in this showroom looked like the items we normally purchased from this company. Instead of goofy mugs and the infamous oversized wine glasses, I saw upscale home décor and furniture I was afraid to sit on. Something was off. I went looking for a representative to find out where their

novelty knick knacks were held. Turns out that the rep I'd asked had never heard of the items we were looking for, nor had they carried them in the past. Great. It turned out our "successful" first stop had been the wrong company. Apparently, there are *two* DCI's and we found the wrong one. Wonderful.

Before discovering this, we got a quote for the merchandise we looked at and stuffed it in the bottom of Liz's bag.

"Maria must never know about this," Liz said.

"Agreed," said my brother, "she doesn't need to know we found the fake DCI."

Liz and I looked at each other and shook our heads at his logic. Although, we did refer to them as the "fake DCI" for the duration of our trip.

The rest of the day was filled with more of the same, although we did have a few successful trips and bought some adorable Halloween stuff. My brother was an easy sell, and the salespeople gravitated towards him because he would say yes to anything, such as Thanksgiving platters and Fourth of July trinkets, holidays during which Salem was a ghost town (no pun intended). After much negotiation and compromising between the three of us, we found a rhythm that helped us in picking out items that we liked as well as Maria approved. By six o'clock, we were exhausted and ready to get to the hotel. Nine straight hours of shopping on three hours of sleep was not an experience I'd wish on anybody.

When we got into our taxi and told the driver where we were going, he made a confused face and headed down Peachtree Street. We had no idea where we were, so we paid no attention to where he was taking us. Big mistake. We ended up at some random conference center that in no way resembled a hotel. When we finally explained where we had to go, he got out of the taxi to ask for directions. Turns out that our hotel is located in an industrial park, not at all near our

current location. With traffic, it took an additional forty minutes to arrive at the Courtyard Marriott. Now, I've stayed at these hotels in the past, and while they weren't fancy, they were at least comfortable and clean. This room had stains on the carpets, a cracked light fixture in the bathroom, and pen marks on the comforters. Needless to say we were grossed out and not excited to be living here for the next two days.

It was nearly eight and we were starving. Normally when I go on vacation I look for local restaurants that I wouldn't be able to experience at home. But since we could barely stand up and had another full day at the convention center the next morning, we decided to eat at the Starbucks in the hotel lobby. The meal was as disappointing as the amenities and we hit the vending machine to buy chips and candy on the way back to our room. So much for authentic southern cuisine. By the time we showered and brushed our teeth, Liz and I were ready to collapse into bed. Christopher, on the other hand, was ready to party.

"I'm bored. Let's play a game or something."

Liz and I, with one eye open under the covers, looked at him sternly. Even at home he was able to work a full day and stay out all night. Nonetheless, Liz and I crawled out of bed and we all played Heads Up, a version of charades that involves a Smart Phone. When it's the player's turn to guess the correct answer, they hold up the phone to their forehead, revealing the answer to the other players. Then, those players will perform a re-enactment for the person holding the phone to guess correctly. We spent the night laughing and acting out ridiculous scenarios that we would never let people see us doing in public. Well, maybe Christopher wouldn't care. My favorite was when Christopher re-enacted somebody unclogging a toilet, which involved him sitting on the bed and jumping up suddenly, thrusting an imaginary plunger into the corner of the bed. Liz was in a fit of laughter as she tried to guess what he was doing.

We finally went to bed around midnight. I felt like I'd just fallen asleep when Liz's alarm went off at six o'clock to hit the hotel gym. She asked if we wanted to come, but we waved her off and turned over to enjoy another precious hour of sleep. Liz informed us that she was happy about sleeping in, considering her routine at home starts at five in the morning. I hope to have Liz's energy one day.

Our taxi fought its way through the Atlanta morning traffic and finally made it to AmericasMart an hour later. Somehow during our game of Heads Up, my classy brother dubbed the convention center "America's Fart", which became his name for it throughout our time there. We stopped at Starbucks, which seemed to be our permanent Atlanta diet, and began another long day of looking at various doodads for the shop. By the end of the day, we stumbled upon one of our required stops, a gift company called One Hundred Eighty Degrees. That was where the bulk of our Halloween and Christmas merchandise came from and Maria was counting on them to have stellar products. We ordered the usual sparkly glitter globes and spooky pumpkins. We even found some new items that we thought she would like, such as large lanterns with Halloween themed silhouettes inside. Each lantern was brightly lit up with colorful sparkles floating through each silhouette. After perusing the Christmas section and choosing a handful of glittery snow globes and elegant Santa Clauses, we headed for the counter to place our order.

While talking to a representative, one of the "big" bosses overheard our conversation and left her desk to chat.

"Excuse me, did you say you're from Maria's Sweet Somethings?"

"Yes," we asked as if it were a trick question.

"I've spoken with Maria in the past. There would be certain Saturday mornings she would call when we weren't open but I happened to be at the office."

The three of us stared at her in disbelief. Here we were, at the largest trade show in the country, at a large company who deals with thousands, if not millions of customers annually. All we had to do was utter the name of our store and one of the managers had to come over and explain her encounter with Maria. This summed up her personality perfectly. Unforgettable.

She continued on with her story. “You know, Maria claims to have a small store, but she orders a tremendous amount of merchandise.”

We lost it. They probably thought we were crazy because of how hard we were laughing. No truer words had ever been spoken. Every year, we were dumbfounded by how we were going to fit all of the product onto the floor, despite us having enough merchandise for a shop that was triple the size. This was an inside joke that we’d had for years and talked about it on a regular basis. Even customers would comment on how much stuff was crammed into the small space. The fact that an outsider confirmed the craziness validated our feelings on a level that turned us into cackling hyenas. We were laughing to the point of tears because of this woman’s observation. The three of us placed the order as fast as possible and rushed out the door. She probably thought Maria’s Sweet Somethings was full of lunatics. Perhaps she wasn’t wrong.

That night for dinner, we decided to jazz it up a bit and go to the Hard Rock Café across the street from the convention center. Although it was a place we could go to in Boston or any other metropolitan city, at least it wasn’t Starbucks. On the way home, our taxi driver was given the exact address to the hotel so we wouldn’t be held up in another hour’s worth of traffic. We settled into our slummy hotel room and climbed into bed.

“Anyone up for another game?” My brother yelled as he emerged from the bathroom.

Again, Liz and I were in bed, scrolling through our phones like zombies.

“Chris,” Liz said, “I think if you didn’t come on this trip, Rachael and I would have gone to bed by seven o’clock every night.”

She was so right. After long days of walking through twenty-two floors and scrutinizing every holiday item that was in each showroom, we would have come back to the room and collapsed into bed the second we got back. Christopher, however, had energy like I’d never seen. If it had been anyone else who wanted to stay up late playing cheesy games, I would have said absolutely not, and sent them away so I could sleep. But my brother’s genuine interest in having fun and hanging out with us was enough to keep everyone awake. I love my sleep, but I’ve learned that I can miss out on so many great memories by going to bed. Sometimes, it’s worth being tired in order to have fun.

The next morning, we packed our bags and got them into the taxi, leaving us virtually no room to put our feet. Our first cab had been a van so there was plenty of space for our belongings. This time, we had no such luck. The three of us were packed like sardines on the way to our final day at AmericasMart. Our driver sped off like a rocket ship and headed for the highway. We looked at each other in horror and braced ourselves for what would be the longest drive of our lives. I thought Massachusetts drivers were among the most aggressive, but this guy put all of us to shame as he crossed six lanes of traffic in less than five seconds on the congested interstate. As we weaved in and out of lanes to move up one car length in the parking lot of vehicles, his cell phone rang and he spoke to a friend on speaker phone for the entire hour of our drive. Not to mention that the friend, whose name was Ahmed as we soon learned, was blaring rap music in the background. My brother knew the songs, so occasionally he would sing along with the lyrics, each time getting a disapproving look from our driver in the rearview mirror.

Liz looked over at us holding her stomach. “Is this a bad time to tell you that I get car sick?”

Between the driver whipping in and out of lanes and the aroma of sweat mixed with fast food, even I was getting nauseous. I can’t imagine how Liz would make it through the rest of this ride. We weren’t even halfway there. Half an hour into this dreadful journey, our driver received a phone call from a little old lady that he was supposed to take to a doctor’s appointment. Her voice was exactly how one would imitate an elderly woman, with the high pitched tone.

“Yes, hello sir, I have a doctor’s appointment at nine-thirty and someone is supposed to pick me up?”

It was nine-forty and we weren’t even in downtown Atlanta.

“Yes, ma’am,” he stated. “I’ll be there in half an hour.”

We stared at each other and tried not to laugh. Liz, however, was trying not to throw up. She held her stomach tightly and bent over to hide her face in her hands. She must have felt horrible to be visibly in pain, because Liz always grit her teeth and sucked up any discomfort she had. Truly, I didn’t think she would make it without vomiting out the window. At last, the taxi pulled onto Peachtree Street, a few blocks away from the convention center.

“This is good,” Liz yelled promptly, “we’re good to leave here.” She practically threw the credit card at him.

“Wow,” she said as he drove away, “I can’t believe I didn’t throw up in there. I was just going to open the door and get out on the freeway!”

We concluded our shopping and headed off to the airport. We were finally going home. After a layover in Newark, New Jersey and another disappointing dinner in the food court, we landed at Logan Airport and made it into our beds by midnight. This was definitely not the

southern vacation I'd dreamed of taking, but nonetheless, memories were made. However, after much thought, we decided that it was not the right time to take on a business endeavor.

There were too many roadblocks, including bills, our other jobs, and daily life struggles to even consider something that serious. I was busy planning a wedding and going to school, while Liz was happy in her thriving real estate position. Christopher was still young, trying to figure out what he wanted to do in the future. Once we sat down and looked at the logistics of what buying the store would entail, none of us wanted to make that commitment during that point in our lives.

The three of us still talk about the possibility of owning the store sometime in the distant future, although now it is more of a "what if" scenario, rather than reality. We are still good friends, and Christopher and I have remained close, although we are both so busy with our own lives. I'll admit, it was hard when I realized that he was more independent and didn't need me like he did when he was a kid. I was used to him always wanting to hang out with me, knowing I had someone to go out to eat with or run errands with me. I guess I took it for granted and didn't understand how much I enjoyed it, because when those days were gone I found myself missing them dearly.

Now, Christopher is nineteen with a full-time job, and helps out at the store during the busy season. Shortly after our trip to Atlanta, Liz and I got a hilarious phone call from him after one of his shifts. He was working with Maria and perusing through the new catalogues we brought back from the show. Maria was checking her email and something must have caught her eye, because Christopher saw a puzzled expression on her face.

"Chris," she said perplexed, "I have a quote here from a company called DCI. It looks like you guys picked out a lot of merchandise. Funny that there are two DCI's."

We were caught! Luckily, Maria was not upset and actually liked many items that we chose, but not enough to go through with the order. Although we have decided not to pursue buying the store at this point in time, it's still fun to see everything we accomplished during our unforgettable shopping trip. I have to admit that the thought of being my own boss and having control over my day-to-day work life still holds temptation. Perhaps this was not the right business endeavor for us, but maybe another opportunity will come along in the future. We learned a lot about what it would be like doing business together and making decisions. Although we understood that it wouldn't be easy, it was different than we expected. The next time I visit Georgia, I will absolutely be exploring those red dirt roads and getting my tourist advice from my favorite country music stars.

No More Secrets

“I’m in Hell!”

My dad was yelling over the radio. He was trapped in the car with my mom, my brother, and I, singing along to our favorite country songs. He was driving, so there wasn’t much he could do to change the music coming through on my mom’s phone. My brother and I sat in the backseat, dancing and yelling the lyrics to Miranda Lambert’s “Mamma’s Broken Heart”. We didn’t care for the song much, but torturing my dad with the music he hated most was always fun. My mom and I started listening to country music a few years ago, something my dad could not get on board with.

My mom and I had tickets to the Lady Antebellum concert that night at the Bank of New Hampshire Pavilion. Instead of just driving up for the concert, we decided to turn it into a family vacation to New Hampshire, something we hadn’t done in ten years. This might even be the last, considering that my brother and I were older now, and family bonding experiences were now few and far between. The four of us hadn’t been in such close quarters with each other in a long time, and I forgot how much fun it could be. This was a good moment, the family at its best. The greatest times were when there was banter going back and forth. We could laugh harder than anybody. When it’s good, it’s great, but when it’s bad, it’s horrible.

On the outside, we were all very different. It was as if God took the four most different individuals and thought it would be funny to morph us into one family. My parents were an unlikely pair. In family photos, my mom would be wearing designer clothes from top to bottom with impeccable makeup and hair to match. Her blonde bob wouldn’t move from just the right amount of hair spray. My dad would be in a Star Wars sweatshirt with a Tom Brady jersey

underneath, probably the same one he'd had for ten years. These outward characteristics give a glimpse into their personalities, and these differing qualities caused tension over the years. My mom had a tendency to keep up with the Jones's, while my dad lived to impress only himself. This disagreement on how to approach the world resulted in arguments over the most mundane of situations, such as what to wear in Christmas card photographs or how to set the table when guests came over to the house. For my mother, everything had to be perfect. Even the most minute details were required to be immaculate and sleek. My father was quite different. His idea of dressing up included a shirt that didn't have an NFL logo or characters from his favorite movies. Instead of bending to my mom's version of appropriate attire and etiquette, he did his own thing, refusing to give up his own sense of individuality. Nevertheless, they loved each other and despite these glaring differences, were happy most of the time.

My brother and I were combination of the two, personalities mixed with goofiness and sophistication. Like my dad, I strived to be an individual, dressing how I pleased and having a mind of my own. However, in the back of my mind I could always hear my mom's voice, telling me that my hair needed fixing or my outfit didn't quite match. Image was important to her. This rubbed off on my brother as well. During his teenage years, he was very much a follower, always interested in what was cool at the time. When the popular clothing brand The North Face was all the rage, he had to have a jacket in every color. When wearing Nike socks up to the knees was considered trendy, for reasons I will never understand, my brother rocked them proudly. He too, had the bug in his ear that his exterior had to be on point, even if he wasn't completely satisfied.

On the inside, however, the four of us were all so similar that it hurt, and many times hurt was the result. There were many problems between my parents from early on in their marriage. They loved each other, but they fought frequently from as far back as I can remember. My dad

had an explosive temper, something I chalked up to him being Italian. I thought it was normal, and I often sided with him because we spent more time together. My mom would frequently work double shifts at her job in Boston, and my brother and I watched my dad do everything from food shopping, cooking, cleaning, and taking my brother and I to our appointments and after school activities. He did this on top of working a full-time job.

My dad was always the strong one. Along with the chores that had to be done, my dad was also the one that everybody leaned on. Whether it was a minor problem or a major crisis, extended family and friends always looked to my dad for guidance. During his teenage years, he took on a lot of responsibility after his father died, and people got used to his caregiving nature. I thought he was superhuman, a constant in my life that would never waver.

When I was a freshman in high school, I noticed a slight shift in my dad's daily routine. He had just started a new job, one of many that he had throughout my childhood. He worked for FedEx for eleven years, and when my brother was born he took a year off from work to be a stay at home dad. One year turned into two and when he did start working again, nothing lasted for more than a year or two. He tried the post office, various positions at three different restaurants, and multiple courier jobs that just didn't work out. I knew this was a source of tension between my parents, but I never worried about it. Dad always figured it out. He still did everything as usual, but something was just off. He was not as present as he usually was. It started off very gradually, but over the course of two months it was much more noticeable. Instead of talking to my brother and I about our days and spending time with us, he would simply lay on the couch and watch television, keeping to himself. Too afraid to ask my father, I would ask my mom.

“What's up with dad?” That was my fourteen-year-old way of showing concern.

“What do you mean?” My mother would answer, avoiding eye contact and acting distracted.

“He seems kind of...I don’t know, not real talkative like he usually is. He’s been keeping to himself a lot.”

“He’s just tired. He has a lot to do. Don’t worry.”

That was the only answer I got, but I knew it was not the truth. His temper was much more apparent, and he and my mom would spend lots of time talking in their room with the door closed. All I could hear were muffled whispers. My brother was only eight, and while he was not affected much by this, even he knew something was wrong.

One day, as I was getting ready for school, I heard quiet sobs coming from the living room. This felt so uncomfortable, so I quietly walked down the stairs and into the kitchen to avoid my mom. However, looking in the living room, I saw that it was my dad who was crying. I ran in kitchen so he wouldn’t see me, and stood frozen for a brief period. I’d never seen my dad cry. All I could think to do was to get my lunch from the fridge and yell goodbye, pretending like I didn’t know what was going on. That’s what we did. We pretended like things weren’t happening. We didn’t talk about uncomfortable situations. We kept secrets.

“B-bye dad.” I said timidly from the hallway, making sure not to look in the living room.

I could hear the pain in his voice, but he still managed to say, “bye Rach. Don’t worry about anything today, okay? I’m fine.” He knew that I had seen him. The secret was partially out.

“Okay.” I said abruptly as I ran out the front door to catch my bus.

That day, I did what my dad told me to do. I didn’t worry because, why should I? He was my dad. He was the strong one, and he was fine, just like he said. When I got home, everything

was normal; My dad was making dinner and I did my homework at the kitchen table. Like he said, he was fine.

The next morning, my alarm went off for school. I got out of bed, but something felt strange. I wasn't sick, but I didn't feel right and I didn't want to go to school. I knew this would never fly with my mother, so I faked a cough and went into the bedroom.

"I think I'm sick, mom. *Fake cough*. I don't think I can go to school today." My dad was still sleeping, which was odd.

She looked at me suspiciously, but gave in. "Okay. Go back to bed."

So I did. I fell asleep for about an hour and woke up to the hum of my mom's TV on in the bedroom. She was getting ready for work. I heard my dad's muffled footsteps. The shower was on. The bathroom door closed slowly behind him, but it was cracked open. Out of nowhere, the house was filled with guttural sobs coming from the bathroom. There was screaming and chaos. My mom heard this over her hair dryer and raced into the bathroom.

I ran from my room and into the hallway, but my mom had shut the bathroom door. For some reason, my brother was home from school as well. We stood in the hallway with panic on our faces. My brother burst into tears, not knowing what else to do. My mom yelled over my dad's screams.

"Go to Grammie's! Tell her I sent you!" We ran to her in-law apartment, where she could also hear what was going on. My dad built the in-law apartment when they purchased the house in nineteen ninety-three. It was originally a garage, but when my grandmother was also looking for a place to live, he gutted the garage and part of our kitchen so she had somewhere to live. This took away an additional bathroom and counter space in our home, but my dad did what he had to do for his mother. She too, had tears in her eyes, but just told us to sit on the couch and

put on the television. I can't imagine how she felt knowing that her son was in so much pain. After what seemed like forever, the screaming from my house stopped.

My mom came to my grandmother's house about twenty minutes later. Grammie hit the mute button and we all waited for some type of explanation.

"He's laying down now." My mom said. "I don't really know what happened, but I'm going to call his pharmacologist." She told my grandmother.

What was a pharmacologist? What the hell was going on with my dad? Why wouldn't anyone tell us? Just as these questions were racing through my head, my dad came over. He looked incredibly sad, but the chaos had ended. I didn't know what to say, but when I opened my mouth to say something, anything, I just burst into tears. My dad came over and hugged me, and just kept saying that he was sorry.

But sorry for what? I didn't understand anything that was going on. Why was he crying and screaming all of a sudden like a lunatic?

A couple of days went by before I got any answers. After the dust settled and my dad felt well enough to talk, we all sat down together. I averted eye contact the whole time, because I didn't know what else to do. We never talked about things like this. It had been months of secrets and whispering behind closed doors, and now that my parents wanted to tell us what was happening, I felt eerily uncomfortable.

"The truth is, I found out that I have a mental illness. I have depression and some other things going on."

As I got older, I learned more about the severity of his condition. During that time, my dad was diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, and General Anxiety Disorder. In those two months, he averaged about two hours of sleep every

night. These diagnoses stemmed from the death of his father over twenty years before and the grief that he had suppressed. In that time, he'd never dealt with or even cried about the loss of his father. He'd suffered internally for decades, and this was his first external bout with mental illness. But it was not the last.

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The drive up to New Hampshire was full of banter about what music to listen to. Lucky for me, I liked everything from my dad's seventies classic rock, to my mom's back and forth between disco and country, and my brother's hip-hop. When "Blurred Lines" came on, the three of us danced and shouted out the lyrics while my dad put a finger to his head, indicating he wanted to blow his brains out.

"Okay, Aerosmith is next", he shouted, "I can't take anymore honky tonk or nightclub shit."

I enjoyed taking a vacation with my parents as an adult. The last time we went away together I was fourteen and my brother was seven. I'd just gotten my iPod mini and didn't want waste time looking at the scenery of Lake George, New York or enjoy the fancy restaurants that we never normally went to. The five-hour car ride was spent scrolling through songs I'd downloaded the night before. When my mom interrupted my song to tell me to look at the beautiful foliage, I rolled my eyes and slipped my earbud back in. I still remember that clunky pink device, holding it everywhere we went with the earbuds in, thinking I was the coolest thing on Earth. Now, at twenty-four, I could actually take in the scenery of New Hampshire and appreciate what we were doing.

The temperature was ninety-six degrees when we got to the Fireside Hotel, only a half mile away from the concert venue. My mom was profusely wiping at her face as sweat beads

started to slide down her forehead. Her liquid foundation was starting to smudge, but she didn't seem to notice. Perhaps this was not the right season to see an outdoor show in her menopausal state. (She would kill me for saying that!) After checking into the place, we headed to Jonathan's, a restaurant right next door. Apparently my mom had been there before and loved it. I was surprised, considering the décor was as cheesy as it gets, with antlers on the wall and a life-sized stuffed moose greeting us at the entrance. We sat, drained from the heat. Even though we hadn't been outside long, the humidity made it hard to breathe and even a few minutes outside made me want to take a nap.

“Rach, do you mind if Christopher goes to the concert with you tonight,” my mom asked, looking pale and depleted.

My brother instantly smiled and raised his hands in the air.

“Yes!” He shouted. He originally told my mom that he didn't want to go; I guess he thought he was too cool for country music. I knew that he secretly liked Lady Antebellum because I'd caught him singing along on the radio. Of course, when the show got closer and closer, he complained that he didn't have a ticket.

I'll admit that I was disappointed. This concert had been her idea and she was so excited about going. I was surprised at her abrupt change of heart. The idea of walking in this heat and sitting outside was enough to make her not want to go, and I wasn't having it.

“Mom, it's summer and you knew you'd need to walk. It's just heat, you can't suck it up for fifteen minutes?” That was the wrong thing to say.

I was met with a full explanation on what it is like to be mid-fifties and how her body isn't what it used to be and how the heat triggers extreme fatigue for her and on and on...The

monologue could have been published and sold to “Menopause the Musical”. I shut right up after that.

I looked at my brother who greeted me with a smug smile. “I’m not buying you beer,” I said sternly.

The smug smile disappeared. He wouldn’t try to argue with me. I was a goody goody, afraid of getting caught and going to jail, always visualizing the worst case scenario. At seventeen, my brother was by no means a goody goody and didn’t think his decisions through. He was a teenager, though, who could blame him? We hurried back to the hotel room to change and get our tickets and we were off the the show. I tried to look like a country girl in my red and black flannel shirt and jeans ripped at the knees. My brother looked like he was going to Nantucket in his striped shorts and Sperry’s. We were an unlikely pair.

I have to say, that walk was brutal. With the temperature in the high nineties, walking on the side of the road with no shade was rough. The path was straight and narrow all the way to the venue, with no relief from the blazing heat. The walk itself was only a half of a mile, but the baking sun made it feel like a voyage across the state. By the time we got there, the top of my neck was wet with perspiration, making my hair damp. Cotton flannel and jeans were not the best choice, even if I did look like a down home country girl. For all the shit I gave my brother about his preppy look, he had the last laugh. We settled into our seats as Sam Hunt was halfway through his set, an up and coming artist at the time. The blazing sun was setting and dusk started to take over the sky.

“What do you think mom and dad are doing,” Christopher asked.

“Probably what they do at home,” I said, “they’ll watch television and dad will fall asleep by nine.” We laughed.

“Yeah, his medicine makes him fall asleep early,” he said, “but at least he’s taking it.”

I nodded but didn’t make eye contact. The tone was somber now. The memories of him being off medication were still burned into my brain. I remember when he told us he was going to try and wean off of the medications he was taking. It was a hot August afternoon and the side effects of his medicine mixed with the scorching heat made him feel extremely tired. He didn’t like the side effects of lethargy and extreme fatigue on a daily basis. I understood his reasoning, but I also foresaw a tumultuous few months ahead because of the side effects that came with not taking these mood-altering drugs. I was right.

With powerful anti-depressants, weaning off of them too quickly can impact brain chemistry and cause intense mood swings. I saw my dad fall back into his old patterns of flying off the handle over something minuscule staying up until the early hours of the morning. I’d wake up in the middle of the night to the soft hum of the television in the living room, or see the light turned on underneath the crack of my bedroom door, indicating he was playing games on his iPad. After two months of this, everything finally came to a head one afternoon when I got home from classes. My dad was in the kitchen and we were talking casually about mundane day-to-day events. I made a joke that I’ve made many times in the past. He loved doughnuts, and that day he came home with three of them. I’d sarcastically advised him lay off the doughnuts, and patted my stomach, indicating the weight that might accumulate. I’d made this joke on many occasions, every time he came home with junk food. He would always laugh and tell me to mind my own business. However, this time he was furious and yelled at me to stop insulting him. Instead of ducking out and heading to my room to avoid the chaos, I fought back. I’d had enough. I went on a rant about how he’s affecting the people he lives with and how he needs to re-evaluate his decisions if he ever wants a relationship with us.

The look on his face said it all. I could tell he was hurt, but the rage took over. My dad and I were as close as it gets, and hearing this from me was hard. Maybe I shouldn't admit this, but my dad is my favorite person on the planet. Even now, as I sit here writing at twenty-six years old, I recall all the sacrifices he's made for his family, and how even to this day, I call him if I have a flat tire or don't know how to cook chicken properly. He was a fixer; he always knew what to do. He always took care of things. And maybe that's why he is where he is, because everyone leaned on him so much. My grandmother, his siblings, my mom, and my brother and I always looked to him to fix the problem, because he always could. He learned how to take care of himself and everyone else at a young age.

When his father died suddenly of a heart attack, it was up to him to care for the house. When my dad talks about that day, it's as if he is re-living the nightmare that ensued. His life changed on February eighteenth, nineteen seventy-eight, a week after the historic Blizzard of '78. My grandfather had spent the morning shoveling the five feet of snow that had fallen. Later that afternoon, the family had gone to a wedding and had a great time dancing and celebrating with their friends. Towards the end of the event, my grandfather wasn't feeling well, so they decided to go home early. My uncle drove home and my grandfather rested in the backseat. Although he didn't seem like himself, nobody worried that anything serious was happening. My dad helped his father onto the couch and left the room. My grandmother went to get a blanket to drape over her husband. When she entered the living room, my father heard a hysterical scream from his upstairs bedroom. He raced down the stairs, entering the living room and seeing his father lifeless with purple lips. He was cold to the touch. My dad ran to the phone to call an ambulance, but it was too late. My grandfather was pronounced dead before he got to the hospital.

Grammie retreated from her family and fell into a deep depression, leaving someone else to pick up the slack. She would come home from work every night around six o'clock and go directly into her bedroom to be alone, a routine that would last for several years. Her oldest son got in with a dangerous crowd, which resulted in him partying and drinking heavily on a regular basis. Many nights he would not come home at all. Her youngest daughter was only fifteen and didn't know how to cope with the loss of her father. She would frequently fall into crying fits and struggled to stay afloat in school. This left Grammie's middle child, my father, as the one to step up and make sure that dinner was made and the bills were paid on time. My grandmother has told me the story of my grandfather's funeral, where she was sitting like a zombie with my aunt and uncle, also looking like zombies with tears rolling down their cheeks and clinging to their mother for support. My dad, however, stood at the door, greeting people and showing them the line to pay their respects. He always seemed content on the outside, never displaying an ounce of vulnerability.

These traits carried through into adulthood, making him the person everybody turned to when they had a problem. When my aunt went through a nasty divorce from a compulsive gambler and a lousy father, it was my dad who helped take care of her son. When my grandmother was in a verbally abusive relationship after her husband died, it was my father who confronted him. He became the person to call whenever somebody needed fixing. Now, our fixer had vanished, and left no instructions on how to handle what my dad normally took care of.

After screaming back and forth for a few minutes, he finally went upstairs and I escaped to my grandmother's apartment, right next door to us. She'd heard the yelling, too.

"I'm not going back there," I said to her, "I'm not staying there."

We sat there in silence for awhile. Grammie looked worried. We could hear my dad yelling to someone on the phone, probably my mom. The walls were thin and we could hear his side of what just happened. It didn't make any sense to me. We sat there for over an hour just listening to him walk briskly around the house. I heard doors slamming and I wasn't sure what he was doing. I watched the autumn sun set in my grandmother's bay window and felt more uneasy as the room became darker and darker. Just when I didn't think I could sit in anticipation any longer, my phone vibrated on the couch beside me. It was my mom.

"I'm in the car outside. I don't want to go into the house," she said.

We never for a second thought my dad was violent or that we were in danger, we simply wanted to avoid the screaming fight that was bound to ensue. When he gets in this way, there is no reasoning, just fighting and saying things we all regret.

"Um...okay, I guess Grammie and I will meet you in the car. Where are we going?" I asked.

"I don't know, just not here."

I hung up and picked up my purse off the floor beside my feet.

"Ready?" I asked Grammie.

"I'm going to stay, Rachael. My son might need me. I don't want him to be alone."

I gave her a hug and went out her front door and into my mom's car. We drove aimlessly for awhile, not knowing where to go or who to call. We needed to eat dinner, considering it was nearly eight. However, neither one of us had much of an appetite. Eventually, we pulled into the parking lot at a local mall and decided to go into Panera Bread for dinner. My mom put the car in park and killed the engine. The next step was to get out of the car and go inside, but we didn't

move. Because even if we did go inside and eat, what would we do after that? Eventually, we had to go home.

“Mom, you need to call someone,” I said, “we can’t avoid him forever.”

She pulled out her phone and dialed her brother’s number. When he answered and my mom burst into tears, nothing else needed to be said. He got into his truck and drove from Methuen to meet us at Panera, which was an hour long drive. We stayed there, looking at the tea we ordered but had no stomach to drink, while my uncle went to our house to see my dad. The discussion was peaceful, and in the end my dad packed a bag and stayed at a hotel. My mom and I went back to the house. The eerie silence was deafening, as if the yelling was still echoing off the walls.

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Christopher and I walked back to the hotel after the concert. The stifling air had turned into a comfortable breeze and I was now the one wearing appropriate clothes. My parents weren’t too pleased when we turned the room light on while they were sound asleep. The room was small. It had two queen beds, a less than impressive bathroom off to the side, and not much else.

“Can somebody please turn off the sun?” My dad asked as he buried his face underneath the pillow.

They definitely weren’t happy when we played videos we recorded from the show and started dancing and singing along.

“Go to bed!” My mom yelled.

We were still wired from the pounding of the bass in our chests. The music had been extremely loud, and it was hard going from a place with screaming fans to the silence of our

hotel room. Instead of going to bed, I pulled out my earbuds and watched Netflix on my phone. Thank God for Wifi. It made family vacations so much more bearable.

The next morning, the four of us headed out for breakfast. On our way up to New Hampshire, I noticed a restaurant called Griddle in the Middle. The name sounded interesting so I persuaded everyone to go there. It turned out to be a pancake place that had a griddle in the middle of each table. Customers were able to pick fruit, candy, etc. to put into their batter and the waitress mixed it up and brought it over for them to cook. My brother ordered a batch with M&M's, Reese's Pieces, and a dozen other candies. You'd think he was five years old instead of someone about to graduate from high school. I guess it suited him well, considering he also ordered a large chocolate milk.

Aside from a young couple in sitting far away from us, we were the only people in the place. Before our batter arrived, my dad turned on the griddle to heat it up. He sprayed the Pam spray that was on the table and we saw little bubbles forming as the griddle became warmer. The waitress came over with our orders, almost on cue. As my brother reached over to grab his candy filled batter, his arm hit the large glass of chocolate milk and spilled onto the now sizzling griddle. My mom screamed and the young couple on the other side of the restaurant jerked their heads to look at us.

"Mom, calm down," my brother said as my dad and I were in a fit of laughing.

The milk began to solidify on the griddle and the aroma of rancid dairy filled the air. Instead of chowing down on delicious, fluffy pancakes, my dad turned off the griddle, waited for it to cool down, and scraped the rubbery milk off of the griddle. There's never a dull moment in this family. After causing a scene in the restaurant, my dad had spotted an antique shop he wanted to look through. The outside looked like a barn, so I knew there wouldn't be anything I

was interested in. As my brother opened the screen door, the spring that held the door lever in place sprang out and the door went flying.

“We can’t take you anywhere,” my dad joked as the cashier stared us down.

There was a chill in the air today, much different than the night of concert, which was two evenings prior. It was mid-morning and I could feel the mild breeze blowing my hair back. Fall was approaching, and it wouldn’t be long before all of the days were like this and the evenings would be even worse, requiring a heavy jacket and maybe even a hat and gloves. In that moment, I was reminded of the autumn before, the year my dad had left our house, and the time that passed without his presence. Three days had gone by since our fight that led to this upheaval, and although that’s a short time, it felt like years had passed.

The night was cold as my brother and I pulled into our driveway. October was nearly over, and the weather was getting colder with each passing day. My dad’s car was in front of the house. I didn’t want to go in. I knew that he would be there, and I wasn’t mad anymore. I’d been texting my dad over the weekend so I knew he’d calmed down and felt remorse for the situation. I simply didn’t want to deal with the awkwardness that would ensue. My mom told him that she didn’t want him back in the house until he agreed to see his pharmacologist, and I don’t know what his response had been. We’d never had a confrontation as serious as my parents almost getting divorced. However, we still didn’t know the status of their relationship. He came home a few hours ago, and my brother and I got out of work early, (7 o’clock is considered early) a rarity for an October evening in Salem, Massachusetts. I got my brother a job with me at the ice cream and candy shop, where I’d worked for the past seven years. This was the first time he’d experienced the craziness of the Halloween festivities. He was exhausted, and also wasn’t in the mood to have an uncomfortable encounter with my parents. We never did this. Whenever things

got too complicated, everyone would change the subject and avoid whatever elephant was occupying the air space. Things had gotten better since my dad's diagnosis eight years prior, but slowly we would fall back into our old patterns of brushing issues under the rug. Now, there was no choice except to face it. I turned off the engine and we made the long walk to the front door. My parents were sitting at the kitchen table. My mom was still in her pajamas from the night before. Her eyes were puffy and swollen. My dad looked nice. He was wearing jeans and a long sleeved shirt with his hair gelled back. His eyes were also red and puffy.

“Have a seat,” he said to us gently. He could tell we were uncomfortable.

The leg of the chair dragged against the floor as I pulled it out from underneath the table. The room was so quiet, I noticed every minute sound.

“We decided that I'm going to move back in. I'm sorry for all the pain I've caused you guys. I don't want to lose my family, and I'm going to do what I can to make this work for all of us.”

That night, my brother and I went with my dad to get his belongings from the hotel. He'd found a place on Hampton Beach right on the water. It was a beautiful hotel and I imagined that during the summertime it was bustling with tourists.

“Wow,” I said to my dad, “I see you've been living in the lap of luxury while you were away.” We both had a dark sense of humor and were able to joke about something as painful as this.

“Oh yeah, Rach,” he looked at me and raised an eyebrow, “it's been a real vacation, let me tell ya.”

While the guys got his clothes and toiletries into the suitcase, I went across the street to gaze at the ocean. The night was freezing and the wind was blowing harshly over the water,

creating large waves. I closed my eyes and let the wind sweep against my face. My hair was wild and my oversized sweatshirt was fighting to stay on my body. I didn't care, though. I stood there while the salty mist of the water and the whipping wind overtook my senses. There was a storm brewing on the Eastern seaboard, but ours was over.

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During our last night at Weirs Beach, my mom insisted that we all do a sunset cruise, despite the groans from Christopher and I. We felt like little kids again, being forced to do something boring, which was exactly what was happening now. She assured us that we would have fun and that they were serving a full turkey dinner with stuffing and gravy. The best way to get us to do something was to lure us with the promise of food. However, it was rather disappointing when I found the food to be disgusting. I discreetly went up to my dad, knowing he would understand as a fellow picky eater. He took a bite and also made a face.

"I think this is pressed meat," he said as he spat the food into a napkin.

I didn't know what that meant but it didn't sound like something I wanted to know. Now that I was starving and bored, I slumped into my chair and with the attitude of a sixteen-year-old and pulled out my phone. No service in the middle of the lake. Great. I guess I was forced to enjoy the scenery and take in my surroundings. The lake looped around a large island with beautiful homes and docks for boats. It was breathtaking. When the sun finally set, the sky was overtaken with shades of pink, yellow, and fiery orange as the sun fought to stay in view. However, the sun lost its battle and the sky gently turned to pastels of soft pink, lavender, and a hazy blue before the the night's stars took over and the full moon emerged.

The boat docked at nine o'clock and everyone lined up to leave. A bright moon was shining over the pier and I could see the arcade lit up in the distance. I hadn't been to a

boardwalk since I was a little kid. Memories of bumper cars and air hockey flooded my mind and the inner child in me shrieked with excitement. I wanted to walk around and explore, but I was just so hungry that I couldn't concentrate on anything else.

"Dad," I walked next to him and whispered, "I'm starving. I really need to eat." He hadn't eaten the fake meat on the boat either, so I knew he'd be hungry, too.

"Don't worry, I have it figured out."

We approached the boardwalk and I saw a pizza stand next to the arcade selling slices.

"Pam, I'm grabbing a slice of pizza. Anyone else want one?" He winked at me.

"Me please!" I raised my hand aggressively and bellowed. "Make it two!"

My mom and Christopher walked into the local shops while my dad and I ate pizza like savages on a nearby bench. This was our last night in New Hampshire before we would head home and continue our separate lives. We still saw each other, but it had been years since we'd spent this much time together as a family

"This was fun," my dad said, in between mouthfuls of pepperoni pizza. "I'm glad we came here."

"Me too," I said, "I wasn't sure if I'd have a good time, to be honest." I knew I could tell him this and he would understand. It had been so long since our last family vacation that I wasn't sure how it would go. So much had changed since we were children and the dynamic was different. My mom might have been hurt by the comment, but I didn't have to worry with my dad. He would know what I meant.

"I second that." He said and squeezed my shoulder. Nothing else needed to be said.

My mom and Christopher emerged from a store, my mom holding a shopping bag. My dad and I both had pizza in the corners of our mouths. My mom had pointed it out and laughed.

She no longer fretted over the image of a perfect family. That façade had been shattered long ago, and we didn't live by those standards anymore. There were no more secrets.

“How did I know you'd find something to buy?” My dad asked as he reached over to carry the newly purchased item.

“Chris, there's always something to buy,” my mom said as she gladly handed over the heavy bag for him to carry. “What were you guys talking about,” she asked.

“My dad gave me a knowing glance and said, “just how much we loved this vacation.”

The four of us walked back to the car, throwing banter back and forth, the way our family did at its best.