

# **From the Ashes**

## **Honors Thesis**

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# From the Ashes

A Memoir by Jessica Olin

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# Preface and Acknowledgements

When you first start writing, it is often said that writing about your own experiences is the best way to get started. As young writers it's also not uncommon to ignore any and all advice. And so, that is how I first started my thesis. It began as a piece of fiction. One of my Creative Writing professors in the beginning of my writing career told me that a great way to write a story was to take something that had happened to you, and then make it worse, much much worse. So I had this piece of fiction from the beginning of my college career, and I tried to make it work. I tried so hard to adapt that piece of fiction into something the woman I have become would have written. It just didn't work. So I tried again; I wrote something new. This time it began as autobiographical fiction. A fictitious frame with a lot my own personal stories. So many thanks to my advisor J.D. Scrimgeour for recognizing that I had found my niche. He raved about my writing and the differences he saw between my prior submissions and this. Finally, I conceded to truly writing what I knew, my life story.

What a journey it has been to write about my life. I may only be twenty-two but I had no idea how much I had actually forgotten until I started to try and write it! With a little help from my Dad, Mom, and Stepmom, I was able to piece together my challenging childhood. Writing about some of the traumatic moments that happened as I grew up, at first felt like climbing a mountain. It was strenuous and exhausting. And many times I had to stop writing, or choose to write at certain times because I would become so involved in my own memories it would take me to such a negative place in my own mind. Many of the moments I write about in this memoir didn't get much thought over the last ten years of my life.

After unraveling all of the tangled mess, it felt amazing to let it out. I learned a lot about myself during the process, too. As children, we tend to push a lot of our emotions into hidden corners, box them up, and keep them out of the way. I got to analyze my own childhood, with wiser, more sure eyes. As an individual about to graduate and recently engaged, I am in awe of myself. After revealing many of the injustices done to by loved ones, both family and friend, I have come to realize just how strong of a person I am.

We all have faults, myself included, but I have so many people to thank for helping me realize my true abilities. I want to thank my parents, despite their shortcomings, for all of the wonderful qualities they have instilled in me, and their support to pursue my dreams. A big thanks to the many professors, advisors, and mentors whom have encouraged me to trek on in spite of my hardships. And a special thanks goes to those who didn't support me or have faith in me over the years, for you have taught me to be my own biggest believer

## Chapter 1

My memories of seven are fresher than the contents of my fridge. I can remember the way my Dad's guitar felt in my hands and the strange sounds it would make as he tuned it. I can remember my Dad's constant encouragement, "Slash didn't learn how to play overnight." Every Saturday we would practice. I can still remember the exact smile my Dad had when I finally learned my first song. He would tell me all kinds of stories about how he used to play in a band when he was young.

My Mother, she was such a nice woman back then, very old fashioned. She cleaned the house from top to bottom, and made sure to have dinner on the table for him when he got home from work. I didn't know it back then, but she got a lot of flak for being a stay at home mom. She didn't like to call it that though; in her words she was a "Senior Domestic Engineer"; it made her feel important. She has always been a people pleaser. That piece of her made her love staying at home, making my dad happy, and, of course, raising me.

This version of them is what I like to remember, because after seven, everything changed. They started to fight. At first it was hushed frustration hidden in the corner, just out of earshot. But the more they fought, the louder they got. Dad started to go away on business trips more and more, leaving Mom alone with us constantly. There are days when I still hate him for that.

With my Dad's absence, my Mom began to drink. She thought I didn't know, and to be honest, back then I probably didn't know exactly. But I knew something was wrong.

After my brother, Justin, was born we moved to Groton. My parents designed and built their own house. To this day I still think it looks like an oversized dollhouse. The siding was a blush pink color my mother chose; she thought it gave the house character. The shutters resembled an angry ocean, painted in dark teal to contrast the childish pink. Everything in the house was hand selected by my parents, from the counters to the type of wood used for the floor. It is one of the only things I can remember my parents working together on as a team. They stood over the blue-prints mhm-ing as the contractor spoke in technical terms that went over both of their heads. My Dad wasn't very confrontational, but my Mother was never afraid to ask a question. She would ask, and my Dad would rub his hand across her back in silent appreciation.

As a child, I can recall getting lost in the house. The kitchen stood tall and dark with its expensive and fancy granite counter tops and stainless steel appliances. At times it almost seemed ominous. Everything towered over me in the kitchen and the only windows looking into the kitchen faced the backyard. This caused the kitchen to often be in shadow while the sun lit the rest of the window filled house. The living room had vaulted ceilings and tall windows, and always felt warm and safe. My favorite activity when I was sick was to lie on the living room couch, plastic mixing bowl on the floor (just in case). I would be all curled up with

the blanket my mother had dubbed the “make-me-feel-better blanket,” watching *Beauty and the Beast*.

My fifth birthday party is one of my fondest memories. My grandmother came in from Chicago just to celebrate with me. She began my obsession with clothing, bringing me a new outfit every visit. My gifted brown and white dress was accompanied with a darling hat that I, of course, donned for my party. I felt like a princess, I even had the spoiled jealousy to go with it. My grandmother gave Justin small trinkets on my birthday. I thought of it as favoritism, back stabbing, sabotage. “Hey, why does *he* get presents when it’s *my* birthday?” I whined.

The weather was unnaturally warm for December, which only increased my excitement. I have always appreciated the warmth of the sun. My parents had hired a clown. He wasn’t just any old clown, though, he was the best clown. Bozo dropped his bowling pin and I ran to grab it as it rolled across the hardwood. We all laughed, poor clown. We laughed even harder when he tripped over his big feet, his rainbow body making a loud thud on the hardwood floor. As five year olds, nothing could have been funnier than a clumsy clown.

The best part of the party, though, was playing outside in December. This is one of the only birthday parties I have ever had where the weather was warm enough to enjoy being outside. My parents had strung a rainbow pony piñata from the old wooden play-set. The yellow plastic bat felt like victory in my hands as they placed the blindfold over my eyes. One spin, two spin, three spin and I can still feel the way my stomach lurched as I tried to aim straight for where I thought the hanging pony full of candy was. I think we made it through the line almost two

times before any of our five-year-old strength broke through the papier-mâché. The shower of candy fell to the ground and we scrambled to pick up every last piece before the sun dipped below the tree line.

The party ended with a cake with candy letters that hurt your teeth to bite. I'm pretty sure I ruined that beautiful dress my grandmother bought me. I was and am a messy eater. As parents arrived to pick up their kids, gifts had been opened and sugar-highs began to wear thin. It was such a great birthday that I was willing to forgive my brother for his act of betrayal; he didn't know any better. The party was one of my only childhood memories that seem simple, enjoyable.

After years of therapy, though, I still think less about that party than I do about some of the more haunting memories from this house. My father's increasing absence and my mother's alcoholism placed me in some bad situations. I have an image of my mother crawling around on her knees, chasing me. I remember the late afternoon light made the kitchen feel even more ominous than usual and the island loomed over me. The house was quiet; my brother was down for a nap. At first it felt like a game. I was giggling and laughing as my mom chased me on all fours. But then, when I started screaming, "Mom, stop!" she wouldn't listen. Dad wasn't there to save me. Her eyes were wild and glossy, and her voice was even louder than normal as she shouted, "Its time for a spanking!" By this time I was crying. I didn't understand why my Mom was being... well, crazy. I hadn't done anything wrong, as far as I knew. I ran and hid myself in the bathroom, locking the door behind me. By the time I emerged my mother was passed out in the living room.

Don't get me wrong. I love my parents. For every bad memory from that house, there was a great one to balance it. The house was positioned along the edge of wetlands. Once you got over the mosquitos and the smell, it was a lovely place to grow up. There was lots of wildlife, frogs, ducks, and various bugs. My mother took us out into the wetlands with stale bread during the spring to feed the ducks that would come visit the pond about a quarter mile from the house. My mom would break out the bug spray and our rain boots. It was always a fight with my brother to get him into his jacket and boots. Justin always had to oppose what we were doing. *"MOM I don't wanna wear a jacket"* he would whine, snot dribbling down from his little nose. Even as he grew up, it didn't matter how cold it was out, he wanted to wear shorts and a t-shirt. Once the fight was over, we would walk down the mud-trodden path. It was the best when we were quiet because every croak from a frog and chirp from a bird could be heard. When I smell bug spray today I still think of these times.

I think my favorite memory of my father from this house is Halloween. My Dad bought a ride-on lawn mower with all of the bells and whistles when we moved into the Groton house. He was adamant about doing the landscaping himself, but more often than not, my mother was the one doing the mowing. The one time my Dad was guaranteed to break out his tractor was Halloween. His green machine would cart all us kids in the neighborhood door to door. No child left behind, you could say. The bumpy ride and the scratch of the hay on our bottoms were worth it to not have to walk from house to house. Our neighborhood was large and the

houses weren't all that close together. So, on Halloween my Dad was the neighborhood hero.

As my parents' relationship went down hill, so did the good memories at the house. Holidays felt strained. I remember my Mom and Dad fighting about Christmas. My Mother wanted to take us to see her sister and our cousins in Connecticut, but my Dad was completely against the idea. He wouldn't let my Mom go with just us kids either because of her drinking. He was being controlling, she told her sister. I found myself spending as much time out of the house as possible. At friends' houses, at school, at gymnastics, whatever I could do to find myself not in the middle of their fights. One night though, I came home and the house didn't feel like a home anymore. My parents were at each other's throats. It was dinnertime, but there was no dinner. My mother's slurred words echoed throughout the house as she shouted at my father, "I know you were with her!"

"Charmaine, would you stop already? I'm tired of your paranoia and your assumptions."

"I am **not** being paranoid, *Jordan*."

"Mom? Why are you talking funny?" I remember making my presence known. My mother started cooing at me, talking to me in this soft, gooey voice that made me feel uncomfortable. It was sickeningly sweet, and my whole body was left feeling gummy, like hands after eating cotton candy. This was the first of many times when I would hear that tone and know something was wrong. I remember my Dad came over, seeing my discomfort, and pulled me close to his side. My mother's eyes became cold and hateful. I saw this change take over her whole body, as my mother

transformed into someone I didn't recognize. My Dad told me to go upstairs. I didn't listen. I stood at the bottom of the staircase leading to the upstairs, using the bannister to lean and get a better view. From there, I could only see my mother. She was pale and shaking, her face shallow.

"I swear to god, Jord."

"Charmaine, pull your shit together."

My mom no longer was where I could see her and a loud bang rang out from the kitchen. I ran from the stairs back to where my parents were arguing. My Mom had pinned my dad up against the refrigerator, her face reflecting in the stainless steel. My Dad saw me and looked my mother in the eyes, "Don't do it for me, do it for them," and glanced back at me. My mother slowly turned around to see me standing there crying, watching. She dropped my Dad, and he immediately grabbed the phone and called 9-1-1.

My mother had run upstairs and locked herself in their bedroom after that. The red and blue lights flickered in the windowpanes of every house on our cul-de-sac. They broke the panes of glass in the beautiful French doors to my parents' bedroom to get her. My mother was arrested that night and held in a cell until the next day. My Dad ordered us Chinese food as some kind of a peace treaty. He didn't even know what to say to me; he just kept looking at me with these sad, apologetic eyes. There are days he still looks at me like that.

The divorce was tough, even though they did their best to keep us kids out of it. There was only one time I can remember being directly a part of the divorce. A long, very quiet car ride into Boston set the tone. I asked my Mom where we were

going, and all that my mother could manage to say was, “Momma and Daddy have a quick meeting.” My mother was dressed in a professional but drab outfit, all black. She looked like she was going to a funeral, and in a way I guess she was; it was the death of their marriage.

The lobby of the building was filled with marble and gold sconces. It felt royal. My brother and I fought over who could hit the elevator button, and my mother didn’t even bother telling us to stop. When we reached whatever floor it was, we were brought into a conference room. Some kind woman, I’m assuming it was the receptionist, had placed two packages of crayons and a brand-new coloring book on the large oblong table. It was safe to say they didn’t get very many kids there. My brother and I managed to entertain ourselves with the swivel chairs and some scribbling. When it was time to go, my Dad came into the conference room to give us hugs. My Dad’s suffocating squeeze and lengthy absences from the house made it pretty clear that something had changed. He whispered to me “I’ll see you soon, pumpkin.” A peck on the forehead and he was gone. My mother entered the room, her face gaunt and the tracks of smudged tears on her cheeks.

My Dad moved on pretty quick. Within six months of the divorce he was engaged, and he remarried another six months after that. Without my Dad’s paycheck, my mother could not afford the house, our house, the one they built just for us. It broke my heart. It was exciting and it was frustrating. I was happy to see my Dad happy, but I was miserable to see my mother falling apart. My stepmom set my Dad free, and even when I didn’t like her, I loved that she could put a smile on my Dad’s face. My Mom, on the other hand, had been destroyed. She had become

accustomed to a certain lifestyle, and all of that ended with the sale of the Groton house. My mother hated that my Dad was already on to the next wife. Even to this day she tells me, "leaving your father is the worst mistake I ever made," as if she was the sole decider in their divorce. I was eight the first time she told me that. After that it was like a thunderstorm. The skies of my mother's past had opened up, and her traumas came pouring down on my childhood.

## Chapter 2

After Groton, I lived in Pepperell, an old mill town a few towns away. My mother's "friend," Dan, helped her get the house. It was nowhere near as nice as the Groton house, but it was a house. The house had a finished basement, a bright kitchen, and my brother and I had our own rooms. The night we first moved in, my mother set up our mattresses on the floor in the living room since our furniture hadn't come yet. It was summer and the air was sticky. We ordered grinders for supper from some local sub shop. I got the same thing I still get today: turkey, lettuce and tomato, toasted, with Italian dressing on it. We sat, sweaty, on our mattresses, eating subs off paper plates, trying so hard not to make a mess (shredded lettuce is not easily contained). We didn't even have cable set up; we had rented a movie from blockbuster – now replaced by Netflix, Hulu and Redbox.

My mother did a nice job decorating and made the place feel like home pretty quickly. She even turned the finished basement into a playroom for my brother and me. The tile floor was black and white checkered. I didn't appreciate how retro it was back then. We had our own TV set up down there, and a couch, and most of our toys. The painted cement blocks kept it the coolest place in the house during the summer, making it the most common place to find us.

The neighborhood seemed welcoming and I made friends in school pretty easily. I made a best friend; she lived on my street, but way down the end. She lived with her Dad (her parents were divorced too). My mother was concerned as to why the girl didn't live with her mother anymore, but at the time I thought it was cool that she lived with her Dad. Dads do make the best mac & cheese.

Shortly after we moved in, my mother started to notice strange things little by little. One of the moms on the street let her daughter (about five or six years old) run around without a shirt on. At the time I didn't think much of it, it was hot out, but now I guess that is a little inappropriate. Or that, even though we lived near wetlands there were no mosquitos to be found. I mean, yeah it was all a little strange, but new setting, new surroundings; at seven years old I didn't think much about it.

My relationship with my mother evolved in that house, and that's why I hate it. I blame it as if it was a demon that got to my mom, that changed her. I was seven when she first started detailing the horrors of her childhood to me. There was one day where she was shaving her legs in the bathroom. I was sitting on the ugly terra cotta colored carpeting just outside the bathroom door. Her voice waivered as she spoke, "When I was your age, god, my life was so bad." The sound of her razor clacking against the sink filled the void left after she spoke.

"How come, Momma?" I looked inquisitively at her. She told me about her stepfather and how he molested her. How her mother chose him over her every time. How she ended up at O'Ryan house, a group home. The conversation ended with my mother a half-naked lump on the floor, and seven-year-old me, smoothing her hair trying to comfort her.

That was the first of many inappropriate conversations my mother had with me. Shortly after that first chat though, problems arose beyond a lack of boundaries. My mother would complain that she felt strange, and then all of a sudden her face would contort. It would terrify my brother and me. Do you remember your parents

telling you if you crossed your eyes your face might get stuck that way? Well, it felt like it was true after all as we would watch my mother's face become strained and she would stick her tongue out and it was as if her face had frozen like that. Minutes later the muscles in her face would relax and she would be breathing heavily as if it took all of her effort just to convince her face to return to its normal state. At first, it was funny; we thought it was a game. It didn't take long for our laughs to turn to concern. "Momma? Momma? You okay?" we would ask, exchanging wide-eyed looks, our pitches rising with fear. And that was just the beginning.

My mother became convinced the house was diseased. Soon it became more than just the house, it was the car, it was our clothes. Everything was contaminated. I don't remember why, but according to my mother, one day my brother and I approached her and told her that we felt weird too. She decided that was it, that we were leaving that house and all of its contaminants. She told us we could bring three things with us, but that was it. I remember picking my make-up chest, my cd case and my cd player. We moved into an apartment in Acton, and then, when she didn't get better, we moved again.

While my mother bounced us from apartment to apartment, my Dad and Stepmother (Judy) got married. I had gotten to go dress shopping one weekend before the wedding with Judy and picked out this adorable dress. It had a black crushed velvet bodice and a black and white checkered skirt. My favorite part about the dress though was the big royal blue satin ribbon that wrapped around the waist. I think that if I hadn't outgrown the dress, I'd still own it today. Their wedding was held the day before my eighth birthday, which at first felt like the worst thing in the

world. I thought they were stealing all of the attention away from me. The whole family had stayed that night in the hotel, and we all gathered for breakfast the morning of my birthday. That was the loudest verse of happy birthday I have ever received. My dad took me to see Harry Potter in the movie theater that afternoon. Despite all of the struggles going on at the time, their wedding and my eighth birthday had been a relief from all of the drama.

We moved three times over a six-month period that year, and each time we moved we switched schools. I went to four or five different elementary schools during second grade. My younger brother was only in Kindergarten, and these moves affected his education much more than mine. Thankfully, there came a point where my mother decided to pass custody over to my father. She, to this day, says that when she gave my father custody it was with the intentions of getting us back.

It was a long process for her to get "better." My brother and I went the first three months without seeing her. Her sister, my Aunt Kathy, had agreed to try and help her, so she ended up in Connecticut for a little while. There was a Sunday sometime in the spring of that year that my Dad and Judy finally agreed to take my brother and I to see her. We met her at Rein's Deli, a famous Jewish deli in Connecticut, about 20 minutes east of Hartford. The deal was that we could not be alone with her, so Judy and my Dad busied themselves for a few hours while we visited with my mother, aunt and cousins.

"Hi guys!" my mother cooed. Even to my eight-year-old ears her happiness sounded fake.

She had squatted down to our height with her arms out, expectantly waiting. My brother had always been a mama's boy and went straight in for the hug, but I can remember being hesitant, looking for signs of normalcy. She looked like it had been a thousand hours since she had gotten a wink of sleep. Her eyes were framed with dark circles rimmed with red. Even my aunt looked exhausted, like having my mother there simply wore her out.

Once the awkward initial moments were through, we moved into the restaurant. For me, that was the highlight of the visit. I love Rein's Deli. The conversation felt halted and strained. I wanted to hear good news: she was all better now, they had found something horribly wrong at our house in Pepperell, anything to explain what had happened. At eight years old, I was mature enough to know, though, I wouldn't hear any of those things. My mother made small talk, but mainly asked questions about how school was and if we had made any new friends. For the most part it all went smoothly.

It wasn't until she gave me this conspiratorial look and asked, "How have you been feeling, baby doll?" That I got that familiar knot in my stomach, the one I had been waiting all day to get.

"Fine," I answered, staring at my plate, burning holes into my half-eaten pickle. Lunch was delivered to the table, saving me from any further questioning. Although, by that time, the knot had grown larger than my fist and I couldn't even picture trying to eat my turkey club. I nibbled on a few French fries nervously. All of the excitement about eating at Rein's Deli had faded away, replaced by an eagerness to be back in my Dad's Volvo station wagon, safe.

Even worse than all of that was when we had to say our goodbyes. My mother again came down to my height and grabbed me by the shoulders, just a little too firmly for it to have been comfortable. She said, "I love you Jessica Ann, don't you ever forget that," and started crying. My Aunt had to pull her away as my Dad and Judy ushered us back to the car. Etched into my memory forever, there is part of me that wishes we had never gone to see her. Forever now, I have a memory of my mom in one of her lowest moments.

It took at least another couple of months before things started to look up for her. She finally managed to get herself into a halfway house in Woburn, the next town over from us. They had visitor's hours, which allowed for us to see her much more often than being in Connecticut.

I don't remember visiting much but I do remember the one Christmas she spent there. My nerves rang through my nine-year-old body like jingle bells, concerned she couldn't pull off a nice Christmas for Justin, who at the time couldn't have been more than seven. We pulled up to the house, each window rimmed with white Christmas lights and an oversized candy cane stood glowing beside the pathway leading to the front door. As we entered the house we were greeted with big smiles and Merry Christmases. It was warm and inviting, but my mother had that timid unsureness to her expression. She needed so many reassurances that she had done okay.

As soon as we got through the door she fussed over how grown up we looked in our nice Christmas outfits. All of the women there also doted on us and couldn't stop saying, "Charmaine, they look just like you!" Even though I didn't see always

see the resemblance. She had made her famous meal of Shake 'n Bake chicken, homemade mashed potatoes, and corn. My mother wasn't the greatest cook but she makes a mean mashed potato; it's still my favorite. I have to admit, for where she was and what she had access to, she did a pretty good job.

The long awaited opening of the gifts came and my mother had gathered us in the rather small living room. She looked at me with so many apologies in her eyes I couldn't help but stare at the chipping nail polish on my fingers. My mother waited for me to look back up at her before saying, "I know it isn't much but..." and I interrupted her.

"Christmas is about being together, not presents."

She smiled at me, but it looked so strained that I could have sworn someone was pulling at the corners of her mouth forcing them up. That year I got my first Avril Lavigne CD. I don't remember anything else, but that CD quickly became my favorite. I still sing *Skater Boi* at the occasional karaoke night. Before we left, I remember giving my mom a big hug. When she leaned in I whispered, "I'm proud of you, Mom." I listened to *Skater Boi* the whole ride home, silently thanking her.

### Chapter 3

Middle school brought a lot of challenges for me. But it started back in elementary school. As a fifth grader I had earned my right to the back of the bus. But I hadn't made very many friends, so I read. I read a lot. It was the only way to tune out the relentless teasing. They called me "bubble reader." One day, I tuned in to the conversation rather than sticking my nose in a book. One of the "popular" girls was talking about shaving her legs. In fifth grade, yes, girls were shaving their legs. She looked at my legs and said, "I would get started if I were you." Her eyes were filled with contempt as she looked at my legs. They weren't even that bad. Girls are mean.

I had reached the age where I was becoming a woman, though. All of the girls would talk about how their moms helped them learn to shave their legs among other womanly things. I didn't live with my Mom though. And even more so, I was having a hard time making friends. I had one very close friend during elementary school while I was in Burlington. Kavya befriended me when I was the "new girl." She was the only one who risked the "cooties" I may have been carrying as the new kid in school. We were instantly best friends, until fifth grade. One of our classmates was having an end of the school year party at his house. The whole class was invited for a barbecue, and water slide in the backyard. We all were sitting around the table eating our lunch, enjoying the sun, when someone went and ruined everything.

"Why are you friends with Jessica?" someone asked.

"Ew, why would I be friends with *her*?" Kavya responded.

I ran from the table crying. That was the end of elementary school, and the beginning of a lot of changes for me.

Before I went back to school for sixth grade I begged my mom to take me to get my eyebrows waxed. I had a uni-brow and was tired of hearing people use it against me. My mother asked, "Are you sure? Once you start, you have to keep up with it." She explained to me the "risks" of waxing and how every time the hair would grow back a little darker, and a little thicker. I didn't care.

I remember lying in the reclining chair for the first time, my eyes closed as the warm wax spread across my face. The woman laid a strip of cloth over the wax and kneaded my brows; I thought it felt nice. With a quick snap of her wrist, off came the cloth, wax, and hair, and down ran the tears on my face. "OW." My mother looked at me. "Beauty is pain." She said.

The last straw happened in sixth grade. In Massachusetts, the state standardized test is called the MCAS. We all sat in our homerooms during the spring of sixth grade taking this timed, and excruciatingly long test. In an attempt to make testing seem fun, teachers would tell us to dress in our pajamas if we wanted. The rebel that I am, I was wearing my favorite light colored jeans. I was sitting there taking this test when my lady parts felt warmer than normal. I casually looked down at my crotch. There bloomed the red flower of puberty. Panic. I could feel the red spread up past my neck and into my cheeks. Of course I wore my light colored jeans... I went up to the teacher's desk whispering the situation. She allowed me to go down to the nurse's office so I could call my stepmom. Luckily, I owned an almost identical pair of jeans. My stepmom brought me my jeans and some pads. I

was able to slip back in and finish my test without anyone noticing. But for the rest of the test, I was distracted. I just wanted to call my mom.

After that, I may have put a little bird in my mother's ear that I wanted to come live with her. She was teaching me how to use tampons. Never an enjoyable experience really. We were squeezed into the relatively small bathroom of the in-law apartment she was living in at the time. Mid-explanation she stopped and turned to me and said, "See, you should be living with your momma." I just nodded. It made sense to me. I didn't have many friends. I was becoming a woman, and who better to teach you than your mom, right?

The first of many custody battles began.

It was a few years before my mother established herself on her own. She got a lot of help from friends and her boyfriend. She moved into a beautiful house in Acton with her boyfriend. It was across the street from a farm with a farm stand attached. A nice yard, and my brother and I even had our own bedrooms! It really seemed like she had pulled herself together. But as she pulled it together, so did I. I changed my mind. I didn't want to live with her. Not because I didn't want to be with her, but months had gone by and I had made friends. After so long of being a misfit, I finally fit in with a group.

To say my mom didn't take my change of heart lightly would be an understatement. She took it personally. She couldn't understand that after she had moved us so many times, I just wanted to finally be settled. The hard part was over. She walked me through shaving, tampons, and the whole shebang. It was too late.

We were having an argument about my decision to stay with my Dad when she came out with, "You really stabbed me in the heart, Jessica." That was it for me. I didn't speak with her for months after that. Even in middle school I knew I didn't need that kind of negativity in my life. She continued to fight for custody of Justin, but lost. The courts determined it was better for us to both remain together and remain in our present school systems, etc.

My mother did get extended visitation rights, which led to us spending every other weekend and Wednesday nights with her. At first, the visitation schedule really bothered me. It ruined my plans with friends every other weekend. Acton was so far away. Parents were never willing to take the drive. So many weekends I spent reading, and texting, trying not to miss out on anything.

The only bright side was the farm stand across the street. The owner, Heidi, and her son, Max, were some of the sweetest people. Heidi gave me a job working the cash register on Saturdays and Sundays when I was visiting. I got along well with Max, too, even though he was closer to my brothers age. There was a while where things were pretty good for the most part.

As time went on, I began to see patterns and strange occurrences. We were driving back to Burlington from Acton one Sunday afternoon. I noticed a brown paper bag in the front seat. I thought I saw little bottles but I wasn't sure. When I asked, my mom just said, "Oh, its nothing." And shoved the bag into the glove box. I went looking for the bag the following weekend, but it was gone.

I continued to suspect my mother was drinking again only because she continued to give me reason. At thirteen years old, I was pretty intuitive. That

Christmas Eve my mother and Dan got into a huge fight. She was screaming at him, “You’re such a jerk!” And plenty of other profanities. He finally had had enough of her screaming and left. Once there was no one for my mother to scream at she locked herself in her bedroom and screamed at the wall instead. Justin and I sat down stairs watching Christmas TV specials while we waited for her to calm down.

Eventually she emerged from her room and came downstairs. Her feet slammed against each step heavily. She came into the living room and just glared at us, silently hovering. When she finally spoke her voice was raspy.

“It’s time to go to bed.”

“But Mom, it’s only 730, and its Christmas Eve!”

“Yeah, it’s only 730,” my brother echoed.

My mother’s face was pink and only deepening. I could see the lights dancing in her glossy eyes.

“No, its time for bed.” She said again.

“Mom, I’m thirteen years old. I am not going to bed at 730.”

My mother threatened to spank us if we didn’t go up to bed. That was enough to get my brother motivated.

“Fine. I’ll go into my room, but I’m staying up and reading for a while.”

My mother didn’t say anything; she just followed my brother into his room. I went in my room and shut the door. I was comfortably in bed, and into my book when my mother barged through my door and shut my light off.

“*Mom*, stop! I’m trying to read.”

“No Jessica, it’s time for bed,” She said in that all too familiar tone.

When I didn't lie back in my bed she shoved my shoulders, hard. I hit my head off of the headboard. I stared at my mother wide-eyed and ran into my bathroom locking the door. I cried on the bathroom floor and sat there for hours until I was positive she had gone to bed. I finally returned to my bed and slept.

The next morning, it was Christmas. I woke up and came downstairs and Dan had returned and my mother was there, bright eyed and bushy tailed. With no reference to the previous night, the rest of Christmas went seamlessly. It was as if she had no recollection of the prior evening's events.

It wasn't too long after that, maybe 6-months, before all of my suspicions were confirmed. It was a late spring evening. I went into my pajama drawer only to find a completely empty bottle of gin. My heart immediately fell into my stomach. What was I supposed to do? How do I even approach her? She's just going to deny it. I worked myself up so much that I got sick. I told a very close friend and they told me to talk to my Dad. As much as I was nervous, I didn't know what else to do. He told me I needed to speak with the Parenting Coordinator. I didn't even know what that was.

I began sneaking around. My Mom would ask me where I was going, "a walk," I answered as if was normal. I "walked" a lot over the following two days communicating with parenting coordinator in secret. When she finally contacted my Mom, I was working across the street at the farm stand. My mom texted me, "You need to come home immediately." I knew exactly what that meant and it took all of my strength, physically and emotionally to go back to the house. I crossed the street looking like a dead man walking.

When I finally made it back to the house, my mother was waiting. Her face was flush and her knuckles white. Here we go, I thought. She brought me out onto the back porch and had me sit in a chair, while she screamed at me. "How could you?" "You're the worst daughter in the world!" "You're no daughter to me." It continued for an hour, if not more. She finally kicked me out of her house.

I sat in the driveway crying. My Mother had banished me from the house but held me captive in the front yard, humiliating me. What felt like hours was only 45 minutes as I waited for my Dad to come rescue me.

And so, for the second time, I stopped speaking to her.

## Chapter 4

One morning, at twenty-one years old, I woke up to a world changed. I awoke that morning to an internal vibration in my spirit that something was wrong; imagine a rigid string, pulled taut until it snapped. My phone screen glared 06:59AM, one minute before my alarm went off. One new text message was all I awoke to. It read:

Hey there is a letter for you in the front pocket of my North Carolina sweatshirt; door's unlocked. I'd grab it sooner than later. Sorry for this but it's important. The sweatshirt is hanging up on the closet door in my room. Thanks.

Was the letter something that came in the mail? Was it time sensitive? Do I need to get it before class? Is something wrong? Why isn't he answering the phone? Why hasn't he responded to my text messages? Is he home? He does work late. Maybe he's sleeping. Should I stop on my way to class? I can't stop thinking about it. I should stop. My brain ran at 100 miles an hour.

I made some phone calls before I made my decision. First, I called the guy I was talking to at the time. He told me my ex sounded like he was "crazy pants," whatever that was supposed to mean. He told me not to go. He told me he worried that my ex would attack me. Or worse, I'd find a body. Not funny. Then, I called my ex's business partner, Kyle. When did you see him last? Have you heard from him? Is something wrong? They had made plans for that day. He saw him last night at two in the morning. Things seemed normal, he said.

Regardless of what anyone said, it didn't matter; I had a gut feeling. Something was wrong. Something was very wrong. I've never had a feeling so deep in my gut and

it terrified me. Getting ready tends to be a process, but that morning, I don't think I've ever gotten ready so fast. I pulled my jeans on, did my little jump to make sure they were up all the way, and picked the first shirt in my drawer. I sped through applying my foundation, slapped some mascara on, and I was ready to go.

I honestly can't say what was causing me such extreme anxiety other than simply a gut feeling. I had experienced similar situations before with him, but something about that text message stuck with me. My stepmom immediately noticed my frantic behavior. I read the text message to her, and she also advised me not to go, or at the very least not go alone. I wasn't about to call the police. I wasn't at maximum panic level yet. I still believed we were all getting worked up over piece of mail, myself included. Despite wanting to believe all of this worry was an exaggeration, her reaction confirmed to me that maybe I did actually have something to worry about.

I know myself pretty well, and I knew going to school would be pointless if I didn't go find out what was going on. I decided to go find this "letter" and assure myself all was fine.

I drove faster than usual. I kept telling myself that if I got pulled over it would be fine, I would tell the cop the situation and he would escort me. I kept telling myself everything was fine. I played my music so loud that I couldn't hear the thoughts running wild. I had my windows down, letting the wind keep my face from heating up with fear. And when I pulled up to the house I had a wave of relief roll through me.

Everything was in its place. His truck was in the driveway. Lights were on in the house. I could hear music. How could something be wrong if everything looked so normal?

Like he said, the front door was unlocked and I walked right in.

“Matt? Hello? Anybody home?” My voice rang throughout the apartment and the air hung uncomfortably still. Maybe he was sleeping. I peeked my head into the bedroom. No one was in the bed, but there lay his phone on the makeshift end table he had set up. The phone sang out some all-too-happy country music and for a moment I felt lost. His truck, here, his phone, here, but where was he?

I was in no mood to play hide-and-seek. All of that energy from worrying turned into kinetic energy as I tore the house apart. I looked under the bed, around the bed, in the bathroom. I ran to the basement and looked in each of the strangely proportioned unfinished rooms. I thought, if it were me, where would I be. I ran out to the truck, but no luck. I called Kyle, frantic, “I can’t find Matt?!” Kyle remained calm, and told me to take a deep breath. Then it came to me. With all of that searching, and the fear that had bubbled up inside of me, I had completely forgotten about the “letter.” I told Kyle I had to go.

I ran back inside and headed straight for the bedroom. There hung the sweatshirt on the corner of the bedroom door. I reached into the pocket and pulled out a piece of mail, and then two folded up pieces of paper. The front of the first one said “Letter 1 Read First” and the other had no writing on the outside

I brought the notes into the kitchen to read. I opened the first one and found three pages of his chicken scratch handwriting. My pulse quickened as I sped through that first note. “Wish you were honest...” “I told you...” “My faults covered yours up.” “This is what I have resorted to, and did it this time.” “...You will get over it.” Only to stop when I read the line, “P.S. I guess this is just another act for attention, right?” And

my heart dropped into my stomach. I nearly lost control of my body functions as I ran to the bathroom. I began hyperventilation, feeling his words suffocating me. As I read through the rest of the first letter I cried. He was so angry, but not just angry in general, he was angry with me.

My brain was now scanning through the last week trying to figure out what I could have done wrong to make him so upset. I finally opened the second letter.

I'm sorry, Jess. I didn't wanna put you threw this. The last letter was mostly me angry. You were a great girlfriend and an amazing best friend. I'm doing this so I can be happy for once. My depression has been at an all time worst. The withdrawals and anger. I'm finally going to escape. As I move on, do not mourn me, celebrate my life and the good times. This really isn't about you. You will make a great teacher/mother someday. I saw the happiness in your eyes with the little boy on Facebook. Hope that kid does better than me. Well I'll miss ya. Gotta go. Your friend, (I think, not sure) Matty.

I didn't understand. But, how? I couldn't find him anywhere. He had always told me that he wanted to die in nature. Did he just walk off into the woods? I paced around the house and went back into the bedroom. That was when I noticed there were more notes. A note written to Kyle, his business partner sat atop the nightstand next to his phone. How could I have missed it! I finally called his business partner. "Something is wrong!" I cried into the phone. I explained how I found the notes. As I was on the phone with him, I found another one, this time written to his family.

Near hysterics, Kyle tried to calm me down over the phone, when all of a sudden I felt it. It almost felt like someone was staring at me. That same tingly feeling you get on the back of your neck that makes you turn around. On the phone with Kyle, I was mid-pace when I felt it, exiting the bedroom. I stopped dead in my tracks and turned around. There he was. "Matt's hanging in the closet," was all I could manage before hanging up on Kyle. I called Laurie, Matt's Stepmom, and could only manage "Matt's dead," through my tears.

Nobody realizes how many phone calls must be made when someone dies until you're there. Then, despite nearly fainting and repeating the words "Not today, not today, not today" over and over under my breath, I called 9-1-1.

"What's your emergency?" The operator asked.

"My ex-boyfriend hung himself," I sobbed, unable to even form the complete thought. The operator transferred me to the appropriate people for my location.

Whoever came on the line next deserves a lawsuit. I sat there in the living room on the phone with this woman. She asked me if I could "cut my friend down." I'm less than 5 feet tall and weigh a little over 100lbs. I ran back into the bedroom and could only stomach a peek before I nearly threw up. His face was blue; it would have been useless to even try. He was gone. Done. I couldn't stop saying, "I can't" to the woman in between my hyperventilating and sobs.

I couldn't bear to be in there any longer. I ran to the front porch and sat head in hands, awaiting the arrival of the emergency personnel. Still repeating, "Not today, not today" under my breath. We are told countless times that if we need help, real help, to call 9-1-1, that they will help. Well no one helped me. I sat there on the front steps as

four EMTs or firemen or whoever they were brushed right past me, only one stopping to ask me “Where is he?” No one bothered to say, “are you okay?” I didn’t even get an “I’m sorry.”

Shortly after the paramedics and other emergency personnel were on scene, his family began to arrive. His Stepmom and Dad first, and they helped me make the immediately important calls. When you tell someone that someone you’re close with died, and not peacefully, the reactions vary. Some say sorry for your loss, some say they are in a better place now. But most don’t know what to say; they just stare at you with their mouths agape, opening and closing like fish.

It seems, at first, to bring people together. You see friends who you haven’t seen in years. Family from across the country reach out to see how you are holding up. All of the friends who knew him banded together in some sort of shared experience. Once all events have been held, the funeral is done, the memorial passed, you really see who stands by you. I learned the hardest lesson of my life thus far from that. I truly learned what my mother meant when she told me, “they are HIS family, not yours.”

No one from that part of my life checks up on me anymore. Even those who were truly close with me have cut ties or slowly faded out of the picture. I had to start over. I had to meet new people, make to new friends. Of course, I still had my family and friends that had no relation to my relationship with Matt. Most importantly, though, I was able to weed out those who were fair-weather friends, and I’m so much better off for it.

There is a part of me that feels guilty for missing him some days, for wanting one more chance to hold his hand or rest my head on his shoulder. It feels like I’m cheating. I

try to talk to my fiancé about it, but then I just feel awkward... The whole situation is uncomfortable. No one should ever be stuck in a situation like this. At 21 years old, I never should have had to see a dead body, especially not the body of someone I knew; not like that. I shouldn't have had to be the one to break the news to anyone. I shouldn't have had to call his Dad, or his uncle, or his business partner or his best friend... but I was. It was all me. He made it about me despite his comment from the second letter, "this really isn't about you." And there are days where I hate him for it, and I feel guilty for that too.

It's not his fault that none of us could see the pain he was in. But you know what is/was his fault? Not having the courage to come talk to any of us who would have happily been there to listen. Instead, he decided to act like everything was hunky-dory and take it all upon himself. How dare he make such a big decision that would affect so many. Maybe he didn't realize just how many people he had touched in his short life. I really can't speak for him as to why he thought this was the only way out.

I don't hold blame against him for feeling so helpless. I do hold blame against him for bringing me into it. What an unjust and cruel final stab at me. To set me up, and make me feel as though I were to blame. I didn't hold a gun to his head, or give him a bag of drugs. I didn't push him off a bridge. I didn't tie that noose around his neck, he did. He texted me telling me that there was something important in his sweatshirt pocket. He told me it was important. He told me to come get it sooner rather than later.

And just like that, the end of an era came. Just like that, I was a part of the rubble.