Chapter One: *Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.* Soren Kierkegaard

After my shift at the restaurant downtown, I stepped into the empty parking lot and the door slammed behind me louder than all the plates I’d broken that night. I was a bad waitress.

I started walking to my car and felt the cool night air blow across my face. The breeze carried a whiff of the Italian food I’d been serving all day. Pulling the elastic off my ponytail, I let my hair fall and caress my shoulders. Pausing for a moment, I allowed my head to fall back until it was almost parallel with the ground, and began to stare at the shimmering sky, stars bright and mesmerizing.

When I began to walk again, I heard footsteps behind me, hitting the pavement simultaneously with mine. My skin turned to gooseflesh. An overwhelming fear mixed with tension spread through my body.

My purse was slung over my shoulder and a blue apron, tied ever so tightly around my waist, held a lot of money in tips. Okay, a decent amount of money in tips; I was after all, a bad waitress.

I was much too afraid to look behind me, so continued moving, becoming more nervous with every breath. Reaching into my bag for my keys, I felt a small tube of lipstick, a brush, and to my surprise, a few pieces of lettuce. I checked the pocket in the front of my purse. No keys. My feet hit the concrete harder with each step and my hands shook like a plucked guitar string. I checked inside the bag again and finally felt cold metal in my palm.
The other person’s footsteps started to sound louder, closer. After unlocking my car with the remote, I swung the door open, and jumped into the driver’s seat. My heart throbbed in my chest as I started the engine of my Jetta and peeled out of the parking lot without ever looking back. Pushing the pedal to the floor, I sped down the street to the highway entrance.

After pulling into the slowest lane of traffic, I began to loosen my grip on the steering wheel. I exhaled and felt safe again. I was driving a bit slower than the speed limit of sixty-five miles per hour when out of nowhere, two cars came speeding up the road behind me. One was driving much too close to my left, not letting the car behind me pass. I started breathing fast. The car behind me sped up and collided with my rear bumper, jolting my car forward and into the side of the other vehicle. I lost control. My Jetta spun like a top as I squeezed my hands around the wheel, feeling as though I had the power to crush it in half.

The pressure from spinning pushed my back against the seat, fully extending my arms and causing my body to tighten. My car had already spun several times before it rammed into something else and I heard another crash. Instantly, I felt another jolt, and then the right side of my car began to rise off the ground.

Holy shit, holy shit,” I said, at the top of my lungs.

It seemed to happen in slow motion. As the right side of my car rose up, the left side hit the ground, and I went with it. I placed my hands over my face as my body flung to the left and my head bashed into the side window. Then my seat belt tightened and pulled me back with force.
Glass shattered everywhere. I felt my entire body turn upside down for a split second before being pushed into the window again. Then everything was silent, and I had the sensation that I was falling.

I was. So was my car. It had flipped over the guardrail and was plummeting into a ditch between the north and southbound side of the highway. I closed my eyes. It seemed like forever before the driver’s side of my car finally smashed onto the ground.

Then, silence and darkness. I’m alive, I thought. I can’t believe it.

My body felt numb and all I could smell was burning rubber. With the light from my cell phone, I held my hands in front of my face and saw that they were covered in blood. Am I really injured but just can’t feel it yet? I thought.

What I could feel, was a stinging sensation on the side of my head behind my left ear. I touched it with my hand and felt more blood. I realized then, that I had to get out of the car, afraid that it might blow up or catch on fire.

I turned the interior light on, made sure my cell phone was in my pocket, and unlocked the doors. I took off my seat belt and braced myself with both arms. Since the car was still standing on its side, I had to grab onto the passenger door to pull myself up, and then stand on the side of the middle console to fling the door open. I couldn’t get it to stay propped, so climbed farther up onto the side of the seat, and on bent knees pushed the door ajar and hopped out. I landed on the ground and started running.

Surrounded by trees, I could barely see the gray guardrail in the distance. I started crying as I ran up the small hill toward the highway. I was terrified. I wondered about the people that were driving the other cars involved, and hoped that they were okay.
Once I got to the top of the hill, I saw that the break down lane was clear. I couldn’t believe that the cars that’d hit me didn’t have any damage. I was shocked that they had driven away and that no one else had pulled over. People are usually nosy with this kind of thing. Traffic jams were often caused by a curiosity delay. I felt confused, and started to scream for help.

Still hysterical and trying to catch my breath, I realized that there wasn’t anyone around and reached into my pocket for my phone. I was about to finish dialing 911 when I looked up and saw that a woman was running toward me.

“Are you all right?” she asked, but didn’t give me a chance to answer. “I saw what happened from a distance. I think the other cars just drove off and left you. I called 911,” she said. “They’re on their way. Was there anyone else with you in your car?”

“No, just me.”


“Some lady did. I’m so scared.”

“I’ll be right there. Where are you?”

I was still crying and speaking frantically. Between breaths, I told her my location on the highway and noticed that the woman who pulled over to help me had disappeared.

A few minutes later, I heard sirens howling in the distance, and hoped Mom would get to me before the ambulance so I didn’t have to get in it alone. I waited on the side of the road by myself. Each time another car drove by, I heard it crush glass or other debris on the road from the accident.
Finally, the orange and white ambulance stopped a few feet away from me. Two men stepped out and immediately rushed over to where I was standing.

I looked up at the stars that night one more time before stepping into the ambulance, still in shock that I was standing. Just a while later, Mom arrived with Steven, my Step-Dad.

I saw them through the steamy ambulance window and asked the EMT to open the door for them.

“Sorry guys,” he said when he saw them, “There’s only room for one more.”

“I’ll go in with her. Can you meet us there?” Mom asked Steven.

Mom jumped into the ambulance, hugged me, and her eyes filled with tears.

“Oh, Ash, I’m so sorry that this happened. You just can’t catch a break, can you?”

Before we left for the hospital, a police officer walked over to Mom and me.

“Lucky you had your seat belt on; otherwise, you may not have made it,” he said.

“She always wears her seat belt,” Mom said, with half of a smile.

Unlike many of my friends, I did always wear my safety belt. It was a security of some kind for me.

The ambulance ride seemed to take forever. I hated lying on the stretcher and wanted to sit up right. Each turn seemed tighter than normal and each stop abrupt. The trip made every inch of my body ache.

Toward the end of the ride, it finally registered. I was on my way to a hospital. I hadn’t been to one for quite some time and never wanted to go back. I hated the smell, the food, and the memories that being there brought to the forefront of my mind.
I’ll never forget that April in 2002, and all that had led up to it that year. Maybe it wasn’t just that year. It could’ve been my entire life creeping up on me like a bad dream.

Either way, it happened, and I’d been working hard on recovering. I prayed that this accident wouldn’t interfere with my healing process.

* 

Although my body felt like someone had run me over with an eighteen-wheeler, I ended up leaving the hospital after my accident in one piece. I had to get stitches on the side of my head, behind my left ear. Each time the needle pricked my skin, a stinging pain would rush up my lower back and into my neck.

It was almost as painful as when the nurse pulled the glass out of my hands. When my car window shattered and my hands plunged through it, the tiniest pieces of glass had become lodged in my skin. The chunks of glass reflected the hospital light, helping the nurse find them. With small tweezers, she parted my skin, and then removed the particles.

After all the glass was gone, the nurse stitched up my hands and wrists. There were only a few deep wounds that needed to be closed, but the backs of my hands were completely scratched. The hundreds of tiny red cuts looked like streets on the map of a busy city.

I was nervous about getting in the car after that. Even sitting in the back seat made me anxious, so I took a break from driving.

A few nights after my accident, I had a nightmare that prolonged my driving strike. In my dream, the crash happened the same way, except I didn’t survive. As I dreamt, I watched firefighters and police officers rescue me from my car with the Jaws of
Life. I saw them carry my lifeless body to the top of the ditch on a stretcher, and watched Mom throw herself onto my body in hysterics.

The nightmare skipped on to my funeral and I heard my brother, Joey, reading my eulogy: “My sister was always there for me. I miss her already. She was such a large part of our family’s foundation, that without her, I’m afraid we may fall through the cracks.”

The nightmare ended with the vision of the newspaper headline the day after my accident: “Twenty-year-old female killed in hit-and-run crash.”

I knew that my fear of driving would only grow the longer I put it off, so one day, I just did it. I sat behind the wheel and turned the key. Even hearing the engine revving made my body quiver as I sat in the driver’s seat. I hesitated after placing my foot on the gas pedal and almost couldn’t accelerate.

My hands closed tightly around the wheel as I persisted and pushed on the gas. I felt as though I was driving again for the first time. I began to coast along my street and felt the smoothness of the road.

When I was ready, I turned on to the main drag in town. This was a big deal for me, or at least it felt that way. After a while, I was ready for an actual trip to a destination. I chose the ice cream shop about ten minutes away for inspiration. It worked. I had a scoop of black raspberry in a sugar cone and the rest was all jimmies.

That accident was not the first turbulence that my life had felt, and it wouldn’t be the last. As I reflect on my past, it shows itself in the form of a slide show, one image projected after another. Once one memory pops into place, another slides in and pushes the old one to the side.
Chapter Two: Nothing is there that had not been understood, conceived, experienced and recognized in the vibrating echo of memory; no experience has been too slight, and the smallest happening unfolds like a destiny, and the destiny itself is like a wonderful broad tapestry where every thread is inwoven by an infinitely delicate hand, laid next to its fellow, and held and supported by a hundred others. Rainer Maria Rilke

The first place I ever lived was a cozy white house, adorned with black shutters. The small yard had three layers of tiered land in the back that formed a wide staircase. During a storm, the overflowing raindrops on those stairs made a waterfall come to life.

Throughout the summer, the grass on each layer was lime green. Perfectly trimmed by Pa, it felt soft. He grew rose vines that flowed up the rocks and gave off the sweet smell of home. Pa had black hair, glasses, and a belly like Santa. He and I would sniff his roses close up and occasionally, he’d let me pick off the brightest, most vivid red ones I could find.

It was a Tuesday, just before sunset. I felt as if Pa and I were the only people in the whole world.

“You’re the Princess up here,” he said, eyes squinting from the sunshine.

The smell of Grammy’s pork chops covered in tomato soup teased our noses, and Pa and I gathered our freshly picked roses before heading inside for dinner. He always reminded me to be careful of the thorns.

*
Mom and Dad were both still in high school when I was born, so I didn’t see a lot of them. They didn’t see a lot of each other either, they stopped dating when I was just a few months old.

Grammy and Pa took care of me most of the time and taught me everything I needed to know: how to get dressed, say the alphabet, and tie my shoelaces. When it came to tying my shoes, I felt like I was trying to learn a different language; but Pa made it simple.

One afternoon, I was sitting on the floor watching television when Pa strolled by me and I inhaled a whiff of Juicy Fruit. He always smelled of sweet Juicy Fruit gum. I stretched my legs out and felt the rug brush against the back of my calves before Pa turned to look at me.

“Where are your sneaks, Ash?” Pa asked.

“I think I left them in your room.”

Pa and Grammy had converted the dining room into their bedroom to make more space when Mom had me. He grabbed my sneakers off the floor, and came back into the living room.

“So are you ready to tie these on your own?”

“I don’t know, Pa. I mess up every time.”

“Come sit with me,” he said.

I hopped up next to him on the couch and he held my shoe in between his knees with one lace in each hand.

“Now you know how to do the first knot, right?”

“Yeah, that’s the easy part.”
“The bow is easy, too. Just watch this.”

He made a loop with each lace and called them bunny ears.

“Now you cross this bunny ear over that bunny ear, and pull one through. Then grab both ears and pull tight.”

He pulled both sides of the laces and they made a bow.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it.”

“Oh, that looked easy. Let me try.”

I put on my shoe, made the first knot, crossed the bunny ears, and was lost again.

“Remember, now pull tight,” he said.

I pulled both bunny ears and started to see a bow form.

If only everything was that easy.

The wooden stairs in our house led to the bedroom Mom, Auntie Pam, and I shared, as well as Uncle Mike’s, across from ours. My room had three twin beds lined up in a row, two windows, a closet, and a dresser. It was kind of like a sleepover every night with Mom and Auntie Pam. Sometimes, I felt like they were my sisters, and I was just another one of Grammy and Pa’s kids. I only saw Mom at night and Dad sometimes on the weekends. Mom and Dad both possess a nice smile, dirty blond hair, and a thick Boston accent.

* 

Grammy and Pa stood at the end of our driveway everyday and waited for me to get home from preschool. The path to our little white house seemed so far away, as I
gazed out the window from the school bus. I couldn’t wait to get there as we turned the
corner onto Rockingham Ave.

“There they are Paula,” I said to my sweet brunette bus driver. I liked to sit in the
first seat and talk to her on the way home. There usually weren’t many kids on the dark
blue mini-bus. It was old, and some days it seemed like the bus wouldn’t make it up the
hill to my house, but it always did.

“They never miss a day,” Paula said as she pulled the lever and opened the door
to the bus for me to jump out.

I waived to Paula and she gave me a wink. Grammy, with her silver hair still in
rollers and Pa, with his glasses on, finishing a cigarette, welcomed me home. I knew they
had just put together a bowl of the juiciest strawberries as an after school snack for me.
They did everyday, sometimes with whipped cream.

“What did you do today?” Pa asked as I hopped off the bus.

“So much, I drew and painted, this one is for you.” I handed Pa my finger-painted
version of the Mona Lisa.

“This is fridge’ material if I’ve ever seen it,” Pa said.

*

One Saturday that winter, Nona, Dad’s mom, was planning to pick me up at
Grammy and Pa’s house. Her short, straight brown hair was always done nicely; her pink
lipstick brought out the topaz blue color in her eyes. Nona and Grammy were very
different women. Nona was a single-working mother of three for most of her life, and
Grammy had five children and was a homemaker for most of hers. One thing they both
had in common was that they seemed to know the answer to everything.
It was almost time for me to leave when I jumped up on Pa’s lap and my eyes started to water.

“Please don’t cry, Ash,” he said.

“But I just want to stay here.”

“Well you’ll get to see your Dad, and it’s just for the night.”

I hugged Pa and hoped that he would let me stay. In the next moment, Nona’s car pulled into the driveway, and she walked inside.

“Why are you crying, sweetheart?” Nona asked as she bent down to look in my eyes.

She and Pa looked at each other.

“It will be fun. We can go shopping,” she said as she lifted me into her arms.

I continued to cry, but after a few minutes in the car, I had calmed down.
Whenever shopping was mentioned, I felt better about leaving home. On the way back to Nona’s house, we stopped at the bakery where she bought me fresh bread. Nona always let me have a slice in the car, and almost made it seem like we were sneaking it, so I would feel special. Then I’d wipe the crumbs off my shirt and say, “Just hiding the evidence.”

That night, Nona made dinner for Dad, Uncle Vinnie, Auntie Crena, me, and Gramps, even though he and Nona had been divorced for years. I liked to hang out in the kitchen with Nona while she was cooking. I told her that she made the best meatballs in the world and Dad agreed.

Once I became accustomed to being with Dad and his side of the family, it was time to go back to Grammy and Pa’s. Mom came to pick me up that Sunday night. It was
freezing outside and my face was so cold that my nose went numb. Each house we drove by had icicles dangling from its rooftop. When we arrived home to Grammy and Pa’s, Mom lifted me out of the car to carry me inside.

As she climbed the icy stairs with me in her arms, Mom lost her balance on the third step. She fell to the left with her right arm around me, but my three-year-old body flung head first into the concrete. She still had me in her grip, and managed to catch herself with her left hand on the railing, so just one side of my face smacked the stair before she pulled me back up into her arms. My face was pouring with blood and tears, and Mom was in a complete panic.

No one else was home, and Mom was too frantic to drive. She brought me inside and called Auntie Paula, one of her older sisters who had already gotten married and moved out of Grammy and Pa’s house. Auntie Paula and Uncle Stevie came over immediately and drove us to the hospital. I was able to go home a few hours later with some stitches.

The Friday after my accident, I was still feeling sore. I still had the stitches in my cheek and some bruises scattered on my face. Uncle Stevie was going to watch me, as he did most nights when Mom, Grammy, and all my Aunts attended Bingo. He let me stay awake extra late and we ate tomatoes covered in mayonnaise, our favorite snack. He would make a great father. I wondered when he and Auntie Paula would have kids.

The tomatoes didn’t taste as sweet that night. It could’ve been because my face hurt while I was chewing.

This was just the beginning of how I learned to heal.
Chapter Three: *Every object that returns to our imagination raises different passions according to the circumstances of their departure.* Richard Steele

The next spring seemed like it would never arrive. I was getting ready for my first vacation to Walt Disney World in honor of Grammy and Pa’s wedding anniversary. I was so eager to get to Disney World that I had a countdown going on a chart similar to an advent calendar I used before Christmas. Usually, Christmas was the event I looked forward to all year, but I’d never had a vacation planned before in my four years of life.

I was nervous about flying on an airplane, but kind of intrigued since I had never done it. Just the idea of being suspended in the air made my stomach uneasy. I was afraid we would crash.

Two days before we left, I woke up with red dots all over my body. Mom said she saw them on my face, too. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I looked in the mirror and saw that she was telling me the truth. We went to the doctor, which always freaked me out. I was mostly nervous about getting shots, blood taken, or having that long Q-tip stuck down my throat.

Fortunately, this exam was rather quick. After Dr. Masucci examined my spots for less than a minute, he knew.

“You have the chicken pox.”

“That’s what’s?” I asked.

“The chicken pox. That’s what those little bumps are called,” he explained.

“We have a trip planned to Florida in a couple of days. Can she go?” Mom asked.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” he said.

My face immediately fell when Mom nodded her head in agreement.
Luckily, for me, Mom decided that I could go anyway. Two sunrises later, spots and all, I traveled to the airport with Mom, Pa, Grammy, Uncle Mike, Auntie Pam, Auntie Paula, Uncle Stevie, Auntie Linda, Uncle Ray, and their son, Raym, for our trip. We looked like a strange version of the Brady Bunch walking to our gate.

I hated all those itchy red bumps all over my body, and loathed the fact that they covered my face. I wanted to punch eyeholes in a paper bag and put it over my head to cover me up, or at least a mask, like the ones you wear on Halloween.

I decided that I wasn’t going to let anything keep me from enjoying the *It’s A Small World* ride that I’d heard so much about. Although it was incredibly hot and thundering every day, and I still looked like a pepperoni pizza, my family and I managed to make it down to the theme park without fail.

Uncle Ray took Raym and me on most of the rides, and I thought about how wonderful it would’ve been if my Dad were there. I envied Raym a little bit for being able to live with his Mom and Dad alone in the same place, never having to leave one house to sleep at another. Then sometimes I felt bad for him, because he didn’t get to live with Pa and Grammy.

* 

A few months after we returned home from vacation, Pa bought us a video game system. Atari was the coolest thing I had ever played with. Pa showed me how to play Pac-man and tons of other games. I couldn’t get enough.

My two favorite past-times became playing Atari and helping my grandmothers cook, maybe because Pac-man was always eating.

*
I turned five the following summer and Mom introduced me to the man she had been dating. Jody was nice enough, but I was a little scared of him the first time we met.

His voice was raspy, and he had scars on his face; the scars looked like layers of pink skin where a mustache and beard would be if he had one, with small penny sized circles scattered throughout. While his left hand and arm looked completely normal, his right hand and arm had the same kind of scars as his face. I had never seen anything like that before.

“Your mom has told me a lot about you. I know that you like ice cream. Black raspberry and Mint Chocolate Chip, right? Do you want to go and get one with me and your mom?” Jody asked.

Raspy voice or not, I couldn’t turn down dessert.

When we went out for ice cream cones, Mom and Jody explained why he was scarred. As a child, he and his family were trapped in a fire. I found out from Mom when I was older that the fire also killed his father and sister, and that one of his younger brothers was the one who started the flame.

The next weekend, Nona brought me over to visit her dad. Grampy was a jolly man with chicken legs, yet a big, round belly and a huge smile.

“There’s my great-granddaughter. I’ve missed you. Come sit on my lap,” he said to me whenever I strolled in the door.

I jumped on him in his big, maroon-leather, reclining chair.

“Will you read me a story?” I asked.

“I sure will. Then, will you read one to me after?”

“Okay, Grampy.”
After reading, we would often go outside and play in his backyard. He liked to cook on his grill and sit in the sun. He put a little plastic kiddie pool in the grass for me to splash in whenever I was there visiting.

*

One night, back at Grammy and Pa’s, while I was playing in the living room, Mom called me into the kitchen. As I walked toward the room, I saw her sitting at the table with Jody, Grammy, and Pa. When did Jody get here? I wondered. I took a few more steps and entered the kitchen.

“Sit down with us, we have something to tell you,” Mom said.

“What is it?”

“Well, Ash, Jody and I have decided to get married.”

“To do what?”

“To get married. Like Auntie Paula and Uncle Stevie, and Auntie Linda and Uncle Ray, did.”

I wasn’t sure what to think.

“Are you excited? We’ll get to move into a new house.”

“A new house?”

I knew that meant we wouldn’t be living with Grammy and Pa anymore.

“Well, it may not be a house, it may be an apartment, but you’ll love it.”

I sensed that whether I wanted this to happen or not, it was going to, so I didn’t say much else. I hated the thought of living without Grammy and Pa, but knew that it was inevitable.

*
The morning of Mom and Jody’s wedding day was rainy. My satin and lace turquoise dress fit me remarkably, and I had my hair up on one side with a flowery clip. Mom said I was being a brat that day.

Mom wore a white gown with lace and pearls, and her veil cascaded down her back, to the floor. The bottom of her dress was so puffy that I could have hid right underneath it. It looked like a big cloud. I wanted to curl up in it and stay there forever.

Everyone was dressed in fancy clothes and wore bright smiles at the church. As I slowly wandered down the aisle with my basket of flower petals, I dropped the petals, one by one, hoping that I could prolong the ceremony. I saw Nona in one of the pews, and handed her a petal. Once I made it to the front of the church, I stood there while Mom married Jody and changed our lives forever.

*

Our new apartment was the bottom floor of an old, two-family, colonial style house. I had my own room there and the whole place to myself, but I didn’t like it. I was scared of sleeping alone and felt so empty without Grammy and Pa around.

Jody took care of me a lot while Mom was at work. It wasn’t the same as being with Pa. One day when Jody was watching me, I was jumping up and down on his and Mom’s bed. I was shocked when he hopped on the bed with me, spread out across it, and started to roll back and forth in between my jumps.

“I’m a steamroller,” he said, “I’m gonna get the Princess!”

Oh, this is way more fun that just jumping alone, I thought.

“No, no, you can’t get me, I am the almighty Princess!” I said playfully.
When I couldn’t jump out of his way anymore, he would tackle me. That was the start of our game, “The Steamroller and the Princess.”

* 

One weekend when I was visiting Dad at Nona’s house, Auntie Crena took me outdoors to play. It was so sunny outside that I had to squint my eyes. Auntie Crena and I played hopscotch and danced around to our own melodies. While we were dancing, she grabbed my hands so that our palms were touching, and swung me around until my feet lifted off the ground. I felt like I was flying.

“Go faster, Auntie, go faster!”

She squeezed my hands more tightly, and bent her elbows so I would get more momentum. She must have pulled my right side harder than my left, because it created enough force to rip the ball of my arm right out of the socket.

A doctor was able to pop my shoulder back into place. It sounded like a rock being crushed by a bulldozer and felt like the doctor shoved a knife into my arm. It may have hurt worse than when my shoulder originally popped out. I wore a sling for a couple of weeks while it healed.
Chapter Four:

This life's dim windows of the soul
Distorts the heavens from pole to pole
And leads you to believe a lie
When you see with, not through, the eye.

William Blake

Mom and I attended a barbeque at her friend’s house on a sunny, blue-sky, day. The grill had been on all afternoon, so you could still smell the charcoal. I’d been playing on the swing set for a while when my shoulders started itching at the straps of my sundress. I should’ve stayed in my pink bathing suit. I had a blast swimming in the pool all day; it was so much better than the public pool we usually went to that was full of kids smaller than me, and their pee.

When Mom said it was time to go, I gave everyone a kiss on the cheek and then realized that I’d forgotten the adorable German Shepard that all the kids and I’d been riding like a pony. He was lying at the bottom of the stairs off the back deck. I held the shaky wooden railing and started to walk down slowly. Mom stood at the top to watch me.

Once I reached the stoop, I leaned toward the dog to give him a kiss. As I bent over, the dog stood on his hind legs and pushed my shoulders back with his front paws. I felt his claws digging into me as my back hit the ground.

“Oh my God, Ashley!” Mom screamed.

The dog kept me pinned while he started to bite my left cheek just below my eye. I didn’t cry or scream. I was scared stiff. My arms and legs felt like they weighed a hundred pounds each.
The sound of Mom’s feet loudly pounding on each step scared the dog off me. She lifted me into her arms, and carried me inside.

“It’s okay, Ash, it’s okay.”

My face was red with blood. Mom covered me in a multi-colored beach towel and tried to console me while her friend called an ambulance.

I can still picture the blue tissue paper the doctors wrapped around my face. It was almost like a cone that veterinarians put on a dog when it comes home after a surgery, only the tissue was around both of my eyes and nose. I was lying in a hospital bed looking at the ceiling that appeared to have a blue rim from the paper.

I had already tried to escape from the nurse once because I was so scared, but made it only about two feet. Mom grabbed me in one quick pull and carried me over to the nurse. The next moment, I was back in the hospital bed with a doctor on one side of me and a nurse on the other. I felt a needle with Novocain prick the skin below my eye, but I could still feel a smaller needle and stitch break my skin again and then flow through the apple of my cheek like it was silk.

Afterward, my cheek felt like it was on fire, my whole body ached, and I was self-conscious about the red scar on my face that was bigger than a quarter from the dog’s bite marks. The next week I found out that the German Shepard who bit me had been put to sleep by its owner. I felt so low. Maybe the dog didn’t mean to bite me, or maybe he was just playing.

Years later, Mom told me the real way that the dog died. Someone had put poison in the dog’s food, and she thought it was my Step-Dad, Jody.

*
Trying to escape from getting stitches in the emergency room was just the beginning of my attempts to omit medical procedures. Up until I was five years old, I’d never entertained a good dental hygiene habit.

It was a clear day outside with lots of sunshine, when the air is so warm it feels like it’s hugging you. Stepping out of the sun was the last thing I wanted to do. I had been dreading this appointment for weeks. After tossing and turning for hours the night before, I fell into a light sleep full of nightmares. I woke up feeling nervous and not at all rested.

The moment I stepped over the threshold, I inhaled the distinct nauseating and pungent scent of the dentist’s office. I’d thought of different excuses that could possibly get me out of this, but nothing seemed good enough.

“Excuse me, Doctor, can I go to the bathroom?” I asked.

“Sure, go ahead.”

I asked to go to the bathroom four more times before the doctor finally refused and said we had to get started. The brown leather chair was smack in the middle of the dentist’s office and much bigger than I was. It had several kinds of tools and hoses attached to it. It looked like an electric chair to me.

I sat in the chair for a second before I felt an overpowering urge to stand up. The nurses had to hold me down while the doctor put a black mask over my nose and lips.

I woke up with a shooting pain in my mouth and tons of cotton. I moved the cotton to one side then ran my tongue along my gums and felt the open spots where five of my teeth used to live. My head felt heavy, my mouth and stomach were throbbing.

I was sore for hours after the surgery and my mouth remained tender for weeks. I made the choice to become an avid brusher.
Soon after I moved out of Grammy and Pa’s, another change came. Mom was pregnant with my baby brother. About a month after Mom found out, Auntie Paula announced that she was finally going to have her first child. I couldn’t believe it when Auntie Linda told everyone that she was pregnant, too, for the second time. It was hormone overload when the three of them were together. Although, it was somewhat funny watching them walk next to each other, fighting over which one had the bigger stomach and the last piece of beef jerky.

My little brother, Joey, was born first in 1989 on January 7th.

“Are you excited about being a big sister, Ash?” Mom asked.

“Yes, can he play?”

“Yes he can, when he’s a little older.”

“How about now?”

“A little bit older than that, sweetie.”

I really was thrilled about being a big sister and helped Mom take care of Joey all the time. She even put his basinet in my room. I was going to be six soon, and so excited to teach Joey everything I knew. Even though Joey and I had different dads, he was still my brother, and he was precious. His blond hair grew in quickly, and his blue eyes got brighter every day.

Auntie Linda and Auntie Paula had two more months of pregnancy to go. Auntie Linda knew she was having a girl and Auntie Paula, a boy. They had already picked out the names, Caitlin and Stephen.

*
When we went over to Grammy and Pa’s to visit, Mom was against the idea of me looking at it, but I did anyway. That hole in his knee looked like a bloody crater about the size of a lemon and a quarter of an inch deep. Pa had developed an open blood clot caused from an ulcer in his leg.

We started to visit Pa more frequently as the crater in his leg grew. He wasn’t able to play with me as much anymore, and he didn’t look the same. He always seemed so tired.

February 18th, 1989, Mom came to pick me up from Nona’s house; she had dyed her hair black. As we drove away, I showed Mom pictures I had drawn for Pa, and we talked about the gift I gave to Dad for his birthday that morning. We pulled into Grammy and Pa’s driveway and Mom took the keys out of the ignition, and just sat there.

“I have to tell you something,” she said.

I knew that when someone told you that they had to tell you something before they actually told you what that something was, that it was important, and most likely bad.

“What?” I asked.

She was silent.

“What, what?” I continued to ask.

“Pa was really sick and he fell to sleep and now his body and soul are in heaven. I’m so sorry, sweetie. I’ve been sitting with the rest of the family all day trying to figure out how to tell you. Even Grammy didn’t know what to do.”

I thought Grammy was supposed to know everything. If they thought about it all day, how did they only come up with this? In the car, in the driveway.
“You’re lying!” I said as I slammed my hands on my thighs and whipped the door open to the car to run into the house. I sprinted into Pa’s room, found it empty, and sat on the floor. Mom said I sat there alone for about an hour crying.

I didn’t know what Heaven was or where it was, but I knew that I had heard of people going there before, and they never came back. I missed him already.

Grammy finally came into Pa’s room and sat down next to me on the floor. She started to sob more hysterically than before. “What are we going to do, Ashley?” Her voice crackled as she tried to talk through her tears. “Our Pa is gone.”

I just sat there, numb. Mom came in behind Grammy, and we all cried together on the ground. Mom and I had both lost a Dad, and Grammy, the love of her life.

I didn’t know what to do. I was never going to see Pa, again. How can that be? I thought. I used to see him everyday. He was my best friend.

Thinking I was too young, Mom decided I shouldn’t go to Pa’s wake and funeral. I was never able to say goodbye to him or hug him one last time. Instead, Nona took me to her house for the day to spend time with Dad. None one of us can remember what we ended up doing that day, but I know that I didn’t get the chance to heal.
Chapter Five: When we encounter the family from the point of view of the soul, accepting it’s shadows and its failure to meet our idealistic expectations, we are faced with mysteries that resist our moralism and sentimentality. Thomas Moore

I never caught strep throat or bronchitis like the other kids in my new first grade class at school, or Joey. However, more often than not, I had a bellyache. At times, I wished I had a head cold instead of having my stomach problem. Everyone had something wrong with them, but I at least wanted to have a problem that could be fixed. Even though I hated the doctor, I wanted him to give me medicine that would allow me to feel relief.

The bellyaches were more than uncomfortable. They took over my entire being, creating a vigorous pain in my stomach and a dull soreness throughout the rest of my flesh and bones. They came over me like a pound of wet concrete, weighing me down and taking all of my energy. Then it seemed, as when concrete hardens, my insides would contract and tighten, causing the pain to increase.

Nothing was worse than how my stomach felt when Pa died, or when someone I loved was being harmed.

I never thought Jody would hurt me, but he did. He started drinking excessively and mistreating Mom. I remember seeing her crouched down with her back to the wall in between the toilet and sink, Jody barely standing on his own, hitting her while she cried. The vision of that bathroom stays in the back of my nightmares.

When Jody came home late after drinking, he and Mom would get into a fight. One night, he came home earlier than usual.
I was supposed to be asleep. Jody and Mom started to argue the moment he sauntered in the door.

“Where’ve you been? You smell,” Mom said with disgust.

“None o’ your business. You writing a book?”

“Fuck you.”

I stood up, ran over to Joey, and grabbed him out of his basinet in the corner of my room. I walked toward Mom with Joey in my arms, and Jody, not seeing us, swung his fist at Mom. He missed her face and punched a whole right through the glass door that separated the living room and their bedroom.

I backed away and the glass shattered, scattering everywhere across the floor. Jody looked at his bloody fist, then the floor sparkling with glass, and stumbled into the bathroom. Crying hysterically, Mom pulled Joey into her arms and checked him for cuts.

“Do you see what you did?” Mom screamed at Jody through the wall.

He didn’t say anything back.

This was not the first time that Jody had swung at Mom, but it was the last. After less than two years of marriage, she filed for a divorce.

*

One change from the end of Mom and Jody’s marriage that I hated was the jump-start of Mom’s new social life. She went out a lot at night. Sometimes, Joey and I stayed with babysitters. The two girls across the street sat for us, Melissa and Julie. They were sisters, and the older one always had friends over after Mom left us alone and the youngest one was always glued to the television, so I usually ended up taking care of Joey and myself.
I walked in on Melissa kissing her boyfriend once in the kitchen. She was sitting on the counter, her boyfriend stood in front of her with his hands intertwined in her brown hair. They didn’t even notice my presence, so I slowly backed out, then yelled for Melissa’s sister, Julie.

“Melissa and her boyfriend have their faces stuck together in there,” I said pointing to the kitchen. Without replying, Julie immediately sprinted into the kitchen to stop the make out session.

I wished Grammy could watch us instead of babysitters. When Grammy had the strength, she always did, but Mom stayed out too late for her most of the time. Plus, Grammy was recovering from her surgery; she’d had a breast removed, and was forced to wear a bra with one boob stuffed. Mom, Joey, and I went over to Grammy’s a lot to help change her bandages and put on her new bra.

“I can’t wait to see your first communion, Ash,” she said to me one day when we stopped by her house. “I’ve been waiting to see this for years.”

Grammy didn’t make it to my communion. She died three days before. We all thought the surgery would fix her and that she would become stronger than the cancer, but with Pa’s death constantly tugging on her heart, she slowly lost the will to fight and eventually, lost the battle.

Mom could see that I was still not over Pa’s death. I didn’t smile as much as I used to or laugh as often. I stayed in bed as long as I could and found it hard to get excited about things.
Mom chose to bring me to Grammy’s funeral and wake, in order to see her again and say goodbye. It wasn’t easy to cope, but going to her wake gave me a chance to see her one last time. I got to memorize her face and touch her hand.

Having Grammy around was the last bit of Pa that I had left. I was shocked and so petrified of what life would be like without them. I felt like a flower that had lost its stem, and I was wilting away.

Grammy and Pa gave me a foundation for life that I wished Joey could have experienced. Desperately trying to find a way to fill that void for him, I felt overwhelmed and incredibly inadequate, and I’d only just turned eight years old.

*

Once I became acclimated to living in our new apartment, Mom said it was time to move again. Our new place was just a few miles away. Just as I was about settled into my new room, Mom told me that we weren’t staying. She said that the man who rented the bottom floor of the house drove into her car, so she wanted to find somewhere else to live.

We stayed with Auntie Pam and Uncle Mike for a few days until Mom discovered another vacancy. The duplex was smaller than where we’d lived previously, so I’d hoped it would feel similar to Grammy and Pa’s house, but without them it still felt bare. I remembered hearing people say at funerals, that only time can help when you lose someone you love. However, I felt that with each passing day, I longed for Pa and Grammy a little bit more.

*
Only a few seasons past before we were on the move again. Number 78, Medford Street was a yellow duplex with brown trim and a small front yard with yellow grass and wildflowers growing along the sides. It was the first three-story apartment that we had ever lived in. The wall-to-wall mauve colored carpet covered most of the first level, and then continued up the stairs and into the two bedrooms, Joey’s and mine, on the second floor.

I couldn’t see into Joey’s room when I was lying in my bed. I could only hear him cry. He cried a lot. He had a hard time going to sleep almost every time he tried. There is one night in particular that I wish I could permanently erase from my memory.

Mom’s new boyfriend, Stephen, was staying with us at the time. Joey started to cry right after Mom tucked us both into bed. With my eyes wide open, all I could see was the dim yellow glare glowing from my night light through the darkness. I wished I could help my brother, but didn’t know what to do.

It felt like Mom was crushing my heart with each step she took down from the third floor to ours. I knew where she was going and what she was going to do. She always walked faster and harder when she was angry.

She stomped into Joey’s room and started yelling, “Stop crying!”

When he didn’t listen, she started smacking him. My body clenched and flinched with each slap on my little baby brother. I closed my eyes and wished that I was somewhere else.

She continued to hit Joey until they were both crying. I heard her step out of his room and yell up the stairs to Stephen.

“Can you come down here for a minute?” she asked.
I knew my brother felt the same as me, sad and helpless, but I didn’t understand why Mom was crying, or why she felt helpless.

“Check his back,” she said to Stephen while she cried.

I couldn’t see her, but I knew she had her hands over her mouth, almost in shock at what she had done.

Several minutes had gone by. Mom composed herself and Joey calmed down.

Until next time.

*

Mom had a few parties at this apartment. One party was so crowded that there were people in the kitchen, living room, and dining room. I could smell alcohol flowing through the air. I felt a little bit uncomfortable around the people I didn’t know. Mom had a lot of friends that were strangers to me.

The music was loud and I started to tap my foot. I noticed Mom standing with one of her girlfriends staring at me, so I stopped. They looked at each other and laughed.

“She’ll do a little foot tap, but that’s it.” Mom said to her friend.

Later that night, when the music stopped and everyone had gone home, I was playing in my room. When I went downstairs to go to the bathroom, Stephen was walking through the house with something that looked like a cigarette, but it wasn’t as big. It smelled funny, too.

“Ash is down here,” Mom yelled to Stephen from the other room.

I used the bathroom quickly and then ran back to my room for the night.

On my way out for school the next morning, I made eye contact with our neighbor. I’d never seen her before, and didn’t ever want to. Did she hear the party last
night? Could she hear Mom hit Joey? I wondered. Our walls seemed to be as thin as saran wrap.

In that moment, I realized how much I missed Grammy and Pa, and wondered if I’d ever stop missing them.
Chapter Six: Real suffering has a face and a smell. It lasts in its most intense form no matter what you drape over it. And it knows your name. Mary Karr

My life had completely changed since my grandparent’s death. I had changed, too. I started to feel emotions I hadn’t experienced before. I felt as though I was missing something, a limb, or a piece of my heart. It was harder to wake up in the morning, knowing that my grandparents wouldn’t be around. All of the warm feelings I used to have had disappeared. More often than not, my stomach ached and a giant knot had formed itself in the back of my throat. As if I’d tried to swallow the pit of a peach and it was lodged in my esophagus. It just wouldn’t budge.

Uncle Mike and Auntie Pam were still living in Grammy and Pa’s house. One morning while I was at school, Mom received a call from Auntie Pam around lunchtime. Auntie Pam let Mom know that she’d stepped over Uncle Mike, passed out on the floor before she left for work several hours ago. She thought he was drunk again.

Mom immediately drove over to check on Uncle Mike and found him in the same spot, lying unconscious in his urine and feces. Mom called an ambulance and he was rushed to the hospital. Uncle Mike’s CAT scan results showed fluid in his brain.

When I went to visit him and saw Uncle Mike in his hospital bed, he was unable to move any part of his body. He was completely paralyzed, except for being able to shift his head from side to side. The doctors diagnosed him with, hydrocephalus, otherwise known as a brain blockage. Once they drained the fluid from his brain, they were able to operate, and implanted a shunt.
The surgery was a success and Uncle Mike seemed okay, until two days later when the shunt stopped working. He was rushed to the hospital again and the doctors performed another surgery.

“How can we be sure that this shunt will work?” Mom asked Uncle Mike’s doctor.

“It’s like a car part. A spark plug. Unfortunately, we can’t tell if it’s going to work until we put it in. I’m very sorry. We will put a pressure unit on the outside of his head so you can tell if it’s functioning properly.”

Luckily, the second shunt did work, and Uncle Mike finally started to feel better. However, he had to go to Spaulding Rehabilitation Center in Boston to relearn everything: how to eat, walk, and talk, as well as many other skills he possessed before. I felt so sad whenever we went to visit him; Uncle Mike behaved like a toddler, but in an adult’s body.

*

It seemed like a blessing when each member of my family was healthy for a short while after that. Then, my cousin, Stephen, came down with the flu. Because of the severe and persisting symptoms, Auntie Paula and Uncle Stevie took him to the hospital to figure out what was going wrong.

After many hours in the emergency room, my Aunt and Uncle found out that Stephen had much more than a case of the flu. The problems were stemming from his liver and needed immediate attention. He had to stay at the hospital over night.
Early the next morning, our phone rang. It was Auntie Paula. She told Mom that Stephen’s health was not improving; in fact, it had gotten significantly worse. His liver was failing and he needed a transplant.

Mom, Joey, and I traveled to visit him. When we walked through the big doors, I inhaled a whiff of hospital air and felt a chill flow down my back. Joey tried to run away from Mom and me whenever one of us became distracted as we meandered through the halls; Joey was constantly mischievous. He finally settled down when we arrived in Stephen’s wing. We saw Uncle Stevie right away.

“Any updates?” Mom asked him.

“Not yet. You guys can go see him if you want,” Uncle Stevie said.

I hesitated for a minute, and then followed Mom into Stephen’s hospital room. He was in a bed that looked like an incubator where they put premature babies, only it was bigger. His frail body looked smaller than normal and his face was spotted with blue pigment from the fluids his liver was unable to process. Hooked up to more than one machine, with an IV in his arm, he looked like an old man in a child’s body.

The next afternoon, Auntie Paula called Mom again and said that they had found an organ donor. The eight-hour surgery was going to take place that night; she’d call back when it was over.

Her next phone call was not as pleasant. Once it came time for the surgery, the doctors were unable to perform it because the donated liver came from a man who was an alcoholic.
We couldn’t believe it when another liver became available several hours after the time the first surgery was scheduled to happen. The liver belonged to a woman on the west coast, but could be flown in. We had hope that Stephen was going to be saved.

When the liver arrived the next day, it was too big for Stephen’s little body. The organ donor was obese, and we were back to square one.

A few days later, unable to find a donor, Stephen passed away from Hepatitis B. He was just three years old, the same age as Joey at the time.

It seemed as if my tears wouldn’t stop. The salty tears continued to flow out of my eyes like water from a faucet that never turns off. Finding closure is difficult when so many things are left undone.

Stephen’s funeral was unsettling and dismal. The casket was small, just big enough for a child. Looking at it made me shiver, but not just the kind of shiver that makes your body shake when you feel cold. It was an incessant shiver, the type you can feel inside your bones. As if something in your body is off-kilter and from your head to your toes, you can tell.

As I watched Auntie Paula stroke the top of the casket before it was lowered into the ground, I felt my insides flip-flop like a pancake being tossed in a pan. I didn’t understand how someone so young could have lost his life already. I wanted to know why.

Everyone that attended the funeral was handed a balloon outside. After Stephen was buried, we all released the balloons at once and watched them float into the atmosphere. They flew higher and higher until they looked like gumballs drifting among the clouds.
After that day, every time Joey caught a cold, my heart broke a little bit more inside, as I was scared of losing him, too. Whenever anyone that I knew became sick, I would expect the worst. Why do you lose people you love? I thought. Was there anything I could’ve done? I wanted to build a huge bubble to put myself and everyone I loved inside.

Two weeks after Stephen passed away, I was downstairs at Auntie Linda and Uncle Ray’s apartment. Auntie Paula and Uncle Stevie were visiting, too. We were all planning to have dinner together.

The kitchen had a big picture window that let the light flood in, but that day it was dark. Normally, my Aunts never stopped talking to each other, but they didn’t have much to say that afternoon. All I could hear was the noise emulating from the talk show on the TV.

The news came on after the show was over and announced the decision from a recent courtroom trial. The case involved a month old baby who had passed away. The judge ordered that the baby’s organs not be donated, even though they were in perfect shape. Immediately after hearing that, Auntie Paula punched the TV screen and the glass scattered throughout the room.

Later that year, a vaccine for Hepatitis B was introduced and given to all newborn babies. The vaccine was originally created in 1986; however, prior to 1991, it was only recommended to people that had a high risk for acquiring the infection.
Chapter Seven:

*Cheerfulness, it would appear, is a matter which depends fully as much on the state of things within as on the state of things without and around us.* Charlotte Bronte

Our next move was to 50 Medford Street, just two blocks away from our old apartment. The green, two-family house had a huge backyard. Auntie Linda, Uncle Ray, Raym, and Caitlin lived on the first floor, so at least we knew our neighbors. They went out a lot, though. They were a pack, a unit. They were the, “Bensons.” Mom, Joey, and I didn’t even have the same last names. I was always jealous when I heard their car leaving the driveway, envious of the restaurant they would eat at, or the store they would shop in; they even bowled and played video games at the arcade.

I knew they had more money than we did and thought that made them better than us. One time when Mom, Joey, and I trekked downstairs to borrow something from Auntie Linda, Uncle Ray was outraged.

“What do you need now?” Uncle Ray asked the moment we walked in the door.

“Just to borrow a few things,” Mom said.

He mumbled under his breath. Auntie Linda sat in silence. Mom took what she needed from their food pantry and as we stepped out the door, Uncle Ray yelled to her, “You welfare bitch,” in front of everyone.

I felt inferior to them before, but after that, I really felt like an outsider. I didn’t understand why Uncle Ray was so enraged with Mom, and never found out.

*
Living above our cousins almost always ensured a playmate for Joey and me. Raym and I were only one year apart; Joey and Caitlin were the same age. Raym didn’t think I was very cool, but still let me play with him. He hung around with a girl named Diane, a tall and pretty brunette. She could beat any boy in the neighborhood at a game of kick-ball. I wasn’t really good at sports like Raym or Diane, but thought if I could get better, that it might help me fit in a little more, instead of feeling like an outcast.

On the weekends, Dad taught me everything I needed to know about athletics and outdoor activities. Sports became our, “thing.” We even went camping sometimes with my second cousin, Matt, who felt more like a brother. He was always hanging out with Dad and me.

Dad signed me up for Little League Baseball, but I was bored and quit after the first game. What’s the point of standing in the outfield? None of the kids could hit the ball that far yet, I thought. I tried playing basketball, but was way too short. The other girls could dribble around me with their eyes shut.

With Dad’s help, I found figure skating, which I loved and stuck with. Skating ended up becoming my favorite and most passionate past time. On the ice, I couldn’t feel the knot in the back of my throat. I fell in love with the sound the edge of the blade made as it curved into the ice. I longed to be the first to glide across the newly made ice surface. I dreamt about skating with my eyes closed, feeling the breeze carry my hair.

The faint blue color of the ice made the rink so bright. The lights reflected off it, glimmering into the shadows of the bleachers. The first time I stepped onto the ice, I made Dad hold my hand. By the end of my first hour, I was stroking around the arena as if I was training for the Olympics. The next four or five times to the rink began the same
way, with Dad in hand. After a few minutes, I’d get up the courage to skate on my own. Something about the ice always scared, but thrilled me.

* 

Back at home, Raym was watching a movie in our apartment with Joey, Mom, and me. I usually tried to stay awake when we had company, but my eyelids were getting heavy. I decided to turn in.

The creaky wooden stairs that led up to my bedroom seemed to get longer each time I climbed them. My dark and narrow room, the only one on the third floor, ran the entire length of the house with one window on each end. It was almost like a tunnel, with two spots of light opening and closing it. The ceilings were low and felt like they might close in on me at any time. The worn and lightly stained blue rug must have been there for years. The faint smell of dust coming off it reminded me that the room used to be an attic.

I was almost asleep when I heard a screeching noise. It didn’t sound like a crick or creek that could have come from the house. It was too loud. Then I saw something fly over my head and land on my wall.

I stood and stared at it in wonderment for a moment, then opened my mouth and let out a huge scream. I proceeded to run through my room and then downstairs, all the while screaming continuously like McCauly Culkin in the Home Alone movie.

“There is a scary bird in my room!” I shouted.

Mom proceeded upstairs to investigate and immediately came back down, screaming herself.

“That is not a bird. That is a bat,” she yelled.
My body quivered, and we all ran down to the first floor to wake up Uncle Ray. He came upstairs and trapped the bat between two tennis rackets, while we watched in fear and awe.

He showed us the hissing creature through the small grates of the rackets before he let it lose into the night sky. It took a few days before I was comfortable sleeping in my room again. Raym had told me that the bat wanted to dig a hole in my head and nest there. For the longest time, I wore a hat at night, just in case.

Bats always freaked me out, but I adored all other animals. I even had pet mice once. Well, it started as one mouse. I picked out the one I thought would be the most loveable. She had black and white soft fur, long whiskers, and something else we didn’t know about, babies. My mouse was pregnant when we brought her home. Oops.

She ended up giving birth to eleven baby mice. They were adorable. Most of them were all white, but some of them had specs of black, making them look like they had been rolling around in soot. I kept my mice in a plastic hamster cage with a handle on top. I would take each mouse out of the cage, one at a time, to hold and pet. I loved taking care of them and watching them run around their little world surrounded by plastic and wood shavings. It seemed so wonderfully simple to me.

I’d previously owned a guinea pig and several hamsters, but I became especially attached to the mice. Mom didn’t like them very much. She thought their eyes were scary and beady, and was afraid that they would get out of their cage.

One cold morning, I was rushing out the front door for school, when I stopped immediately over the threshold, my arm propping open the screen. There, on the porch outside, were my mice. Mom had left them there overnight, and they were each frozen
solid, in a different position. One was upright, with his paw extended, as if he were waving; another looked like she was in mid-step. I immediately grabbed them and ran back upstairs to confront Mom. I put their cage on the table, looked at her, and felt my eyes fill up.

“How could you leave them outside all night?” I asked her.

“I’m so sorry. I, I didn’t mean it. I must have forgotten about them.”

I didn’t get another pet for a while.

*

Later that week, Mom said that she had tickets for the circus. Joey and I were ecstatic. A few hours before it was time to leave, I couldn’t find anything to wear that was clean and presentable. Since we didn’t go out often, I wanted to look special.

I sat on the couch with my arms folded and Mom started yelling at me. Her voice became louder, and when her face began to turn red, I got the feeling that I knew what was going to come next. She reminded me of a boiling teakettle on the stove, fuming and ready to burst. I ran away from her and she started to chase me.


Once I reached the staircase that led to my bedroom, I climbed each stair faster than I ever had before. I clenched the railing and used my arms to pull me up quicker when I heard Mom behind me. I got to the top and sprinted toward my bed.

“Where are you gonna go now, you little bitch?” she said.

I hid under the covers, but she pulled them off me. She ripped off my pants and underwear and proceeded to wail on my back and bottom. What happened next is blurry.
A misty image in my mind that longs to stay covered. My memory skips a beat, like a broken record.
Chapter Eight:

The woods are lovely, dark and deep.
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

After Grammy and Pa’s house finally sold, Auntie Pam got her own apartment, but Uncle Mike had to move in with Auntie Linda and Uncle Ray, downstairs from us. Uncle Mike had been drinking a lot, and one night had way too much. Our house was quiet, with everyone in bed, when Mom heard sirens right outside our window. I heard them too, and peering through the glass of my window, I saw Uncle Mike on a stretcher.

The EMT told Mom that they found him passed out in the gutter. Someone had seen him when driving by, and called 911. Uncle Mike’s face was cut and bruised and he was unconscious. The EMT’s were able to wake him up and treat him right there in the driveway. After they completed their tests and administered medicine, Uncle Mike was escorted into Auntie Linda’s apartment and fell right to sleep.

*  

When I went to see Dad on the weekend, Joey was supposed to be visiting with his dad, too. Mom told me that sometimes Jody would say he was going to come and get Joey, but then he wouldn’t show up. Joey would sit on the couch, staring out the window, waiting for Jody to pull into the driveway.

Whenever Jody actually did keep his word, Joey was on cloud nine. His face would become bright and his smile grew big when Jody walked through our door.
would run to Jody with his arms open, and Jody would lift him high and swing him around in a circle.

“We are going to a wrestling match today, and then to see the Monster Trucks tomorrow. Are you pumped?” Jody once said to Joey.

“Cool. I can’t wait.”

Jody grabbed Joey’s things and the two of them left in a hurry. A few minutes later, I heard a scream outside. I recognized that screech. It was Joey. I sprinted to the window and saw Jody running around the outside of his car to the passenger door. Mom stood right behind me, staring at them through the glass.

“Let’s go down there,” she said to me.

Once we got downstairs, Jody told us what happened.

“He didn’t shut the car door all the way. When I started to pull out of the driveway, the door swung open. His right leg flung out, and when the car door slammed shut, it closed his leg in.”

“I’ll call an ambulance,” Mom said.

“No, I think it will be faster if I just take him there right now. Get in.”

Joey ended up with a huge cast on his entire leg. He broke his shinbone, or tibia, one of the larger bones in his leg that connects the knee to the anklebone, as well as his femur, or thighbone, the most proximal bone of the leg. Joey had to stay overnight in the hospital and would have to attend physical therapy for almost twenty weeks when he was released.

*
At Nona’s house later that weekend, Dad said that he had to talk to me about something. I’d only seen Nona for a second earlier that day, and had a gut feeling that something was wrong.

We sat down on the plush, tan sofa and I could smell Nona’s perfume lingering in the air. Dad’s voice was soft. He explained that Grampy had gotten sick, and went to heaven, but that he was in a better place. How could heaven be a better place if he’s not with his family? I thought.

Grampy’s death lodged a new knot in my throat. Having already lost Pa, Grammy, and Stephen made this much harder to handle. I wouldn’t be able to go read stories with Grampy or visit him with Nona anymore. I started to think that something was wrong with me. Why was I losing so many people that I loved?

Nona couldn’t stop her tears at the funeral. She said that Grampy was a fantastic father and that she missed his voice already. I missed it, too. Grampy’s wife, Nana, didn’t say much at all during the services, just gazed into the open air. Without Grampy, Nana fell cold. She was like a clock that stopped ticking, as if Grampy were the batteries that kept her running.

*

Dad wanted to cheer me up after Grampy’s services, so he took my cousin, Matt, and me to a campground in New Hampshire. We had to drive for hours on the Kangamangas Highway. I was glued to my Nintendo Gameboy, passing the time, trying not to think too much.

“Ash, look at the foliage. It’s beautiful,” Dad said to me.

“What’s foliage?” I asked.
“The leaves, on the trees. People vacation here just to look at the leaves changing color.”

When I glanced away from my portable video game, I noticed the gorgeous shades of amber, maroon, and sun kissed orange that graced the tops of the trees. We passed a lake, and I fell in love with the sight of sunshine on rippled water. It seemed as though diamonds were floating on the surface. Dad was right, but I never let him know that I liked the view.

When we arrived at the campsite, I helped Dad and Matt set up the tent even though I was hesitant about sleeping outside. We moseyed to the lodge for dinner and then stayed to play bingo after. The prizes were candy bars instead of money. I ended up winning the last game, the jackpot game. My prize was about forty bars of candy. I was in sugar heaven. All of the kids that didn’t win anything crowded around me in awe of it all. I let them all take one and still had plenty left over for myself. I pondered the concept of sharing. Why do some people find it to be difficult? How can they keep a surplus, knowing that others around them have nothing?

Because Matt teased me and said that bears would smell all the sweetness and break into our tent, I ended up getting rid of the rest of my treats in the girl’s bathroom.

When Dad dropped me off at home that weekend, I missed him before he’d even said goodbye to me. Once the door shut behind him, I ran up to my room so I could see him getting in his car through the window. I wanted to keep him in sight as long as possible. I sat on the floor, gripping the windowpane as I watched him drive away. The knot in the back of my throat grew, and my eyes overflowed and shed tears.

*
Each year at my Catholic school, the students performed a play for the holidays. I always wanted to be Mary, but usually ended up with the privilege of playing the Christmas tree. In third grade, I was an angel, which I considered a step up. One of my only good friends, Kim, was an angel, too. Kim was a feisty red headed girl, the same age as me.

When I entered fourth grade, I finally got the chance to play the part of Mary in the school play. Every rehearsal went by faster that year, and the night of the show had so much more sparkle. The thrill of being on stage was breathtaking. I loved the idea of being someone else for a night. I could feel the excitement all the way from my toes to the tips of my hair.

Being on stage was almost like being in a movie. Nona was a big movie fan and had a huge collection of VHS’s. I wanted to play the starring role in all the ones that ended happily. When I went to Nona’s on the weekends to visit Dad, we always watched at least one video. I had my own collection in the bottom two rows of her wooden bookshelf. It consisted mostly of Disney movies, Warner Brother’s classics, and recorded episodes of my favorite television shows.

I spent many mornings lying with my belly on the floor, elbows bent and fists propping up my chin, trying to decide what to watch while the house was still quiet. I hated scary movies, so those were easy to rule out. I was even afraid to watch the music video for Michael Jackson’s hit song, Thriller.

I was passionate about music, just not about some of the videos. I didn’t want to watch anything that scared me. I didn’t understand why people liked to watch violence on television or horror movies. I already had images in my head that I wanted to be rid of,
like watching Mom or Joey get hit. Why would I want to see other things that would
tantalize me, even if they weren’t real?

Music and I were a better match. I loved to listen to Michael Jackson and Whitney
Houston. I knew the lyrics to “Billie Jean” and “The Greatest Love of All” when I was
still sitting in a high chair. I had a fantastic record collection and a Care Bear, travel box
to carry around my 45’s. I even had one, silver glove that I wore on my right hand to
mimic Michael J.

After dinner at Nona’s house, I would jump up on the table and perform skits for
my family’s entertainment. I made up the skits as I went along, and thrived on my
families smiling faces. I’d even act out scenes from movies or television shows, tell jokes
like I was a standup comic, or belt out songs using a gravy spoon as a pretend
microphone. My family would encourage me and seemed to enjoy it, so I’d always ham it
up.

Whether I was on my family’s kitchen table or the stage in the auditorium, acting
like another person made me feel carefree. It was completely different from being in my
school classroom where I had to be myself. Mom was able to get my tuition paid for by
the state. The only affect it had on me was the free lunch I had to accept everyday.
Standing in the free lunch line with a blue tray in hand was almost like waiting in line for
a punishment.

The food tasted like rubber and gave me a stomachache. My belly hurting wasn’t
as bad as absorbing the looks of my peers who understood what getting free lunch meant.
The lines in the cafeteria at my school were class definers for elementary school students.
I envied the brown bags my peers carried. I’d have even taken a lunch box. Anything was better than the blue tray.

I never complained to Mom about it. We barely had enough to eat in our house, so I didn’t want to stress her out anymore. She was always worried about having enough. Sometimes Auntie Paula would come over with groceries when our cupboards were completely bare.

Once, Joey and I were helping Mom bring in groceries when he was about four years old. He grabbed a gallon of milk out of Mom’s car and started to walk inside. He made it up the stairs, through the living room, and into the kitchen. When he was just about to get to the refrigerator, he dropped the milk and it exploded on the tiles, leaking white everywhere, almost emptying the gallon. Mom’s face became cherry red.

“What were you thinking?” she said to Joey.

He stood still and was silent.

“Now we have no milk because of you. Go to your room.”

“No. I don’t want to.”

“I don’t care,” she said as she grabbed his arm, slapped him, and dragged him into his room.

I could hear Mom smacking his bare skin while he cried. My eyes filled with tears, too, as I started to clean up the floor, wishing I were the one who had made the mess. I always wanted to be able to help Joey when Mom was hitting him. One time, I thought I had the opportunity.
I was sitting in a daze in the living room on our gray couch with my legs stretched out. I heard Mom come thrashing out of her room. I sat up and pulled my knees into my chest. She went into Joey’s room and started shouting at him.

The doorbell rang, and Mom immediately walked downstairs to our front door. The moment that she was half-way down the stairs, I quietly crept into Joey’s room.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said.

“Put your pajamas back on and get into bed.”

I stepped down a few stairs as Mom was on her way up.

“Ahh, who was that?” I said nervously, trying to distract her.

“No one, it’s time for bed. Get ready and I’ll tuck you in.”

Luckily, whoever was at the door diverted her anger for the night.

When Joey turned six, he chose a favorite song.

“Take me to the place I love,” he would sing while he slammed his matchbox cars together with full force.

I wanted to take him away. Anywhere that he loved, anywhere he couldn’t get hurt anymore.

*

Auntie Crena was an actress and I thought that was amazing. She would always sing to me and act out different skits from my bedtime stories when I went to visit Dad on the weekend.

Without much notice, Auntie Crena decided to pack all of her belongings and moved to California to pursue her dream of becoming an entertainer. I knew she would
come back and visit, but still felt dejected. Why does this keep happening? I thought. Why do I keep losing people in my life?

Nona and Dad wanted to lift my spirits, so they bought tickets for us to meet Jodie Sweetin, star of the sitcom, Full House. She was going to be signing autographs at the World Trade Center in Boston. I couldn’t wait. I’d written letters to her before and loved her character on the television show. I wondered if she saw my special stamp when she received the letters. Before mailing an envelope, I would always bite the top, leaving my teeth imprinted on the paper. I’m not sure why, but I did this to every envelope I mailed.

Nona took me shopping the day before to get a new outfit. We went to Jordan Marsh and Nona told me her rules for shopping.

“You don’t want to go to Sparks where your Mom and her sisters shop, those aren’t quality clothes and that store is on the same level with K-Mart. It’s okay to go to JC Penney and Sears, those are the next level up. If you can, you want to shop at Jordan Marsh or Lord and Taylor. Those are the best ones. Don’t go to Needless Markup (she was referring to Neiman Marcus) those clothes are just way too expensive.”

After we browsed through the girls clothing section for a while, she had her arms full and wanted to get everything.

“No Non, it’s okay, just one outfit,” I said.

“Even when you were two years old, you would hold dresses up to your body in the store and try to choose between the two you liked best, which would make me want to buy you both even if I could only afford one,” she said. “I spoil you because you are not a spoiled brat, Ash. Let me buy it all.”

“No really, Non, it’s ok, I just need one outfit for tomorrow.”
We ended up getting almost everything she picked out. She wasn’t easy to argue with, but the outfit I had for the next day was fabulous. It was a gray short set with teal scrunched bits of material around the straps at the top.

The next morning, I carefully stepped into the outfit, right foot, and then left. I pulled the straps up slowly and rested them on my shoulders. I’d pressed the teal material around the shoulder straps to make sure they didn’t look wrinkled.

I’d French-braided my hair, and while I was lacing up my white sneakers I thought about what it would be like to live in Jodie’s shoes, to be adored by tons of fans and autograph photos for them that they’d cherish forever. I bet she didn’t even have to go to school. I pondered living the life of a television star and basked in the image of me lying on the couch in my dressing room with endless amounts of money, food, and clothes.

I arrived at the World Trade Center with Dad, Nona, and gifts for Jodie. Nona and I had picked out a dozen red roses and a bag of Guatemalan “worry babies,” to give to her.

Nona had bought me my own “worry babies” because I worried about everything: Mom, Joey, Dad, my friends. I thought that the “worry babies” would be the ideal gift for Jodie considering the pressure of being a child star and working on television. Although, I would have gladly switched lives with Jodie, her stresses didn’t seem bad to me at all, and I bet she always had enough money for everything that she needed.

Still the “worry babies” or “worry dolls” seemed like a good, thoughtful gift. They looked like short thick toothpicks with faces. They had tiny woven fabric dresses on
the girl babies and the boys wore even smaller shirts and pants to match. About six dolls were encased in a small fabric bag with a little piece of paper inside that said:

WORRY DOLL LEGEND - There is a legend amongst the Highland Indian villages of Guatemala: "If you have a problem, then share it with a worry doll. Before going to bed, tell one worry to each doll, then place them beneath your pillow. Whilst you sleep, the dolls will take your worries away!"

It seemed as though it took forever to meet Jodie. After about three hours, the line hadn’t moved much. Dad and Nona were thinking about leaving, “worry babies” and all.

“You know you look like her,” one of the women standing in line in front of us said.

“I do,” I said, shocked, “Thank you.”

I couldn’t believe someone thought I looked like Jodie Sweetin. She was so pretty, blonde, and had nice teeth. I didn’t think I had any of those characteristics.

Shortly, the line started moving and finally, Jodie was in sight! I couldn’t hold in my excitement and began fidgeting uncontrollably. There were three people in front of us, then two. After she finished her next autograph, Jodie stood up, and started to walk away from the table about twenty feet from me.

“Oh no, what is she doing?” I asked Dad anxiously, raising my eyebrows.

He wasn’t sure, and looked concerned. I prayed that we still had a chance to meet her. A tall woman wearing a pin-stripe suit made her way over to where we stood waiting in line and made an announcement. I was nervous. I thought she was going to let us know that Jodie was done autographing for the day and heading back to sunny California.

“Jodie is going to the restroom. She will be right back,” she said.
I felt like I was about to open a giant present. In next to no time, Jodie returned. She didn’t take much longer than a normal person to use the bathroom. She sat down and proceeded to sign pictures, cards, and other miscellaneous items.

Then, it was my turn. I was shaking. I watched her on television at least once a week and felt like I knew her, yet I was so nervous about talking to her. The girl before me in line left with her signed photo, and I walked up to Jodie.

“Hi,” I said. “I brought you a gift.” I passed her the roses and didn’t give her the “worry babies.” No one else was giving her anything, so I felt weird presenting her with the flowers anyway, never mind an additional gift. Not to mention that the additional gift had a lot of meaning to me, and I hadn’t even met her before. I decided to save the “worry babies,” and tucked them back into my pocket.

Jodie was amiable and thanked me more than once for the flowers. She gave me an 8X10 picture of her, and she signed it, “Thanx, Jodie Sweetin.”

I was so excited for the rest of the day, week, even month. Every time I saw Full House on television after that, I would say, “I met her!” I framed the picture Nona took of Jodie and me while I was talking to her.

My spirits were higher after meeting Jodie. The excitement lasted for a few weeks; but I didn’t realize that it was only masking negative emotions I hadn’t dealt with yet.
Chapter Nine:

_The great events of life often leave one unmoved; they pass out of consciousness, and, when one thinks of them, become unreal. Even the scarlet flowers of passion seem to grow in the same meadow as the poppies of oblivion._ Oscar Wilde

A male teenager was shot a few feet away from my school toward the end of my fourth grade year. I don’t remember hearing it. It happened in the recess yard, which was a slab of concrete about the size of a basketball court in front of my rectangular, brick school. Consequently, Mom made a decision that changed our lives. She announced that we were going to move to Andover, a small town about thirty minutes north.

Mom had been dating a guy named, Dave, for a while. I didn’t like him at all. I’m not sure what originally constituted my negative feelings toward him. I can’t remember clearly, but something about him made my skin crawl. He was tall, with straight, blond hair and a long chin. I can picture his face vividly in my mind, but find it hard to recall time spent with him. As much as I try, my memory begs me not to, and blocks any recollection with black.

I do remember one of the last days I saw Dave. Mom was having a yard sale to earn some extra cash for our move. I helped her and Dave bring the items outside and customers started flowing in before we had even set everything up.

“Well’ve been selling a lot today, Ash,” Mom said.

Dave must not have thought we’d made enough money, because he decided to sell some of our belongings that weren’t for sale, including my bed and dresser. It was the
first matching set I’d ever owned. Both pieces were made of white wood with light gold trim. I wanted to cry when a stranger lugged the set away for pennies.

“I’ll get you new stuff. I promise,” Mom said.

“How?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

I slept on a mattress for a while, and kept clothes packed in boxes. I didn’t have much clothing anyway because I had to wear a uniform to school. Each year Mom would purchase two of the hideous, navy and yellow, plaid jumpers and five of the light-blue-collared shirts for me. They wore out quickly.

Eventually, Mom kept her promise and came through for me with a new cherry oak bedroom set. The bed had a canopy, and the dresser and desk had gold handles. The furniture was lovely, but I longed for my old set, I thought it might keep me connected to my old apartment somehow.

*

I didn’t want to leave my hometown of Malden, but I began to realize that I would have no choice. The day we moved was dreary and stormy. Before we left for good, I sat on my floor, touching it, and crying. Gazing out the window, I heard raindrops hitting the glass and I felt like the world was crying with me.

The first time we pulled onto our new street Mom turned the radio down all the way. The sun had finally shown itself and all I could hear was the sound of the tires rolling along the pavement and an occasional squeak of the brakes. There was no city traffic, no horns beeping or sirens, just silence.
Brookside Estates was the name of our new apartment complex. It was deceivingly tranquil and classy at first glance. The perfectly cut green grass, fresh mulch, and blooming tulips along the sidewalks created a beautiful foreground for the light-blue buildings.

I couldn’t believe that Brookside had a pool and tennis court. It had two parks, one bigger than the other, which I came to find out were named “The Big Park” and “The Little Park.”

We were randomly assigned to a handicapped accessible apartment. Because Mom received money from the government to help us pay rent, we weren’t allowed to object. The apartment had yucky brown, flat carpets and two bathrooms right next to each other. One bathroom was bigger than the other was, and had a silver bar next to the toilet and a tub instead of a one-person shower. We decided to call them, “The Big Bathroom” and “The Little Bathroom.”

Even though we were in the same state, Andover felt like another world. The streets were free of empty beer cans and plastic bags. Even the air smelled cleaner. There were more houses than businesses, and the people were different. They dressed with more class and annunciated every syllable when they spoke. A “cah” was now called a “car.” The word, “wicked” had a different meaning. I thought I was an outsider before, but in Andover, I felt like an alien.

I was a city girl in a rich rural town, approaching my awkward teenage years. I had no sense of style and a pair of bright blue glasses with lenses thicker than the frames. It was a recipe for trouble.
I thought my social status was safe from exposure entering my new school. I had learned to make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and started packing my own lunch. I would not be standing in any free lunch lines in Andover. I didn’t know that my fifth grade classmates couldn’t care less about what people ate, but paid a lot of attention to what they wore. I didn’t have the slightest idea about what was appropriate to wear to a public school.

Besides a couple of old catholic school uniforms, my wardrobe consisted of one particularly hideous purple shirt with a matching vest, a pair of black denim pants, a few t-shirts, and stretchy pants. I felt like Steve Urkel, on a good day, around the girls in my class. Their white sneakers were still white, even on the top where mine had brown stains from dirt. Their hair was always done nicely with a barrette or stylish clip; I bet their moms fixed their hair. I let Mom do my hair once, for my pre-school picture. She crimped my inch long hair until it stood up as if I had been struck by lightning. I never let her near my head again.

The girls at school didn’t make fun of me to my face, but I figured that they talked about me when I wasn’t around. They had to. I was a mess. My clothes were old and cheap, my hair always frazzled.

Joey started school in Andover, although it didn’t go very well. During Mom’s first meeting with his teacher, she told Mom that Joey needed therapy. She added, that if Mom didn’t get him professional help soon, that he’d become a juvenile delinquent.

During Joey’s first counseling appointment, he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder and prescribed Riddelin to take on a daily basis.

*
One day, Auntie Pam and her sister-in-law, Estelle, came over to dye Mom’s hair. Mom was always dying her hair. She used to joke with me that she didn’t remember her original color.

Mom had large facial features and was very pretty; except when she was yelling. She was a horrible speller and said the word “ain’t” all the time, and I hated that. Sometimes she acted differently when we had guests; her voice was sweeter; she’d say “yes,” more than she’d say “no,” and she’d always wear a smile on her face.

Mom liked to make tea for visitors. I never drank tea; I thought it tasted disgustingly similar to medicine. I loved the sweet smell of it though, and I would have consumed an entire pot that day if it would’ve made our guests stay longer.

Mom, Auntie Pam, Estelle, and I were sitting around our dining room table. It was the first piece of nice furniture we had acquired since we moved out of Grammy and Pa’s house. The table sat four people and had white legs; the surface was a light oak wood. It took up the entire dining room.

I could see Joey’s room from where I was sitting. The floor was covered with Lego’s and baseball cards; the bed was unmade. Joey had a lot of wrestling posters, monster trucks, and toy cars. He used a Hulk-Hogan doll for a throw pillow that was almost as big as he was. At six years old, Joey was about four feet tall, with blond hair the color of sunshine, and the brightest, mischievous, baby blue eyes around.

It was the beginning of summertime and Joey had seen some trouble to get into. He was acting up and had been very rambunctious that day after getting his first whiffs of the summer air. Mom had a short fuse when it came to Joey. She wasn’t as bad tempered with me. Maybe because I tried hard to keep any extra heat away from the ever-burning
ambers of Mom’s temper. I don’t remember exactly what Joey did to make her mad that
day, but I do remember the punishment he received for it. It could’ve been the time he
pulled the fire alarm in our building, and got busted because of the blue liquid that
sprayed out of it and onto his shirt. Or the time he set seven feet of the woods on fire
playing with a match.

Mom had gotten up from the table, where I sat with Auntie Pam and Estelle while
they sipped their tea, to reprimand Joey. She came back into the room dragging him by
the elbow.

“You’re in big trouble!” she said.

She took him directly into his room across from the dining room table where I sat
in fear, motionless and helpless. Auntie Pam and Estelle just sat there, too, but I hoped
they would do or say something. Mom slammed the door to Joey’s room. I heard her
smack him, hard, and he started to cry. I heard her strike his bare skin again. Crack.

I stared at the wall. My fists clenched and my throat tightened. I wished I could
knock down the wall and save my brother.

The world outside of Joey’s bedroom seemed to stop just then. Auntie Pam,
Estelle, and I were quiet.

“Say you’re sorry,” Mom yelled.

“No!”

She hit him again, and my whole body went stiff.

“Say you’re sorry!”

“No!” he said, and she continued to smack him.
Estelle stood up, grabbed her things, and began walking quickly to the door. She looked at Auntie Pam who was still sitting in her chair, and said, “I can’t listen to this.”

I said nothing, but in my head, I was begging them to stay. Mom didn’t usually hit Joey when other people were around. I’m not sure what was different about that day. Auntie Pam couldn’t blame Estelle for wanting to leave; neither could I. Auntie reached for her keys and my heart sank to my feet. She threw her purse over her shoulder, gave me a hug and kiss, and walked out the door with Estelle.

I listen to this all the time, I thought. If an adult can’t bear to hear it, then why do I have to? I was constantly cogitating on the effects it was having on my growing brother and how Mom could love us so much, but hurt us so badly.

* 

Some of the anger I had toward Mom reflected on Joey. He was always trying to annoy me, and it usually worked, especially when he drowned my new pet hermit crab in apple juice.

One of his pranks really shocked me, and I lost my temper. He put on a mask that the murderer in the scary movie, Scream, wore and knocked on our front door when he knew I was home alone. The mask had a black hood and a white elongated face with an “O” shaped mouth. When I looked through the peephole and saw him, I was so petrified that I screamed aloud. He whipped the door open and had a kitchen knife in his hand. Once I saw that it was his body, I grabbed the knife from him, and squeezed his lower arm near his wrist. He laughed.

“If you ever wear this mask to scare me again, I’m going to kill you!” I said, still clenching his wrist.
He didn’t respond. I felt anger vibrating through my arm as my grip got tighter. Then I realized what I was doing, let go of his arm, and ran into my room. I was disgusted with myself. I couldn’t help but cry. I wanted to beat myself for yelling at him like that and squeezing his wrist. I was livid with him for wearing that mask, but I knew it gave me no right to lay a finger on him. I was wrong and disappointed in myself. I never let my temper get the best of me again after that.

* 

Once Joey finished first grade, his doctor changed his medicine from Riddelin to Prozac, because he was so depressed. It made me feel empty inside to know that he needed a prescription to make him feel happy.

Skating was one of the only things that made me smile. I was only gliding in circles, but felt like I was floating away from my troubles. I’d joined a skating club, and had started taking lessons. After I’d earned enough badges, I was able to perform in the club’s yearly show. That year the theme was Academy Award Pix, so each student had to skate to a song from a movie that won an Oscar. I chose the song, “These Are a Few of My Favorite Things” from, *The Sound of Music*.

I practiced with my coach for months before the show, perfecting every move. I even rehearsed my routine wearing socks on my kitchen floor to make sure that I had every part memorized. I was always afraid that I’d get nervous, blank out, and end up skating around like a klutz.

The day of the show was warm and bright. When I arrived at the rink, my stomach felt as though a can of soda had exploded in it and the bubbles were fizzing out
of control. As I laced my skates, inhaling and exhaling slowly seemed to make the fizz go flat.

A rush of adrenaline took over my entire body before I stepped out from behind the curtain. I inhaled deeply right before the announcer said my name over the loud speaker and then marched onto the ice. As I began to stroke, the audience started clapping and I couldn’t help but smile.

My music started on a high note, and I began. I landed the first two jumps with precision and completed a spin with speed. I had trouble with the third jump in my program. Sometimes I nailed it, and other times I fell. Right before the jump, I took a deep breath. I pushed off with all of my strength, pulled in as tightly as my arms would allow, and then landed, and exhaled. Yes! I thought.

The rest of the program was over before I knew it, and I was bowing to the audience. I heard the crowd clapping and closed my eyes, just to make sure I wouldn’t forget what that felt like. After being exposed to performing on ice for the first time, I was hooked. I felt happier and more confident on the ice, as if I had the ability to conquer anything.
Chapter Ten:

*Some people weave burlap into the fabric of our lives, and some weave gold thread. Both contribute to make the whole picture beautiful and unique.* Anon

I was finding it challenging to make friends in my new school. The kids in my fifth grade class weren’t very welcoming. One afternoon, my teacher told everyone to choose a locker and a locker buddy.

“Oh, no,” I said quietly under my breath, as I thought of trying to find a person to pair up with in a classroom full of strangers. The worst part was that they all already knew each other; I was the only new girl.

My class started to walk out into the hallway, in pairs. I stepped out onto the tiled floor, unsure of where to go. A girl with silky, blond hair, and impeccably straight bangs walked over to me and said, “Do you want to share a locker?”

“Yes!” I said, glowing, with a huge smile.

I couldn’t have been happier. I’d noticed Brandi in class before, but she always kept to herself. I think she was just shy. After bonding over combination locks, Brandi and I were instantaneous friends. She was good-natured, soft-hearted, and fun to be around.

That November, Brandi had a birthday party with about nine of the other girls from our class. We ate pizza and cake and gave Brandi presents. Then we all sat in the kitchen that smelled of chocolate chip cookies and her Mom gave us each, three glass Christmas ornaments. We decorated them together and stuffed them with icing and sequins so they sparkled. I saved mine for Christmas gifts to give to Mom and Dad.
Brandi’s party was marvelous and so different from anything I had ever done at a friend’s birthday party or even my own.

I accepted an invite to a sleepover party a few weeks later. I can’t remember who hosted it, but almost all of the girls from my class were there, except for Brandi because she was away with her family.

At the party, we played twister and other board games for hours, with the television blaring in the background. I tired myself out before everyone else and wandered to bed early. I woke up before the other girls, too. I went to the bathroom and noticed something different when I looked in the mirror. One side of my hair had a big chunk missing. The girls must have cut it off last night while I was sleeping. I felt so sad that I called Mom and asked her to pick me up as soon as she could. I told her that I didn’t feel well and never mentioned what happened because I was so humiliated. I constantly tried to keep the hole in my hair covered and stayed away from sleepover parties for a long time after that.

*

We almost had a white Christmas the year Auntie Pam bought us Fluffy, a male Persian cat. We wanted him to have a friend, so we saved Snowball, a white Himalayan, from the shelter. We’d never owned pets with so much personality. Fluffy loved to play with toys, give kisses, and sit on his back legs, watching television, with his front paws up, like a human. Snowball was the, “cuddler.” She was placid and shy, but would warm up to anyone if they pet her long enough. She liked to have staring contests; it was easy to look intently at her mystic blue eyes, the color of a bluebird’s wings.
I met more friends living at Brookside than in school. Maybe they liked to play with my cats, or perhaps we were just more alike. The two girls I hung out with most were named Katie, who lived in the apartment just above mine, and Jen who lived down a block.

Katie was there when I got my first detention. Joey had started getting detentions in kindergarten, but I’d never had the experience. I felt horrible and was nervous about telling Mom.

It happened in health class. I was sitting in the back whispering to Katie while Ms. Lunt was addressing the entire class. I wasn’t trying to be rude. I was just bored. Ms. Lunt shot her glance in my direction, and I immediately closed my lips, but it was too late.

“Ashley, it’s rude to talk in class. You should know that. Report back to my classroom after school for detention,” she said.

My face was as red as a stop light. I felt shamed and irritated.

The next couple of hours seemed to whisk by. When the clock struck five past two, I was on my way to Ms. Lunt’s room for my detention.

“Hi,” I said to her as I walked in.

“Have a seat,” she said and pointed to a chair.

“Do I just sit here?”

“Yes. Just sit there until three o’clock. Then you may leave, as long as you promise not to talk in my class anymore.”

“Oh, I won’t.”
The next hour was grueling. I watched the longer hand on the clock pass the
twelve so many times that it started to mesh in with the background and eventually
disappeared. I took my eyes off the clock for a moment so my eyes could focus. At last, it
was three. I was free.

Once I got outdoors, I took a deep breath and held in the fresh air. I caught a bus
that drove kids home after sports practices. I beat Mom to my front door and never had to
tell her about my experience with detention.

*

Katie ended up moving to Connecticut later that year, but we promised to stay in
touch. After she and her family had been gone for a few weeks, I found the nameplate to
their mailbox on the ground in front of our apartments; it was forest green with their last
name engraved in white lettering. I kept it. We wrote letters back and forth, and I called
her a few times, but our friendship eventually dissolved.

I’d only been living in Andover for a year and a half and was losing friends as
quickly as I made them. Katie was gone and I didn’t see Brandi anymore because she and
I attended different middle schools. I realized that most things in life aren’t constant and
that scared me.

Skating was still the only thing that brought me joy. I took on a private coach and
started competing. The only bad thing about skating was the cost. Mom, Dad, Nona,
Uncle Vinnie, and Gramps all chipped in, but they could only afford so much. It was so
costly that I had to find a way to earn money on my own to continue doing it.

I was walking to the bus stop with Jen one morning, and decided to ask her for
advice. She was a year older than I was, and I looked up to her.
“You should try babysitting, since you’re only eleven,” Jen said.

“That’s the perfect idea! Thanks. How do I find a family to work for?”

“Just put a sign up in the grocery store and ask your neighbors.”

I listened to Jen and scored my first job for the nice woman, Jackie, and her son, Nathaniel, that lived next door. I was good with kids, having gained a lot of experience helping Mom with Joey.

I watched Nathaniel every Tuesday. He was only a few months old the first time that I took care of him. He had the most precious light brown curls and was very smart and super playful.

One afternoon, after feeding him blueberries, I put him on the changing table for a fresh diaper. As I was reaching for a wipe, Nathaniel grabbed some of his poop that was stained dark purple from the blueberries, and threw it at me. While I was thinking of what to do next, he giggled and then tossed another glob at my face.

I wiped my cheek and placed the dirty diaper out of Nathaniel’s reach. Just as I was finished cleaning the two of us off at the sink, Jackie came home. She thought the story was adorable.

I was exhausted when I arrived home that evening and couldn’t wait to get to sleep. I was already under the covers when Mom tucked Joey in. He hated bedtime and often tried to stay awake. Mom would get him settled into bed and a few minutes later, he’d come up with an excuse to leave his room.

That night, he wanted a drink.

“Mom, I’m thirsty. Can I go get some water?” he asked.

“No. You just had something to drink an hour ago,” she said.
I knew it would be a long night for us whenever things started like that.

“I just want to get up and have some water, and then I’ll get right back in bed.”

“Tough. I told you to go to sleep. I’m trying to study.”

Mom started school at a community college that year for nursing and was always busy with assignments.

He persisted. “I’m really thirsty.”

“Don’t make me come in there.”

I heard his little feet patter through the dining room into the kitchenette, and then her quick, heavy steps followed. She smacked him right away.

“Ow!” he said.

Each time she slapped him, I hit my pillows.

She dragged him back into his room.

“I said, go to sleep.”

“But I’m not tired, and I’m thirsty.”

“Be quiet or I’ll give you something to cry about.”

She used that phrase a lot. It almost made me feel as bad as when she said, “I gave you life, and I can take it away.”

His tears didn’t stop and neither did her temper. Mom hit him repeatedly, until she started to cry. It was silent for a minute and then I heard her yell my name.

When I went into Joey’s room, she was sitting on the floor with him in her lap.

“I’m so sorry. Please come here,” she said.

She hugged Joey and me at the same time.
“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to. I’m so stressed out because of school and work. I have to work so we can have money. I’m so sorry, guys, I shouldn’t take it out on you. I love you both more than anything,” she said, with tears in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” I said.

Joey wouldn’t speak.

I tried not to let my feelings show; I had to be strong for both Mom and Joey. I had to hold them together.

I didn’t understand how Mom could hurt us. I loved her so much that I could never harm her, even though she made me mad.

I guess Mom didn’t think about what she did before she did it. She seemed to morph, like a Power Ranger does, into a mean fighting machine and then back to a regular person with feelings. I hated to love her sometimes, but there is nothing like the embrace of your mom’s soft side.

*

A few weeks had passed before signs of spring started to show. Buds sprouted on the trees and I could hear birds chirping in the distance. The air smelled of rain, earth, and grass.

Walking to the bus stop on a brisk Thursday morning, I stopped at Jen’s apartment to see if she was ready. Before I could get to her front door, she came out with shorts on. I was stunned.

“You’re crazy,” I said to her as I motioned to her cut-offs.

“What do you mean? It’s like 50 degrees,” she said.

“Okay, but I still think you’re nuts.”
What if she caught a cold? What will she do if it starts to rain? Was she being daring or was I just spineless? Why do I worry so much? Why am I afraid of everything? I thought.

I was intrigued by some of the things Jen did, but not sure that I could or even wanted to do them myself. One weekend, she made out with one of our classmates, Matt. I wanted to know all the details; I’d never heard first-hand make-out gossip before. I’d also never heard the “base” metaphor, that Jen introduced me to.

“Going to first base is just kissing someone, but we went to second base, which means that he put his hand up my shirt,” she said.

“I don’t think I’m ready for that yet.”

I knew that one thing Jen had, that I definitely didn’t have yet, were breasts.

* 

That summer, Nona and I ventured off to Los Angeles to visit Auntie Crena. I was overjoyed about my second vacation and had dreamt of going to California for as long as I could remember. When it actually came close to the date we were supposed to leave, I started having second thoughts about traveling. I was apprehensive about flying and leaving Mom and Joey for an entire week. I hadn’t been away from them for longer than a weekend. Despite some of the things Mom did, I realized then how much I loved her and how much I needed her.

I couldn’t help but think of all that could possibly go wrong. What if the plane caught on fire? Or crashed into another plane? What if something happened to Mom, Joey, or Dad while I was gone?
It seemed I had only blinked before Mom was dropping me off at Nona’s with my suitcase. Our flight left early the next morning. I started to cry when it was time to say goodbye to Mom.

“You are going to have so much fun, Ash. Please don’t be upset,” Mom said.

“I’m going to miss you so much. What if there’s an earthquake while I’m there? What if I get bitten by a black widow spider? What if you or Joey gets sick while I’m away?”

“Don’t think like that. Everything will be fine.”

“I’m going to take this picture of you and me so I can hug it every night,” I said, holding a photo of the two of us.

Mom eventually drove off, and I kept that picture in my pocket. My stomach started to turn and ache, as if I still had an invisible umbilical cord attaching Mom and me, and now that we were apart, it was tugging on my belly button causing the pain.

Once Nona and I had boarded the plane, I couldn’t stop looking around the cabin. The only other time I’d been on a plane was when I went to Disneyworld. I don’t remember seeing a sign that read, Emergency Exit or one that said, Oxygen Mask. The signs just made me fearful that the plane wouldn’t be able to overcome turbulence. That we may stray off course and end up on a deserted island in the middle of the ocean. Or that we’d crash into the island and die in flames. I couldn’t control my paranoid thoughts.

A flight attendant stood in front of the cockpit to make an announcement about safety before takeoff. I glued my eyes and ears to her. What I couldn’t believe, was that
the other passengers weren’t paying attention to her at all. They were fussing with their bags, overhead compartments, or reading a magazine. They must be nuts, I thought.

The flight attendant highlighted the importance of securing your own oxygen mask before helping others.

“Even if your children are with you, please be sure to put on your own mask first.”

I didn’t understand that. Why wouldn’t you help your children or someone that you loved, before yourself? I would’ve done anything to save the family members I’d lost.

The take-off was rocky. I didn’t remember feeling so uneasy the last time that I was on an airplane. Once we were in the air, I felt each muscle in my body begin to loosen up. Until we hit turbulence and I clenched the armrest. I shot my glance at Nona.

“It’s okay, sweetie. This happens, unpredictably, but it’ll be over soon, just have faith,” she said.

We made it safely to Burbank, and Mom was right; I had a ball. I went to DisneyLand, Universal Studios, and Knottsbury Farms. We took a ride through the Hollywood Hills, and I absorbed the breath-taking views. We drove by famous people’s homes, including the Spelling and Playboy Mansions, gawking at their sizes and architecture. We strolled down Hollywood Boulevard and took pictures at the Chinese Theatre; sunbathed at Malibu Beach and watched the sunset over the horizon.

I fell in love with the bright sunlight and the tall palm trees flowing in the breeze. Gazing in the distance, the clouds looked like a blanket draped over the mountains. There was a certain aura about Hollywood, a glitz or sparkle, that made me feel energized.
Nona and I eventually made it back home in one piece. I suggested that my whole family move out west, but they didn’t like the idea.

*

Summer had turned into autumn, Joey and a couple of his friends decided to create a tree house in the woods. He brought me there to show off the humongous maple. It was taller than most of the others and the leaves were slowly falling to the ground.

Joey and his friends had wood stacked near the trunk and were working on nailing down floorboards for the house on the thickest branches.

A few days later, one of Joey’s friends came running up to our apartment, flailing his arms in the air.

“Joey fell out of the tree house! You have to come with me to help him.”

I told Mom what happened and she called an ambulance.

We all ran into the woods and saw Joey curled up in the fetal position, gripping his right arm with his left hand. His face was scrunched up in pain.

“It hurts,” Joey said.

“What hurts?” Mom asked.

“My whole body, but mostly my arm.”

I heard sirens in the distance, getting louder and louder. Mom was able to escort Joey in the ambulance, but I had to stay behind. When they finally returned home, Joey asked me to sign his cast. Luckily, his right arm was the only limb broken. He didn’t have any other major injuries, just bumps and bruises.

*
I’d joined the drama club at school. I’d always been attracted to acting because it gave me the opportunity to stand in someone else’s life for a few hours. Each week, the drama club met on the auditorium stage to work. We performed skits and different exercises as well as took time to prepare for the annual show.

That year we were performing the play, “I Never Saw Another Butterfly,” based on the life of a girl who survived the Holocaust in a concentration camp.

I was chosen to play the part of, Zuzanna Winterova, another prisoner, being held in a concentration camp. I had to memorize a monologue that haunted me, titled, “The Butterfly.” It repeated itself in my nightmares:

*The last, the very last,*

*So richly, brightly, dazzlingly yellow.*

*Perhaps if the sun's tears would sing*  
*against a white stone. . . .*

*Such, such a yellow*  
*Is carried lightly 'way up high.*

*It went away I'm sure because it wished to*  
*kiss the world good-bye.*

*For seven weeks I've lived in here,*  
*Penned up inside this ghetto.*

*But I have found what I love here.*

*The dandelions call to me*  
*And the white chestnut branches in the court.*

*Only I never saw another butterfly.*
That butterfly was the last one.

Butterflies don't live in here,
in the ghetto.

I preferred performing, “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” by Shakespeare; the subject matter was much lighter. I played Puck, and treasured being the witty, funny character; however, originally desired the female lead. My friend, Emily, ended up getting that part. I was envious of her, but tried not to let it show.

The costume I had to wear made me look like a Christmas Elf, and Emily’s made her look like a Princess. However, when I finished a humorous line and heard the audience laugh, nothing else mattered. Hearing laughter that I created felt to me, what parents must feel like the first time they hear their child speak. It made me want to talk forever if the audience would keep laughing.

Being involved in a club made me feel a bit more accepted at school, but still at a distance from my peers. Among the designer clothes and personalized L.L. Bean backpacks, I felt like a pair of sneakers slung over telephone wire.

Mom was always complaining about how much driving she had to do. She especially hated carting me back and forth to skating. My coach, Karen, always helped me in any way that she could and lived close by, so she offered me a ride to skating on certain days if Mom could bring me to her house.

On the way to Karen’s one day, I asked Mom if she could wash my white sneakers while I was at practice. When Mom returned to pick me up after my sessions
that afternoon, I could sense that something was off. Joey was in the front seat next to her
and both of them were quiet.

“I have to tell you something,” Mom said.

Oh no, here we go again, I thought.

“One of the cats died,” she said.

“What! How? Which cat?” I asked as I put one hand on each seat and pulled
myself forward.

We drifted over a speed bump and the knots in my stomach became tighter.

“Well, I went to take the laundry out of the dryer, and I found the cat dead in
there. She must have jumped in while I was switching the loads,” she said.

She continued driving, not even glancing at me in the rear-view mirror like she
sometimes did.

“I’m so sorry honey, I thought it was your sneakers that were making the noise in
the dryer, and then when I opened it, I realized my mistake,” she said.

“Which cat, Mom?” I asked again.

“Snowball,” she said.

I started to sob. I couldn’t believe that my cat had died, and in such an awful way.
I found out the next day that Mom paid one of the cutest boys in the neighborhood ten
dollars to clean out the dryer.

Only when I write this do I realize that he probably threw the cat in a dumpster.

When I told my classmates the story, they laughed.

*
The summer after seventh grade turned out to be a blast. Dad gave me a new, bright purple, ten-speed bike for my birthday and I rode it almost every day. Jen and I would pedal down our street together, side by side. Sometimes, we’d take our hands off the handlebars and hold them out to our sides, like wings on a plane. It felt like flying.

I was devastated when the summer was about to end and Jen told me that she and her family were moving to California. Jen was like a big sister to me. She taught me about boys, make-up, hair, and rock music. Packing her room where we spent hours talking and laughing was torture. We were packing memories.

“I want you to have this,” she said, and pointed to her gold vanity table and chair.

“What are you talking about? You can’t give me that. You love it so much,” I said.

“I know, but you love it, too, and I want you to keep it. Please.”

She taught me how to apply red lipstick at that vanity table. The set was so elegant, as if it were fit for a Queen.

I decided to accept the gift, and I still have it today.

*

Jen came to my apartment to say goodbye, because I couldn’t bare to see hers empty. We talked and I gave her a friendship bracelet I made. She gave me her new address, and I promised to write, so did she.

“I’ll call, too,” she said.

“You better. I’m going to miss you so much. Okay, I hate goodbyes, so get out of here before I start crying.”
We hugged and I watched her walk away. After about ten feet, she flipped her sandals off, ran back over to me, and gave me a huge bear hug. We were both crying.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too.”

*

I dove into skating headfirst. I was working on double jumps and competing a lot more. On days that my coach, Karen, gave me a ride to practice, I had to leave my skating bag with her the night before. I knew my belongings would be taken care of, but I hated letting my skates out of my sight. I’d saved a lot of money for them. They were custom made Ridell boots with Professional Blades. I kept them in a suitcase with a handle and wheels that I eventually named, “Rosie.”

After my session, I asked Karen where I should leave my bag for her.

“You can put Rosie next to the trunk of my car, I’m going out there in a second,” she said.

The minute I returned home, I received a call from Karen.

“Hi,” she said quickly. “Do you have Rosie?”

“No, you do. I put her next to your trunk.”

“It wasn’t there when I went outside.”

“What!”

“Maybe someone else grabbed it. Everyone knows what it looks like,” she said.

No one else named their bag and had a personalized keychain hanging down the front. I thought I had a chance of getting it back.

“You should call some people, and I will, too,” Karen said.
I phoned everyone from the skating club and asked them if they had seen it or taken my bag by accident. No one knew anything. I called the arena and someone working in the office checked for me, but didn’t see my bag anywhere.

My heart sunk. How could this be? Who would take my skating bag? I thought. I couldn’t hold in my tears anymore; and they exploded on my cheeks like a wave on the shore.

For two weeks after that, I went to the rink and sat on the side in the hockey box. One Tuesday, when I walked into the rink, Karen came running over to me.

“You are not going to believe this,” she said with an ear-to-ear grin.

She grabbed my hand and brought me into the office. In the corner, was my black suitcase on wheels. Dangling from the front zipper, was my shiny keychain.

“How did you get these? I can’t believe it,” I said.

“When I came in here today, your bag was next to the side door. Someone must have brought them back.”

My eyes were wide and watering as I slowly wrapped my arms around my skates.

“I’m so happy,” I said.

“Rosie’s,” journey will always be a mystery.

*  

I had a crush on a boy in my neighborhood named, Jorge. When he told people that he liked me, too, some of the other girls were jealous. One in particular, really didn’t care for me at all. Her name was Loni. She was a lot taller than I was and much tougher. She used to mock me and call me names. I would just ignore it, even though it bothered me.
One night, I was playing outdoor hide-and-seek with some of my friends and Jorge. In between rounds, Loni and a few of the people in her crowd walked by me.

“You stupid gringa,” she said, looking right at me.

I couldn’t take it anymore. I’d had enough.

“You are such a bitch,” I said back.

She appeared shocked at first, but then incredibly pissed. She proceeded to walk over to me and punch me right in the face, knocking my glasses off. A crowd of the neighborhood kids formed in a circle around us. They came faster than seagulls on the beach when there’s loose food. Loni came at me again, but I pushed her away and scrambled to look for my glasses. Everything was blurry and the night seemed to get darker just then. I bent over and moved my hands along the ground, but couldn’t feel them.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something sparkle. It had to be the street lamp reflecting off my lenses. I went to reach for them, but Loni kicked me and knocked me onto my side. When I hit the pavement, my chest tightened and I couldn’t inhale. It felt as if I were trying to breathe under water. Loni continued to kick me as I laid on the ground in the shape of a G.

“She’s had enough,” I heard a kid say.

Someone pulled her off me and the crowd started to dissipate. I finally found my glasses and stood up. My whole body felt bruised. I was humiliated and ashamed. I ran home so I didn’t have to face anyone. Mom was in her room when I got in, so I just rushed straight to bed. I couldn’t sleep, though. My feelings of embarrassment turned to
anger. Why do people hit other people? I just don’t understand. How can someone hurt another person?

I especially didn’t understand how Mom could hit Joey. If he misbehaved, and as sure as thunder came after lightning, Joey would misbehave and Mom couldn’t control her temper. She was always on edge.

One night when Joey wouldn’t get in the bathtub, Mom hit his bare skin for what seemed like an hour. I paced back and forth in my room trying to think of a diversion, but came up with nothing. I hated myself.

Mom stopped and the house went still. I heard Joey whimpering and Mom called my name. Instead of yelling at her, as I wanted to, feelings of weakness and vulnerability spread through my bones.

I sat down next to Mom and Joey; she apologized to both of us, and we all cried together.

* 

I’d met two good friends at school, Karen and Caitlin, and the next day I asked them to come into the bathroom with me before class.

“I just need to talk,” I said.

I really did. I had to tell someone what was going on at home. I’d been holding it in for too long. The moment I’d checked under all the stalls, I started to weep.

“What’s going on, Ash?” Karen asked.

I was too ashamed to tell them what was really happening and scared that someone would take me and Joey away from Mom.

“It’s just skating,” I said, “I’m under a lot of pressure, that’s all.”
“That doesn’t seem like all that is bothering you,” Caitlin said.

I knew I had to come up with something else to tell them, but I couldn’t reveal the truth.

“Well, someone wrote this really mean letter about me and sent it to the rink. They wish I was dead.”

I started to cry harder, and they hugged me. The embrace of my friends made me feel better. Everything will be okay, it’s going to work itself out, I thought.

Throughout the next year, I pulled my girlfriends into the bathroom frequently to have shoulders to cry on. My stories became more elaborate, and even though I wasn’t telling them why I was really unhappy, having them to lean on seemed to lift weight off my back.
Chapter Eleven:

A kiss seems the smallest movement of the lips, yet it can capture emotions wild as kindling, or be a contract, or dash a mystery. Diane Ackerman

Winter had finally shown itself toward the end of November with an early morning frost, just in time for the holidays. Carefully cooking with tender love and her Grandmother’s recipes, Nona baked food that could put heaven in your mouth, especially on Thanksgiving Day.

The real attraction to be thankful for was the made-from-scratch spinach raviolis; eventually getting coined the name, “ravs,” and the biggest ones, “honkers.” Prior to our whimsical Thanksgiving celebration each year, a few members of my family would get together and prepare these delicious raviolis according to a secret recipe. We’d begin with a large pile of flour on the kitchen counter, cracking an egg into the center, and then kneading the mixture until it became dough.

Nona prepared the filling in advance in a large, plastic, yellow bowl. After forming a line, we’d each take turns cutting, stuffing, and packaging the raviolis into shirt boxes laced with wax paper for freezing until the big day; but, always leaving a few out to sample for dinner that night.

When it was actually time to sit and eat on Thanksgiving Day, Nona announced that each person would only be allowed four “ravs.” She had to ration them because so many people came to dinner. She’d often have to borrow extra tables and chairs from the bowling alley she worked at just to accommodate everyone.
After finishing our Italian meal, we’d take a break and relax for a while before our next course. The smell of turkey, mashed potatoes, and stuffing would lure us back to the table for a second helping. It seemed unfathomable, but we always managed to put down dessert, too. Apple pie, chocolate-pudding pie, cheesecake, and those mini canolies were irresistible.

The only thing I didn’t like about Thanksgiving was spending it away from Mom and Joey. I wondered what they were doing and if they had enough to eat. I also pondered what it would be like to celebrate with everyone I loved in the same room.

*

Mom met a new man named, Steven, and introduced him to Joey and me. He seemed genuine and appeared to care about Mom a lot. He stayed with us on occasion, and eventually moved in. Having Steven around made Mom less tense; however, her relationship added a new danger to our environment. Steven drank a lot. Whenever I heard loud music playing when I came home at night, I’d try to sneak in quietly and avoid him. Our apartment wasn’t very big, so that wasn’t always an easy feat.

Steven seemed to float off into another world when he was drunk. He became angry there. It made his face turn red and his expression go sour. I was afraid to be around him when he was in that place.

*

I was still turning to figure skating for shelter from my grief. Preparing for the Bay State Games meant skating as much as my pocket could afford. Training kept my worries about home at bay. Focusing on competing temporarily shadowed any other thoughts that were previously haunting me.
I drove out to the Bay State Games with Mom and we stayed in a hotel close to the arena. I had a stunning costume made; the white dress had a rhinestone neckline and teardrop opening in the back. The moment before I took the ice, my knees felt weak. My coach, Karen, stood by my side. I looked into her eyes and she knew I was nervous.

“Repeat after me,” she said, “I am ready. I know this program from start to finish. I will keep my head up, my back straight, and my landing leg strong. I will have fun.”

As I said those words, I felt a rush of warmth come up from my legs and into the rest of my body. I stepped out onto the ice and felt as if I could fly right off the surface and into the stands.

My music started and I pushed through the opening sequence of footwork with power. I landed my first jump and smiled at the judges. With each stroke, the strength inside me grew, and for those few moments, I felt more at ease than I had since I lived with Grammy and Pa. When the music stopped, I didn’t want to leave my ending pose. If only I could’ve frozen that moment in time, just like the ice below me.

It felt like hours had gone by before the results were posted. Waiting for the scores was similar to waiting for a baby to be born. Everyone concerned crowded together for one person to deliver news. I was awe-struck when I saw the results before me.

“Second place,” I said to Karen.

“Oh, I’m so excited! See, I told you that you could do it! Great job, Ash.”

I stood on the platform during the award ceremony and couldn’t wipe the smile from my face or calm down what felt like a volcano erupting with energy inside me. As I lowered my neck to receive my silver medal, I glanced up and saw Mom’s smile,
possibly bigger than mine. I never thought she cared much about the outcome of these things, but she really looked proud that day.

The best part was that I had qualified for the All State Games, which meant the chance to win a national title. However, because the competition took place in Georgia, I didn’t have enough money to go. I couldn’t have earned enough babysitting, even if I worked every day.

Before we left to return home, I marched in a parade with all of the other athletes and attended a pizza party with the kids from my skating club. It felt incredible to belong to something.

I kept the shiny silver medal around my neck for the next week and slept with it for about a month after the competition. Even though I wasn’t able to continue on to the All State Games, I was still thrilled that I had the opportunity compete.

*  

The next few months seemed to whip by me, and then it was almost time for my first year of high school. My friend, Andrew, was in the same grade as me, and one of my neighbors. His mom, Mary Jo, mentioned, almost every time I saw her, that he might have a crush on me. I wasn’t sure if I liked that or not. I also wasn’t sure if she knew what she was talking about. Andrew was always trying to tackle me at the park or making fun of me on the bus.

I decided to test the theory and suggested that Andrew and I attend our first, high school semiformal dance together. I was curious and excited when he agreed to go with me, but still questioned Mary Jo’s presumption. The dance wasn’t for a few months, so I had to wait in suspense.
At home that night, I belly flopped on my bed and started to daydream about what the dance would be like, what high school might be like, and what parts of my life would change when high school was over. Would I look or feel different? Would I move to California? Would I actually get into college? I thought about Mom, and if she had the same way of thinking before she started high school. I’m sure she didn’t realize that she would be pregnant during her junior year. Giving birth to me must have really put a damper on her plans.

I realized then that I was a mistake.

*

The transition from middle to high school wasn’t as difficult as I thought it would be. Even though there were many people to meet, different teachers, and new rules, I’d finally made some friends that provided me with a zone of comfort.

I had stopped crying with my girlfriends in the bathroom at school. Because I made up stories for reasons that I was feeling depressed, I began to feel guilty for lying to them, even though I needed their support. I didn’t want them to think badly of Mom because of what she did when she was mad, so I couldn’t tell them why I was really upset. My friends called her, “The cool mom,” and I wanted it to stay that way, so I found another way to cope with the sadness I was feeling.

I thought about what I would do to cure a headache or stomach pain. How can I alleviate this pain I feel? I thought. One day when I arrived home from school, I opened the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, in search of anything that might give me relief. I wanted something that would make the knot in the back of my throat dispel. I pulled out a bottle of Aleve and twisted off the cap. I started to pour the blue pills into my hand,
counting them out one by one. There were exactly twelve resting in my palm. I swallowed them four at a time with a glass of water.

After a few hours, I’d gotten a stomachache, but nothing else happened, and I never told anyone. I had so many negative feelings inside; it was hard for me to pinpoint what bothered me the most. Was it missing Pa and the other people in my life that I’d lost? Was I angry at Mom for hitting Joey all these years? Was it anxiety about the future? What was causing the heart of the pain?

Not knowing made it even harder for me to deal with. I just knew that I felt sorrowful, more often than not. I wanted help, but didn’t want to reveal my feelings to anyone that I was close with. I assumed that they would think differently of me or wouldn’t want to be around me. Everyone prefers sunshine to an overcast sky. I planned to figure it out on my own, without burdening anyone.

A few weeks had lapsed when I found myself home alone after school. My apartment felt colder than normal. I paced up and down the hallway several times before ending up in the bathroom. The image of me taking those twelve pills popped into my head.

I began searching through our medicine cabinet and found a small brown bottle that I hadn’t seen before. The label read, Ipecac syrup. The writing on the back indicated that it would induce vomiting. Perfect, I thought. If I am physically sick, maybe someone will be able to make me feel good again, without me having to expose myself.

I twisted off the cap, tilted my head back, and poured some of the liquid, thicker than honey, down my throat. It didn’t take long for my stomach to start acting up, feeling as if it were performing somersaults inside my body. I instantly regretted drinking the
stuff. After about thirty minutes of lying on the bathroom rug, holding my knees tightly into my chest, I called Mom.

“Oh, Ash, you sound horrible. What’s wrong? Is it your stomach again?”

“Yes. It’s really bad this time.” I didn’t tell her about the syrup that I drank.

“Okay, I can’t leave my job, but I’ll call Sharon and see if she can come by to check on you,” she said.

About ten minutes later, the syrup worked and I threw up. I didn’t flush the toilet, but instead, just fell back on the floor. I felt a bit of relief, but still woozy. I closed my eyes for a while and then heard the back door open and shut.

“Ash, where are you?” Mom’s friend, Sharon, yelled.

“I’m in here.”

“Oh, sweetie, let’s get you into bed. You look terrible,” she said when she came into the room.

“I feel awful.”

Sharon flushed the toilet and carried me to bed.

“What happened? I know you threw up, but did you eat anything that bothered you? Are any of your friends sick?”

“No. It just came over me after school. Can you stay here with me?”

“Sure.”

Sharon had been a friend of Mom’s for a while. She always seemed to have a way to make me feel better. She had a calming voice and soothing touch. Unfortunately, all I did that day was make myself feel worse. The knot in the back of my throat remained.

*
I stood in the kitchen making myself a sandwich for lunch when I found the release I’d been searching for in my bathroom medicine cabinet. As I opened the silverware drawer to pull out a knife, I remembered how much it hurt the first time I cut myself. The pain clouded my mind and I couldn’t think of anything else.

I took the knife I was about to slice my ham and cheese with, and instead ran it along my wrist. I held the knife loosely in my hand, and it barely made a mark on my arm. The light white line on my skin, surprisingly, didn’t hurt much.

I tried it again. The next time I swiped the knife across myself with more force. The cut stung that time, and sprouted little dots of blood on my skin, like flowers blooming in a garden. The third time I cut myself, the blood started to pour out in a light stream. My eyes overflowed with tears. I wrapped my arm and wrist in paper towels to stop the bleeding. After a minute or two, I put a few band-aids on the horizontal cut and sprawled out on my bed. Focusing on the physical hurt made me forget about the emotional pain.

I cut myself whenever I was feeling helpless or uneasy. Deep down, somewhere, I knew that cutting was wrong, but I hadn’t found any other way to make myself feel better. My vision was blurred and my thinking unclear. Cutting myself just masked what really bothered me, and only for a short time. In addition, it gave me something else to conceal.

* 

The ambers and oranges of autumn had turned to the brown of winter. About two weeks before my first semiformal dance, I found out that Andrew had backed out of our original plan to go together. He’d asked someone else, a girl named, Nicki, who had huge
boobs. I ended up getting a date anyway, but wished Andrew had stuck to our original plan, as I was still inquisitive about his feelings toward me.

Andrew and I were in the same gym class. One blustery afternoon, the rain forced us indoors to play a basketball tournament; Andrew and I ended up on opposing teams. We teased each other constantly. Toward the end, my team was losing by one point. I had the ball in my possession, ready to score. Andrew came up behind me, swiped the ball, and ran in for a lay-up. I followed quickly behind, hoping to catch the rebound. He jumped and shot. As he landed, his arm slammed down on my right shoulder and knocked it out of the socket. It hurt worse than the first time that’d happened to me when I was playing with Auntie Crena.

The pain shot up and down my arm like a pinball. My shoulder felt like it had been sawed in half. I felt a bit of resentment toward Andrew, but that dissipated the moment he apologized. I could sense that he felt awful when I had to leave class and go to the hospital. My shoulder healed in a blue sling that all of my friends signed with a black marker, as if it were a cast. My arm didn’t heal as quickly as it did the first time I’d injured it, but with care it eventually felt strong again.

*

Later that school year, I attended my first orthodontic appointment and found out that I needed braces. I was already a freshman with glasses, but now I had to get metal put in my mouth, too.

Having them put on wasn’t as bad as I thought, but the tightening really killed. The first morning I set off to school with them, I tried to keep my mouth shut as much as possible, but my gums were swollen enough for people to notice that I had them anyway.
The second I sat down on the school bus someone yelled, “Haha! Trashley’s a metal mouth!”

After only having the braces on for a few months, I needed oral surgery because my left eyetooth was lodged in my gums. During the procedure, my doctor attached a bracket to the tooth. I had an appointment with him every three weeks following that, in order to tighten the bracket to rotate and pull the tooth down. Each time I had it worked on, my gums felt like someone was cutting them with a razor blade. It took nine months for the tooth to break through the surface.

*

I turned fifteen the following summer. One starry night, I moseyed over to Andrew’s apartment to watch a movie in my red and blue striped pajamas with my ugly blue glasses resting on my nose. I had finally gotten contacts, but didn’t wear them at night.

I noticed a difference in Andrew when he answered the door. Something clicked in my head, like a switch. In that moment, I realized that the time I’d spent focusing on whether he liked me or not, made me blind to my own feelings for him. They suddenly overwhelmed me. It was like someone handed me a calculator after I’d tried to multiply fifty numbers out by hand for hours. Unexpectedly, everything became completely clear. I had a crush on Andrew.

I don’t remember any part of the movie, or even the title. The entire time I thought about what exactly turned my feelings on. After an hour and a half of some motion picture, I decided to stay and hang out a little longer. We watched some more TV, and joked with each other. I had never noticed how bright his eyes were before.
I was exhausted, so I accepted his offer to stay the night. I slept on the orange couch in his living room, him in his bed. I stirred a bit the next morning when I heard Andrew in the kitchen making breakfast. The smell of bacon and eggs made my mouth water, but my eyes felt like they were sewn shut. Not before long, I woke again and heard him leave. I remembered him saying the night before that he had to attend football practice that morning.

Much later that afternoon, Andrew still wasn’t at home. I felt an intense urge to see him. I decided to check with our friend, Buddha, to see if he had any idea where Andrew was. When I got to Buddha’s apartment, I interrupted him watching TV and picking his hair. He finished and left the pick right in his big black afro, like always.

“What up, Troutman?”

“Don’t call me that!” I said with a laugh. I hated being addressed by my last name. “Do you know where Andy went after practice?”

“I think he’s at his Aunt’s house. Why?”

“Because I want him to ask me out.”

“Like go out, boyfriend/girlfriend, go out?”

“Yes. Do you think he will want to?”

“Yeah, but you should ask him.”

“Well I’m hoping that he’ll ask me. Could you talk to him?” I said, with my right heel lifted and toes turning on the floor.

“I’ll see what I can do.”

Buddha spoke to him for me, and Andrew asked me to be his girlfriend that night. My smile couldn’t have been wider without doing serious damage to my cheek bones.
For two days that week, Mom was going to be away with Steven. Joey planned to stay with his dad, Jody, and I had the house to myself. Mom wanted me to sleepover at Andrew’s, but instead, he, Buddha, and I stayed in my apartment.

Andrew and I shared my bed and Buddha slept on the floor. I had never spent the night in a bed with a boy before; I felt callow, and my palms began to sweat. I could hear Andrew’s heart beating. He started to breathe faster as he drew near me. Our lips touched and my toes curled. We fell asleep with our arms wrapped around each other and our legs intertwined.

From that night on, we were inseparable. Because Andrew lived in the apartment building next to mine, we saw each other everyday. When school started again, he stopped by my house on the way to the bus stop each morning to pick me up. He’d often bring me a treat, a bag of fruit snacks or a piece of candy. He worked at a grocery store downtown, and every night when he finished his shift, he’d tap on my window and say goodnight, sometimes carrying a single flower for me.

I had stopped visiting Nona and Dad every single weekend and started allocating more time for Andrew. Cheering him on at football games, every Friday night, became a ritual. I was his biggest fan.

* 

Back at home, Joey had gotten suspended from school, for the eighth time, and Mom was furious. I sat in the dining room pretending to concentrate on my homework, but praying that something would change the mood in our house. I could feel the tension spilling out of the living room and floating in my direction. Joey sat on the couch, Mom paced back and forth in front of him, asking for an explanation.
“Why did you get suspended?” Mom asked her face red and her eyes fixated on Joey.

He rose to his feet and bolted toward his room.

“Get over here you little brat,” Mom said and grabbed his forearm.

“I fucking hate you,” he said, and refused to look at her.

“You little bastard! Don’t you ever fucking say that again, do you hear me?”

“No!” he screamed.

“Oh, you’re going to be sorry,” Mom said as she stormed into the bathroom and grabbed a bar of soap.

“No, Mom, please. He’s going to get sick,” I said when she came out.

“Shut up, Ashley.”

I looked away and heard her hand and his skin collide. That cracking sound made my teeth clench. When I glanced at them again, Mom had Joey pinned on the ground. She was trying to shove the bar of soap in his mouth. He shook his head from side to side, but she held it still, and eventually pushed the entire bar in between his lips. Joey started to gag and looked like he might throw up, but Mom wouldn’t let up. I turned to look at Steven who had just come into the room.

“Do something!” I said to him.

Steven stood still, looking stunned for a moment before he moved toward Mom and started to pull her off Joey. She imitated a child throwing a tantrum, her legs and arms flailing in the air. Joey ran into his room, and I did the same.

I had a sharp knife from the kitchen stashed in my top dresser drawer. I sat on my bed and started to cut myself, but paused mid-slice. I remembered that Andrew would see
the results. There was no way I could hide this from him because we spent so much time together. I stopped, but the knife still left a noticeable cut. I planned to wear long sleeves to hide it until it healed.

The next morning when I stepped out of bed, I felt the warm apartment floor under my feet. I gazed out the steamy window and saw the first snowfall, it was only a light dusting, but that was all I wanted. Just enough to cover the ground so all you could see was white.

I showered and couldn’t help but cry. The water flowing down my body always evoked tears. Maybe because that was one of the only times during the day in which I didn’t have anything to distract me from the dark feelings I was constantly trying to stifle.

After I finished getting ready, I ran over to Andrew’s apartment. I felt lighter after I crossed over the threshold. It was nothing like being at home walking on eggshells, in fear of Joey misbehaving and Mom losing her temper.

“Do you want to watch a movie?” I asked Andrew.

“Sure. Which one?”

I told him to choose, took off my jacket and sat down.

“I’m tired,” I said.

“You always feel tired.”

“That’s true,” I said as I yawned and reached my arms over my head to stretch.

“What are those band-aids for?” He asked.

“Um, my cat. He scratched me.”

He looked into my eyes and knew I was lying.

“Whatever,” he said.
How did he know that I wasn’t telling the truth? I thought. Was I that transparent?

I confessed and told him that I wouldn’t do it again. He stayed quiet for the rest of the night. I hated that I’d hurt him. I never wanted to see anyone upset, especially people that I loved. I stopped cutting myself after that.
Chapter Twelve:

Except for the point, the still point,

There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. T.S. Eliot

When it came time for Valentine’s Day, Andrew invited me over to his house for a surprise. I proceeded into his room, and found a small round table set up with a red tablecloth and two place settings. He put a magenta light bulb in his lamp to make the whole room glow pink, and scattered confetti that was shaped like x’s and o’s around the room. He cooked spaghetti for dinner and baked two individual, marble, cakes shaped like hearts for dessert. After we finished eating he said that he had a present for me.

“I have one for you, too,” I said to him. “I can’t believe you bought me a present after everything you’ve already done! You transformed your room into a little restaurant. A pink restaurant.”

He laughed and handed me a gift that must have taken him an hour to wrap. I opened a small gold charm shaped like half of a heart. I couldn’t believe my eyes when I held it close and saw that it was engraved. My half of the charm said, “Best,” and he had the other half that said, “Friends.” People who knew us were always complimenting our relationship and saying that it worked so well because we were friends first, and we knew that they were right. I constantly wore my charm around my neck after that.

He always picked out gifts that I liked, but the homemade gifts he gave me were the most meaningful. He created multiple mix tapes and even wrote poems for me. I didn’t need all of those gifts; he was enough of a present.

*
Spring had sprung and Andrew landed a new job at an amusement park.

“You should come work there with me, babe,” he said.

“I don’t know. Mom already hates having to drive me to skating; she’ll hate having to take me to a job, too.”

“We can just work the same shifts, and I’ll make sure you get there and back. Plus, I’m getting my license soon.”

“Only six months before me!”

“I know, but still. What do you think?”

“Well, if you can get me there and back then I think I’ll do it. I can always use extra money.”

I wanted to be sure that I always had a savings account; I had seen Mom struggle with money too much. She’d just mentioned getting rid of her cell phone because she couldn’t afford it anymore, so I took over the contract. It was my first big expense besides skating, and made me feel independent. My new phone was just another reason to get a job with Andrew at the amusement park.

We didn’t actually get to work together. Andrew served food and I scooped ice cream, but we always coordinated our breaks and strolled around watching kids playing and checking out the rides. One day, we took a chance on the ride that spins so fast, your back becomes suctioned to the wall. Half way through, the floor dropped five feet below us, and everyone screamed except for me; the feeling felt familiar somehow.

*
After Andrew received his license, I accompanied him and his mom, Mary Jo, to buy his first car. Mary Jo wasn’t going to be able to help him pay for it, but I had offered to lend him a few hundred dollars if he needed it.

We looked at several different used car lots and ended up narrowing the choices down to two vehicles: a, sporty, black Eclipse, and a dark-brown Toyota Camry.

“So which one do you want to test drive?” the sales clerk asked Andrew.

“I think the price for this one is a little high for me,” he said and pointed to the Eclipse, “but I think this one could work,” he said, motioning to the Camry, yet looking directly in my eyes.

I shook my head vertically and smiled. I knew that he would be able to afford that car with the money he’d saved, and the little extra that I could let him borrow. I loved being able to help, and would’ve done anything for him.

When Andrew test-drove the car, the salesperson kept repeating, “It drives well, handles well.” Each time we took a turn, he’d repeat those exact words. Andrew turned to look at me in the backseat with a small smirk on his face, and I almost died of laughter. Luckily, we both were able to hold it in until we were out of the car and away from the salesman.

Every once in a while after that one of us would say to the other, “Yup, drives well, handles well,” and we’d both crack up. Andrew and I had been dating for about two years when he gave me a ring with a heart shaped stone to promise that we would always be together. We wanted to get married, but decided to wait until after college.

*
I was incredibly thrilled when I passed my driver’s test. Having a license was a ticket out of my house whenever things were bad with Mom and Joey, and when Andrew wasn’t home for me to visit.

During our junior year of high school, Andrew and I both started playing lacrosse. Neither of us had ever tried it before, but we were eager to learn. We bought sticks together and started playing catch outside in the grass. That turned into drills and practicing shots. After a few months of hard training, we were ready for try-outs, and both made the varsity team. I felt energized whenever I ran out onto the open field. It became difficult for me to manage lacrosse and skating, but I liked the challenge and enjoyed keeping myself busy. I realized that having an overflowing schedule also kept my mind off feeling depressed.

Lacrosse also provided a different kind of release for me. I felt liberated when I played. Skating relaxed me, but lacrosse was rugged; it fired me up. It exposed a side of me that I wasn’t familiar with. The aggressiveness of the game filtered out a lot of my anger. I could feel it each time I threw the ball. Every molecule of my body thrived during a game.

I also enjoyed being part of a team. I had friends at my skating club, but it wasn’t the same. I didn’t rely on them in a competition to win. In a game, you have to trust your teammates. I was able to experience the bonding of a group and especially liked that the entire burden didn’t always have to fall on me.

I’d finally bought my first car. I loved being able to drive my friends to lacrosse practice, even though they called my car, “The tomato.” I couldn’t blame them. The
orangey-red matte paint on my hatchback Toyota Tercel did make it resemble a piece of fruit.

Our team had to practice at the middle school because there weren’t enough fields at the high school. On our way there one afternoon, I had fit three people in the back seat of my car and one up front. I pulled out of the school parking lot and proceeded down a hill. A car idled, several feet in front of me, waiting to turn left. I started to slow down, but not fast enough. Once I was closer to the car, I realized that I wouldn’t have enough time to come to a complete stop. I slammed on the brakes and they screeched loudly until my car crashed into the back of the other car.

“Oh, no! What do I do?” I asked my friends.

“Pull over,” one of them said.

The other car pulled over, too, and the driver stepped out. I knew him. He attended my school and was in my class. I felt total embarrassment.

“I’m really sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay. Just a little fender bender. I guess we just call the insurance company and then they’ll take care of the rest.”

We exchanged information and both took off on our separate ways unharmed. Except for his bumper.

*

I had interviewed for a new job at Old Navy, a clothing store, when the amusement park closed for the season. I hated waking up at six AM on Saturday and Sunday mornings, but it was the only free time left over in my schedule.
One night, I helped one of my co-workers out by covering her late shift. I was so exhausted when I finally parked my car at home, that I staggered to my front door with my eyes half shut. When I extended my arm to unlock the deadbolt, I felt soft fur brush against my leg. I shrieked when I realized that a skunk was standing just below me. He proceeded to raise his tail and sprayed me directly in the face and then all over my entire body. I screamed again, then ran to my neighbor’s apartment and started banging on their door.

“I was just sprayed by a skunk! It smells so bad. Can I cut through? I’m afraid to go back on my porch again,” I said.

An indoor hallway connected our apartments, so I made it home without having to go back outside. Unfortunately, neither my neighbor nor I realized that I would leave a trail of skunk stench in their place that lasted several days.

I stunk so badly that I could taste it. The spray burned my nasal passages. I threw the clothes and brand new sneakers that I was wearing away. I took a shower in vinegar and water, but that didn’t help much. I tried bathing in tomato juice, but that only faded the stench. My sense of smell was masked by the scent. Everything I ate seemed to have a hint of skunk. I ended up carrying the odor with me everywhere for almost three weeks.

While I was working at Old Navy in the fitting room a few days after being sprayed, a customer caught on to my mishap.

“Do you smell a skunk in here?” she said to her friend.

I just stayed silent and played dumb. I was already humiliated enough; sitting in a confined classroom at school with my peers and smelling bad was like sitting among them naked. It felt as though everyone was glancing at me and whispering about me. I
was the elephant in the room. They all knew what happened; word spreads easier than hot butter in high school. I asked Andrew if the smell bothered him, and he said it didn’t, but I knew he was lying to spare my feelings. The next weekend, he thought we should do something to get my mind off the unfortunate incident.

Mom and Steven were going to be out all night that Friday, so we decided to have some friends over.

“I’m psyched. I’ve never had a party before,” I said to Andrew.

“Well, your apartment isn’t that big, so it will have to be more like a small gathering.”

“Do you think we could get some beer?”

“Yeah. I’ll have Buddha buy some.”

Later that night, we had about ten of our closest friends over. We listened to music and danced while we drank out of our forty-ounce beer bottles. Andrew and I made sure that everyone set out early so we could clean up. It wasn’t a very big mess, but we had to dispose of the evidence. Andrew threw the beer bottles into the woods behind my apartment. Mom and Steven didn’t suspect a thing when they returned home, and we thought we’d gotten away with it.

Mom picked me up that Sunday from skating practice, and we talked about my session in the car. She told me about the happenings of her day and that she had cooked dinner. When I walked into our apartment, I didn’t see any food on the table. Instead, lined up in a row, were all of the beer bottles that Andrew had thrown into the woods after our party. My bottom lip dropped until my mouth took the shape of an oval. I made a beeline for my bedroom.
“Get back here,” Mom said when she came in behind me.

She is sneaky, I thought. She didn’t say a word about this to me in the car. She wanted to catch me off guard, and she did.

“Do you want to tell me where these came from?” she asked.

“Well, no.”

She pressed further and I told her what happened. She grounded me for a month. She couldn’t ban me from skating because it was already paid for, but I wasn’t allowed to go over to Andrew’s house. After about two weeks of sitting outside together, Andrew and I convinced Mom to end my punishment. I never had another party.
Chapter Thirteen:

_I don’t know why life is constructed to be seamless and safe, why we make such glaring mistakes, things fall so short of our expectations, and our hearts get broken and our kids do scary things and our parents get old and don’t always remember to put pants on before they go out for a stroll._ Anne Lamott

Before I knew it, my senior year of high school was ending. Every year of my life seemed to go by faster than the one before. Andrew and I’d won the superlative of _Class Couple_ in our yearbook. All of the captions for the superlatives were verses from songs. Ours read, “Goin’ to the chapel and they’re gonna get married.”

I _did_ think we were going to get married. I loved him more than I could handle. He was the root of my laughter and the only person who could make the knot in the back of my throat go away. When he put his arms around me, I felt safe.

*

I graduated from high school the day before my eighteenth birthday. I still inhibited my dream of moving to California. I was fascinated by the state the moment I learned of its existence. I felt as though I belonged there. Perhaps it was the glitz and glam of Hollywood, or the magnificent beaches, or that my best friend, Jen and Auntie Crena had both relocated there. Sometimes I think I just wanted the chance to be on my own, with a new slate in a new state, and no one to take care of.

I had the opportunity to vacation in Southern California with Andrew shortly after graduation. For the first few days, we spent time with Jen who I hadn’t seen in years. She
was getting married to her boyfriend, Danny, and I had the privilege of being the maid of honor in their wedding.

After the ceremony, Andrew and I traveled up north to Los Angeles. We stayed with Auntie Crena, and while she was at work, we borrowed her car for sightseeing.

On the last day of our trip, we took a cruise down the Pacific Coast Highway. The palm trees swayed back and forth in the wind, like a pendulum. The sun was dazzling and reflected shimmers of light off the bright blue ocean waters of Malibu. Although I had only been there once before, I felt as if I were home.

*

Once we landed back in Boston, Andrew and I had to start thinking about college in the fall. It was elating and nerve racking at the same time. Even though I’d always wanted to move to the west coast, in the end, I decided to go to Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts. If Andrew wasn’t in the picture, I think I would’ve ended up in California, but my life would’ve taken a completely different course.

*

The day I moved into college, Andrew, Mom, Dad, and Nona came along to help. My campus was full of incoming freshman, unloading a portion of their lives from home, to begin their next venture. After I settled into my new dorm room, Mom gave me a hug and started to cry.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I just can’t believe that you’re in college.”

I couldn’t believe that she was crying. We said our goodbyes and I accompanied everyone to their cars. Andrew was the last to go.
“I’m not going to see you tonight,” I said, and it wasn’t until that moment that it hit me. My life was going to be completely different. Previous patterns and habits were now void. Going next door every night to spend time with Andrew was no longer an option. Things between us were never going to be the same. Was I ever going to be the same?

“I know,” he said.

We hugged for what seemed like ten minutes and kissed each other goodbye.

“I love you,” he said.

“I love you, too.”

He started his car and began to pull away.

I could never say, “Good-bye,” to him, it sounds too final. I was afraid that I’d be saying goodbye for good. Instead, I always said, “See you later,” and he got into the habit of replying with, “Not if I see you first.”

I’ll never forget the first time he said it. We’d been dating for almost six months, and I was leaving his room for the millionth time to head to mine.

“See you later,” I said.

“Not if I see you first,” he replied with a smile.

I couldn’t help but go back to hug and kiss him again. They were six simple words, but the best thing anyone had ever said to me. I wanted to stop time and stay in that moment forever.

*
I had been getting adjusted to Assumption with all the other freshman for about a week. On the day of my first class, about an hour before it began, I received a call from Andrew’s Mom, Mary Jo.

“Hey Ash, is Andrew there?”

“No, why?”

“Well he didn’t come home last night, so I just assumed.”

“He didn’t come home last night?” I asked, twirling my fingers around the telephone cord.

“No. I haven’t seen him. I thought he was with you.”

“He’s not. Did you call his cell phone?”

“Yes, but he didn’t answer.”

“Let me make some calls and I’ll call you back,” I said, and hung up immediately.

I called Andrew’s cell and didn’t get an answer. I scrolled through the contacts on my phone and tried anyone I thought who might know what’d happened. My hands were shaking and my fingers trembling, making it hard to push the small buttons. No one knew anything. I looked at the clock and noticed I had five minutes before my class was supposed to start. I wouldn’t be able to sit still in a lecture hall until I knew that Andrew was safe. I couldn’t bare the thought of losing him. It was paralyzing. I decided to skip the class.

After what seemed like a million grueling minutes turned into over an hour, my phone rang, and it was him.

“Hi. I’m so sorry I couldn’t call you until now. My cell phone died last night. I’m so sorry that you were worried,” he said.
“Worried? I almost had a coronary. It’s just not like you. What happened? Where were you?”

“I was at Peter’s house with a bunch of the guys. I ended up having too much to drink last night and decided to stay over there. I’m so sorry. I really didn’t mean to upset you or my mom.”

“It’s okay. I was just scared that something terrible had happened to you.”

*

The following weekend I’d planned to go home and visit Andrew. When I arrived at his house, he barely turned his head away from the television. I fixed the end of his navy blue pinstriped comforter and sat down on the edge of his bed. I could sense that something was wrong. I confronted him about it, but he denied that anything was upsetting him. After several minutes of silence, he blurted it out.

“Well, I’ve just been thinking, we are both going to different colleges, and I don’t know,” he said.

“Don’t know what?” I asked.

“I don’t know if I can do this anymore. I just want more time to hang out with my friends.”

I was so stunned that I didn’t know what to say. He continued talking for a few more minutes, but I have no recollection of what he said. I felt distraught. After the shock wore off, I started to ask questions.

“What?” I said, interrupting him. “You want to spend more time with your friends? You’re going to be living with them at school. When did you start thinking about
this? How long have you known you were going to do it? How could you?” I asked, as I stood up and began to pace back and forth across his bedroom.

“I’m so sorry, babe,” he said.

“Don’t call me that. How can you do this to me?”

I started to cry hysterically and he continued to apologize. This can’t be happening, I thought. I tried to kiss him, and he pushed me away. It felt like being kicked in the face, then the stomach.

I left his house, but didn’t stop crying. I felt a combination of anguish and anger that I couldn’t suppress. I stopped my car twice to throw up on the side of the road. By the time I arrived at home, my face was completely red and I’d cried so much that I’d lost a contact. I felt completely broken, as if someone had taken a giant knife and sliced me right in half. Mom tried to console me; however, nothing helped me but sleep.

I slept most of the next day. Nona called me that night. I could hear tension in her voice. She told me that Nana, my great grandmother who was married to Grampy, had passed away. After hanging up, I moved in slow motion, searching through my jewelry box for the pearl and diamond ring Nana had given me when I was about ten years old. I put it on my ring finger and it still fit. I began to stroke the top with my thumb, feeling the smoothness of the pearl. I felt completely paralyzed. How can someone be there one day, and the next, be gone.

I traveled back to school a couple of days later, feeling hollow, as if someone had sucked everything out of me with a giant vacuum. I hadn’t eaten in a few days, but my stomach felt swollen, and the thought of food made me want to vomit. My roommate, Caitlin, tried to cheer me up, but was depressed herself, so her attempts weren’t
successful. Even though she was one of my closest friends from high school, she was becoming distant. She hated dorm-life and kept the blinds closed in our room, creating constant darkness.

It took me a few hours to fall asleep that night, twisting and turning to find comfort. Thinking about Nana’s death and losing Andrew made it difficult to be at ease. Andrew was such a huge part of my past. Now he won’t be a part of my future, I thought, before changing positions again.

Sunlight peeking through the blinds on my window woke me up the following morning. I got the urge to shower right away. I felt sick and dirty. Walking back down my dorm-room hallway, all I could hear was the flip and flop of my shower sandals. I was two doors away from my room when my friend, Tina, came rushing out of hers.

“A plane just hit one of the twin towers!” she said.

I stood there in my bathrobe, speechless, trying to comprehend what she had said. “Seriously, and the other one was hit just a couple of hours ago. Go put on the news!”

Without another thought, I sprinted to my room and turned on the TV. There it was. Both Twin Towers had collapsed. The image gave each inch of my skin and bones the jitters. I wonder if Andrew knows about this, I thought. I wanted to call him, but didn’t think I should. The world crisis made my problem seem small.

I sat down on my bed and continued to watch the story on the news. The anchor reported a terrorist hijacking the planes. Thousands of people were injured or dead. Who could do something like that? I thought.
After the tragedy of September 11th, eight sleepless nights and seven foodless days, I broke down and considered calling Andrew. I thought about the uncertainty of the future, how short life seemed to be, and how lucky I was to have the option to contact him.

He answered during the first ring and I sighed with relief. Hearing his voice soothed me.

“How are you?” he asked.

“I’m okay. How about you?”

“Okay, but I miss you,” he said.

Hearing him say those words put my shattered world back together again instantaneously. If only I had the words to fix the world.

“How are you?” I asked.

“Actually, I’m with a few of my friends near your school right now, so I can be there in five minutes.”

I’m not sure why he was twenty-five minutes away from his campus and so close to mine, but he was. I always wondered if he’d been planning to visit me all along, but never found out the truth.

“Well, sure, that would be awesome, but what about your friends? I asked.

“They can wait in the car.”

I couldn’t believe it. He missed me, too. Less than ten minutes later, he was standing in front of me. Seeing him made me glow, but a small part of me wanted to resist that. I thought about how badly he’d gutted me. Could I ever forgive him? Could I ever trust him again? He interrupted my thoughts by wrapping his arms around me, and
feeling his embrace caused the knot in the back of my throat to dissipate. I realized that life was better with him than without him.

After talking a while, we decided to get back together, and I felt as if a giant weight was lifted off my shoulders and back.

*

Things with Andrew and I were never the same. Our relationship had been tainted; it was like a used car; after the first time it breaks down, it becomes weaker and weaker until it eventually dies.

The distance weighed on us; we were only thirty minutes apart, but had been used to living next door to one another. In addition to that, I was always tense, afraid of another break-up out of nowhere. We’d become two pieces of a puzzle that will attach to one another, but don’t actually fit.

Classes became more difficult each week, and my work continued to pile up. I was playing on the varsity lacrosse team, spending hours at the library for my work-study, and babysitting for a local family. With each passing day, I became more overwhelmed.

I started drinking a lot and experimenting with different kinds of drugs. I went out with the girls in my dorm room to party, but would often end up wandering home alone during early hours of the morning, not remembering what I did a few hours earlier.

One morning, I woke up feeling overwhelmingly violated. My body felt sore and I had a bruise underneath my right arm. I tried as hard as possible, but couldn’t recollect anything about the night before and had no idea how I got home.
Chapter Fourteen:

_In the final analysis, the questions of why bad things happen to good people transmutes itself into some very different questions, no longer asking why something happened, but asking how we will respond, what we intend to do now that it happened._

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

My roommate, Caitlin, started to hate college more and more. She was packed and ready to go home every Friday after her last class and didn’t return until late Sunday night. Every time I entered our room, she would be complaining on the phone to someone about school, or lying in her bed crying. I tried to cheer her up and even get her out sometimes. One Thursday night, I thought I was going to convince her.

“Cait, come on let’s go dancing tonight. It’ll be so much fun. You need a little excitement in your life every now and then. Let’s go!”

“No. I don’t feel like it,” she said.

“Come on, I’ll straighten your hair.”

“Really, Ash, I don’t want to. I’m going to watch TV and wrap some Christmas gifts.”

“I have gift bags you can keep, and how much television can you watch? I’ll tape Friends for you. Let’s just get out of here.”

“Sorry.”

It was impossible to make her happy. Eventually, I gave up and set off without her. The next morning Mom called the dorm and woke me up.

“Hello,” I said with a raspy voice and my eyes still shut.
“Hi,” she said, and I knew by the tone of her voice that something was wrong. My eyes opened wide.

“Oh no, what happened?” I asked.

“Uncle Mike was in a car accident.”

“Oh my God.” I held my breath.

“He’s, he’s.”

I interrupted her. “Is he dead?” I asked.

“No,” she said.

“Oh thank God.” I inhaled.

“But he’s not doing very well. He’s at Mass General Hospital right now. The doctors gave him a thirty percent chance to live.”

“Holy shit. Can you come get me?”

“No Ash, I wish I could. I have to stay here, but I already asked Steven and he said he didn’t mind.”

*

When I walked into the hospital room, Mom put her hand on my shoulder. Uncle Mike was lying lifeless on two hospital beds pushed together. He was so swollen that it looked as though there were two of him inside one body. His face and skin were a pale blue color and his eyes were shut. Some of his hair was shaved off and he had a machine or a tube connected to every limb, his chest, and head.

I could only look at him for a minute before I started to cry. How did he survive this? I thought. Will he survive this?

*
Uncle Mike was the passenger in his friend Hank’s car the night of the accident. They were driving on a four-lane highway and were hit head on by a BFI garbage truck. The impact caused Hank’s car to spin out of control and pushed it into oncoming traffic. They were then smashed by an AT&T truck. Uncle Mike was wearing his seatbelt, but because Hank wasn’t, he was thrown forty feet from the car, and died instantly.

I hated leaving the hospital that night. Mom ended up staying behind and everyone else headed home to get rest. I couldn’t sleep, though. I thought about how Uncle Mike was feeling, and if he even knew what had happened to him. I wondered if Grammy and Pa were taking care of him from heaven, like everyone in my family had said. Well if they were, how did this happen in the first place? I thought.

The next day at the hospital, I sat down next to Uncle Mike on his bed. Even though I knew he couldn’t talk back, I wanted him to know I was there.

“Hi, Uncle Mike.” Tears filled my eyes. I tried to be strong, but couldn’t hold it in any longer. I let myself cry. “I love you, and I’m here for you, and you’re going to get better really soon, okay?”

Hearing only the machines beeping made his unconsciousness seem even more real. Just say something, I thought. A word, any word will do. I lifted his sheet up higher on his chest.

“I, I’m here,” I said. I just wanted to hear his voice.

Going to sleep that night wasn’t any easier. I wondered how long this would go on, and what would happen after it was over.

The next day, I hadn’t seen Uncle Mike yet. I was sitting in the waiting room when Mom came running in with a huge smile on her face.
“He opened his eyes! It was only for a second, but he opened his eyes!”

“No way,” I said.

“Yes, he did! This is great news.”

“Wow! I can’t believe it. So what does this mean?” I asked.

“Well, I don’t know for sure yet, but the doctors are in with him now. I’m hoping that this is just the start of many progressions he’ll be making.”

I hugged Mom, Joey, and the rest of my family. We finally felt a tiny bit of hope. After a few weeks, the swelling settled down, and Uncle Mike started to look like himself again, but he still wasn’t moving or talking much at all.

* 

Christmas snuck up on me and was over faster than the entire chorus of Santa Baby. Uncle Mike was still in the hospital. My family and I continued to visit him, waiting patiently for his recovery. That March, with a lot of work and therapy under his belt, Uncle Mike was able to stand on his own. He was transferred to Spaulding Rehabilitation Center where he would spend an additional few months recovering. He had to learn every skill all over again, for the third time in his life, how to walk, talk, eat, and even go to the bathroom.

After Uncle Mike was settled in for a while, Mom drove me to visit him. I stared at the dotted lines on the pavement as we cruised up the highway. If I looked long enough, they seemed to form one long white line. I gazed at the sky and saw seagulls flying in circles. After a while, they resembled paper airplanes floating in the wind. I thought about how different life would be if Pa and Grammy were still alive. Life changes so quickly, I thought.
I gazed over at Mom and noticed a necklace on her neck that I hadn’t seen before.

The gold chain had a cross dangling from it, that landed right on her chest.

“Where did you get that?” I asked her and pointed to the new piece of jewelry.

“It belonged to Hank, the man that was driving the car Uncle Mike was in. His wife gave it to me. She thought it was a good luck charm for Uncle Mike.”

“She didn’t want to keep it for herself?”

“She had many things to remember him by, so she wanted me to have this.”

“Well that was really sweet of her. I wish I had something of Pa’s. It would be so nice to have an actual object of his, something that he touched.”

“Well, Pa did leave you his wedding ring,” she said.

“What?”

There was something of his still around that I could keep. Why hadn’t I been told about this before? I thought.

“But I lost it,” she said.

Immediately, I could feel my face turning from pale to pink to red. My cheeks felt as though they were burning and my eyes began to flood. My gut felt the same as it did after riding a roller coaster. I wrapped my arms around my waist, to comfort my stomach, and felt my fingers, shaking, on my hips.

“You lost it?” I asked.

“I thought I told you about this?” She seemed so nonchalant about it.

“No. I would have remembered something like that.”

I didn’t say anything else until we finally reached our destination. Uncle Mike’s new room in the rehab center smelled of roses and sugar. It was much more tranquil than
his previous hospital room. The walls and lights weren’t so bright and the windowsill was
covered with flower arrangements and balloons. There weren’t any strange machines
around, and Uncle Mike was tubeless. Instead of continuous beeping, I heard a TV in the
background. There was a rug on the floor and the sheets didn’t feel so itchy. I sat on the
side of his bed and gave him a hug.

“How are you feeling today, Uncle?”

“Eh, a little better than yesterday.”

“So what do you do in here?”

“Well, my nurse comes in everyday and the doctors about once a week. They
keep me pretty busy with therapy and tests. Other than that, I watch TV and hang out
with some of the guys down the hall.”

Even though Uncle Mike was improving, I was still really worried about him.

While I was home for Christmas break, Mom spent most of her time at the
hospital with Uncle Mike. Joey’s grandmother, Sis, was staying with us, to keep an eye
on him. She didn’t do a very good job.

One night, Joey broke into the model apartment in our complex. A cop saw him
walking down our street with a VCR and thought it was a bit peculiar. They took the
VCR back and escorted Joey home.

*

Eventually, Uncle Mike was able to move home. He secured a unit in an
apartment complex located in a city close to our house. Steven had proposed to Mom, so
she was busy planning her wedding and taking care of getting Uncle Mike settled in.
He’d only been home for a few weeks when Mom picked up the call.
“Can you come get me? I set my apartment on fire,” Uncle Mike said.

“Seriously?”

“I wouldn’t joke about this. I was making tea and fell asleep on the couch. There was a dishtowel next to the burner that caught the flame and set the rest of the apartment a blaze.”

“I’ll be right there,” Mom said.

While Uncle Mike was staying with us, waiting for his apartment to be ready, he watched Joey for Mom while she was at work. One of the last nights he stayed with us, he was angry with Joey for something. He picked Joey up by the throat and pinned him against the wall. He took off one of his socks and wiped his own butt with it. Then he shoved the sock in Joey’s face and rubbed it all over. After that, he left and Joey was home alone.
Chapter Fifteen:

*My life closed twice before its close;*

*It yet remains to see*

*If Immortality unveil*

*A third event to me,*

*So huge, so hopeless to conceive,*

*As these that twice befell.*

*Parting is all we know of heaven,*

*And all we need of hell*

Emily Dickinson

I didn’t notice that I was spinning out of control until I found myself flat in a hospital bed during the spring of my freshman year in college. When I first woke up, everything was blurry and the only color I could see was white. I felt empty. My head was pounding, and my stomach felt like barbed wire was turning in it, tearing up my insides.

Mom’s face and silhouette were clear to me as she moved down the emergency room aisle in my direction. She was just a few feet in front of my stepfather, Steven, walking quickly. Her tears fell faster with each step. She finally got to the side of my bed and grabbed my hand.

The only words I could get out were, “I’m sorry” and “I love you.”

She replied with a whimper, “It’s okay.”

*
The night before, I had gone out with a few friends to a local bar in Worcester called, Suney’s. I’d obtained my first fake I.D. that year and planned to use it until I wore it out. The license said I was five feet and eight inches tall, when I was barely over the five-foot mark, but I still managed to get where I was going.

The first thing I did at Suney’s was march directly to the bar with my friend Andrea to order drinks.

“Five shooters, please,” I said to the bartender.

Shooters were plastic test tubes filled with different, but strong, mixed drinks.

“Comin’ right up, honey.”

I turned to Andrea while we waited.

“So how was your psych exam yesterday?” I asked her.

“Alright, I think. I’ll find out soon enough. How was your week?”

“Same shit, different day.”

The bartender handed me the bright pink shooters one at a time. I stuck three in between my fingers, gave the rest to Andrea, and turned to pay the bartender.

“How much?”

“Ten, even.”

I gave him eleven dollars before Andrea and I met up with our girlfriends on the other side of the bar. Sara stood up and said, “Ladies, I would like to make a toast. To the brilliant men who love us, the nasty ones who have hurt us, and the lucky bastards who have yet to meet us.”

“Bottom’s up, ladies!” Andrea yelled and we all tapped our glasses together and drank.
I finished all three of my shooters with one sip and watched Andrea down her second one.

“Ready for another?” I asked her.

“Sure, let’s go.”

She and I headed over to the bar again, and this time we both ordered beers, then sprinted to the dance floor. I’d always loved to dance. Just hearing music made my body want to move. However, something about that night just didn’t feel right. I didn’t feel like dancing or doing anything at all. It could have been the horny, sweaty people pushed together like peanut butter and jelly in a sandwich, or the overpowering smell of smoke, but those were both unfortunate characteristics of that place that I had endured before.

It wasn’t long before I figured out that the thing that was different, was me. I was fed up with what I had let my life become. Going to the same bar every week, sometimes several times, and my constant need to party was a reminder of how much I had really transformed since I’d moved into college. My only constant, was that I was constantly looking for an escape.

I realized then, that for my entire life I had been putting a band-aid on a cut that needed stitches.

I decided to go home early, and alone. The girls put up a fight.

“You can’t go, Ash,” Andrea said.

“Yeah, who’s gonna get Gennie on the dance floor?” Sara chimed in.

“I’m sorry guys, I’m just tired. Tomorrow night, okay?”

“Fine, okay,” Sara replied with a sigh. “We’ll miss ya.”
I hugged the rest of my friends and darted for the door to catch a cab. My dorm was quiet and empty when I returned. Usually there were a few people running around causing a ruckus at this time of night. The lights were always on in the main building, so stepping into my room from the hall was like walking into a dark movie theatre.

My roommate was already asleep. At least she appeared to be. I had held in my tears until now. I didn’t want the cab driver to see me crying, and thought I might run into someone I knew along the walk to my room. I still felt the need to hide my feelings when I was upset.

I always thought sadness was contagious, just like laughter and yawning. I didn’t want to pass on my tears. Whenever it rained I felt like someone else was crying with me, and sometimes, that was good enough.

I hadn’t told anyone how forlorn I had felt for so long. I held in my tears whenever I could. I thought that I had to be strong and mask what I was feeling.

But that night, I realized that I couldn’t keep up the façade any longer. I wanted to crawl out of my skin. If only there was a hole I could have nestled into, or a rock I could’ve hidden under. The thought of going to another class or even shedding another tear was overwhelming me. I wanted out of my life.

I fell back into a memory of Pa, throwing a ball to me in our backyard, and then into one without a shred of light. I felt weak, in limbo between two worlds, neither of which I wanted to belong. I was still unsure of the heart of my pain. I need to be numb right now, I thought. I decided to take some pills. I didn’t take time to think of the possible consequences. I was hoping that taking those pills, would be the very last thing I would have to think about.
With only the light shining from my laptop, I struggled to see through my tears and the darkness to find my bottle of Advil. My hands shook uncontrollably as I tried to align the arrows on the cap. It was one of those oversized bottles from a big wholesale store. I leaned my head back, held the Advil to my mouth like a soda bottle, and started to drink. I gulped the Advil and pushed the sugarcoated pills roughly down my throat until I couldn’t swallow anymore. I took a breath. I opened my desk drawer and found some other random samples of medicine, Claritin, and a few other kinds that I didn’t recognize. I unwrapped and swallowed those, too.

There were tears pouring out of my eyes, but my face was completely numb when I looked at myself in the mirror. I felt as though every ounce of pain I had ever felt came over me again with an unstoppable force. It shook my inner core like an earthquake, permanently separating something in my body.

My mind was blank for a minute, and a second later, I could see my life unfolding like a book in the back of my mind. I saw an image of Pa and Grammy hugging me as I got off the school bus, and then they were gone with a flash that brought an image of Joey crying to the front of my mind. I saw a hand strike him, and he fell to the ground. Then, his face turned into Mom’s, and she was now the one being hit. I saw kids at school teasing me, throwing food at me in the cafeteria. I imagined myself falling down a huge dark hole without an end in sight. I saw Dad trying to reach out for me, but I kept falling.

My friend, Gennie, saved me that night. I had an “away message” posted on my AOL instant messenger with lyrics from the song, *Blurry*, by Puddle of Mud. My message read: “Everything's so blurry and everyone's so fake and everybody's empty and
everything is so messed up, pre-occupied without you, I cannot live at all. My whole world surrounds you, I stumble then I crawl.” The song summed up my feelings almost precisely. I felt hollow and hated living without Pa and other people that I had loved and lost. I also sensed that Andrew and I were constantly slipping farther apart, and feared that my first love would be my last.

Considering that my usual “away message” consisted of some kind of smiley face, Gennie decided to walk over to my room to check on me. I don’t know how she found access to the main building, but luckily my room was unlocked. I was very out of it, and she knew that something was extremely wrong.

My roommate, Caitlin, and I had been friends since middle school, so Gennie tried to wake her up. Caitlin wouldn’t budge. Gennie ran down the hall to Karen’s room, who I’d also been close with for years. I found out later that Karen called one of our older friends, who was allowed to have a car on campus, for a ride to the hospital.

The next thing I remember is a nurse sticking a straw in my mouth.

“Drink this,” she said. “It’s going to help you.”

I couldn’t speak, so I just started sipping. A cold, gross, sandy textured charcoal came shooting out of the straw and into my mouth. I wanted to throw up. Noticing my hesitation, the nurse looked at me and pulled the straw away from my lips.

“Just close your eyes and drink, this is activated charcoal. It’s not supposed to taste good.”

I kept drinking.

“You have to drink three glasses of this, so try to hold your nose.”

“Three glasses,” I barely said, hoping she misspoke.
“Yes, three, I’m sorry.”

I took her advice. I closed my eyes, held my nose, and drank. I felt like I had put a sidewalk down my throat.

*

Sunlight flooded into my room at the hospital, but it was cold. A nurse stepped in, one I thought I may have seen the night before, but wasn’t sure.

“Hi Ashley.”

“Hi.”

“Do you remember talking to me very early this morning?”

“No. Well, I remember your face a little.”

“We talked for a while. I’m sorry about what you have been through, and I know you had a long night, but we are going to transfer you to another hospital.”


“Well, I’m sorry, but these are the doctor’s orders.”

“I don’t care, I want to go home. Where’s my Mom?” I asked.

“I’m not sure, but your step-dad is right here.”

Steven’s presence is normally noticeable. He was a salesman with a friendly demeanor. I had a blurry memory of seeing him and Mom arrive several hours after I did the night before, but didn’t remember talking to them and hadn’t noticed that he was in the room. He stood in the corner, silent, and Mom was nowhere in sight. Mom’s presence would’ve comforted me. I wanted to see her big smile and eyes like a forest, green with specs of brown.

“Steven, where’s Mom?”
“I think she’s in the bathroom, Ash.”

I thought of a way to plead with him, of what to say to get him to take me home. I was desperate, scared, and trembling.

“I will hate you forever if you make me go there,” I said to Steven.

He didn’t know what to say.

“There is nothing he can do. You have to follow the doctor’s orders, Ashley,” the nurse said.

“No, I am not going there. Why do I have to go there? I am fine.”

“You are fine now, but you weren’t last night. It is not fine that you want to go to heaven to be with your grandparents, do you remember telling me that?”

“No, I take it back, I didn’t mean it, I want to go home.”

“Aren’t you the same girl that said she wanted to stop crying all the time?”

“I don’t care what I said. I want to go home.”

“I’m sorry, Ashley, but you have to go to the other hospital.”

I quickly jumped up out of the bed and took a stride over to the counter where my contacts sat.

“You can’t run away. There are police officers here.”

I glared at the nurse with the most evil look I could put on my face and wished I could backhand her across the face so hard that it would make her whole body spin.

“I’m not going to run away. I am going to put my contacts in so I can see.” I wanted to follow that with, “Duh,” but I didn’t.

I started to cry, making it incredibly difficult to put my contacts in. I was so angry that, again, I didn’t know what to do. I had no choice. I was taken by ambulance to
another hospital in Newburyport. Mom came along for the ride, and Steven, home to change. My head was pounding, and I felt like a prisoner. I was not able to eat yet because of the immense stomach pain, and all I wanted was my own house and my own bed and my cat.

The almost hour ride in the ambulance felt like days.

“Ash, do you know what I would do without you?” Mom asked.

“No.”

“I would be so lost,” she said as she pushed a piece of my hair out of my face and brushed it behind my ear.

“You would be okay,” I said and looked out the window at the cars flying by on the highway.

“I don’t think I would.”

I turned my head to look at her. “I’m sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“I know you didn’t sweetie.” she grabbed my hand and squeezed it. “I know you didn’t.”

When the ambulance parked at the other hospital, I immediately felt an aura around the grounds that made my entire body shiver. It felt like I was in a scary movie and once I stepped inside the building, creepy music would start to play in the background.

I reluctantly set forth inside with Mom, escorted by the EMT from the ambulance. Everything appeared normal; it looked the same as any hospital. It just felt different. I got goose bumps all over and the hair on my arms stood up straight. A nurse met Mom and me at the front desk.
“Hi, you must be Ashley.”

I didn’t reply.

“She’s really nervous,” Mom said to the nurse.

“Well, you don’t have to worry, Ashley, we’ll take good care of you.”

I remained silent, looking at the white floor.

“Let’s go upstairs.”

“Okay, after you,” Mom replied.

Upstairs? What was upstairs? A second floor dungeon? A large white room with a bed that I’d be bound to? I thought. I was so scared that I considered making a bolt for the door and running away to Canada or even Mexico. As I made my way into the elevator, goose bumps formed over every inch of my tired body.

The elevator led to a small foyer no larger than a normal sized bathroom. There was a locked door with an intercom similar to a security system at an apartment complex. The nurse pushed one of the buttons on the intercom.

“Yes?” A voice said through the speaker.

“I’m back.” The nurse replied.

I heard the door buzz, and my chance to escape was long gone.

The nurse led the way through the big metal locked door. I was terrified about what would happen next.

Mom and I proceeded to the registration desk and answered a series of questions for the woman checking me in. Then the woman asked for my purse. I was shocked.

“What?”
“Could you please hand me your purse?” she asked again, but I could tell it was not really a question that time, but more of a demand.

“Can I have it back?” I asked.

“Sure, as soon as I check it.”

She searched through my purse and took my eyelash curler, mascara, a small compact mirror, and some lotion.

“Here you go.”

She handed over my purse and looked at my hooded sweatshirt that read, “Assumption.”

“Take out the string in the hood of your sweatshirt, please.”

“What?” I asked, in shock, again.

“Your sweatshirt hood, it has a string to tighten it, take that out, please.”

“Just do it, Ash,” Mom said to me.

I untied the knots at each end, pulled the string out and gave it to her.

“Thank you. Now your shoe laces please.”

“Are you serious?”

Mom interrupted me, “Please, Ash, just do it.”

I handed over my shoelaces. I felt like I was handing over my freedom.

“Thank you. Now let me show you to your room.”

As Mom and I followed the woman down the corridor, I noticed how dark it was. There weren’t any windows that I could see. The walls were painted tan with white trim and the floor was covered with a brown rug.
My room was a square box with a tiny window up higher than I could reach. The twin bed was hard, the blankets stiff and the kind that make your skin itch. I spent the rest of the morning in front of the registration booth lying on two chairs pushed together, in a daze.

A nurse told me that I had to attend group therapy later that day with the other patients and that I had an appointment with a doctor in the morning for an individual session. There were many patients wandering around, but I felt completely alone and hollow. The patients all seemed very different. Some of them had been living there for years. Others were temporary, like me.

Later that afternoon, I attended group meeting. It took place in a small room down the hall from the registration desk next to the small cafeteria that was just for the people in my wing. I could smell dinner in the air, but hadn’t managed to work up an appetite. There were about six of us and the counselor sitting on couches set up in a circle. We all had to introduce ourselves and say why we were there. I tried to block out the introductions of the first four people. I didn’t think I was like them, and I didn’t want to be there. The last person to introduce herself before me was a girl who looked about my age.

“Hi, my name is Laura, and I’m here because I swallowed almost an entire bottle of Tylenol PM four nights ago,” she said.

She and I had done almost the exact same thing. I was like her. I was dumbfounded. I realized at that moment that I never wanted to be there again, but felt like I had to be. I wished I could’ve taken back the previous thirty six hours. My turn came next.
“Um, I’m Ashley,” I said and then paused for a moment and took a breath. “I, I took too many pills, too.”

“Why did you do that?” the counselor asked.

“I guess I just didn’t know what else to do. I felt, well, trapped.”

“Trapped and what else?”

“Sad.” I started to cry. “I just felt so sad.”

“Well, we are going to find out why, and fix that. Okay?”

Then there was another awkward pause. I thought about what it would be like to not feel so lugubrious all the time.

“Okay.” I said.

After that meeting, to my surprise, I felt a little bit better. A little bit lighter, as if I’d just stepped off the ice.

Having visitors was uplifting, too. Steven and Mom’s friend, Sharon, came by to see me. I could only have two guests at a time, so Steven and Mom waited outside and let Sharon come in first. She was great. She didn’t ask too many questions. I just wished she could have helped me spring out of that place like I’d asked her to. She sat on the floor next to the two chairs I was lying on in the hall, and held my hand for almost an hour to comfort me.

After I sat with Mom and Steven for a minute, the nurse told us that I had two other visitor’s waiting to come in.

Dad held the big door for Nona. They sat down next to me and I could tell that they both had been crying. Nona was holding a tissue, and Dad’s eyes were red around the rim.
I hugged Dad and kissed his cheek. Nona sat down on the other side of me and held my hand. We were all quiet for most of the visit until Nona asked if I wanted any cookies. She always had a stash of Oreos in her purse.

Andrew was not himself when he came in to see me. His usual, ear-to-ear, grin was missing. His walk was slow and drooping. His eyes looked sore. He sat down next to me, and locked his stare with mine, without saying a word.

“’I’m sorry,’” I said.

“Why did you do it?”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know. I didn’t know what else to do.”

He was quiet for a minute and then handed me a C.D.

“I made this for you,” he said.

I took the C.D. and held it tightly. He had made me a mix tape with all of our songs on it back when compact discs weren’t out yet. It was the sweetest thing. I was assuming this C.D. was something like it. I wanted to hug him, but told him I hadn’t showered in two days. He said he didn’t care and still wrapped his arms tightly around my body. When he had to leave, I felt a jab in my stomach, almost like the cramps I used to get while running in a lacrosse game.

Sleeping at the hospital in Newburyport was the hardest part of my time there. Once I said goodbye to Mom, who stayed with me as long as she could, I dragged myself down the hallway, into my room, and fell into bed. The nurse gave me some medicine to make me drowsy, but it just made me feel dizzy and disengaged.

I stared up; the light from the lobby was bright enough that I could see the ceiling. It looked like someone had painted it with globs of toothpaste. I could hear other patients
talking in their rooms, some yelling occasionally. I didn’t feel safe if I shut my door, but I also didn’t feel safe if I left it open. I closed my eyes, pretended the door wasn’t there, and cried myself to sleep.

A nurse woke me up at 6 AM to take blood and do some other tests. I also had to be ready for a private meeting with my new shrink. I was finally able to eat a few pieces of bacon, and I took a shower.

The shower was big and had a seat for a handicapped person. The water sprinkling on my body felt as though it was washing off a bad layer of skin. I had to use the soap and shampoo that the hospital provided, which was Johnson and Johnson’s for babies. The smell of it was refreshing and familiar. I locked the door to the bathroom, but was still afraid of someone trying to get in. Every time I closed my eyes to put my head under the stream of water, I wiped them quickly, and opened them again to make sure that I was still alone. The warm water on my head and shoulders felt refreshing after three days of hospitals all over me.

Next, I was ready to see the psychiatrist. I met him in his small office with wood paneling on the walls that matched his desk. I sat opposite him while he asked a series of questions.

“How do you feel when you first wake up?” he wanted to know.

“How do you feel when you first wake up?” he wanted to know.

“Tired and sad.”

How about right before bed?

“Is it okay if I say the same answer?” I asked.

“How do you feel when you first wake up?” he wanted to know.

“If your answer is the same.”

“Is it okay if I say the same answer?” I asked.

“Well before bed I also feel tired and sad.”
“Do you cry before you fall asleep?”

“I usually have to cry, in order to fall asleep. Otherwise, I just keep thinking.”

“About what?” he asked

“Everything. I just can’t stop. My mind is always worrying about something. My family, friends, school.”

“Do you cry only at night?”

“No. Also in the shower, sometimes in the car.”

We talked for about an hour and a half. I couldn’t believe the information he asked about my family members. It was like he wanted to know their life stories, too. Maybe he should be writing this book.

He used charts and graphs and asked more questions. It was so tiring. Finally, I thought it was over when he stood up.

“Okay, Ashley, I’m going to have you fill out these sheets for me, and then we are going to perform some simple, standard tests for the rest of the evaluation. Then you’ll be all set.”

“Sure.” Like I had a choice, I thought.

I was so happy when it was over. Soon after, Mom arrived.

“Can I go home today?” I asked her.

“I’m going to see what I can do, okay? How are you feeling?”

“I just want to be done with all of this.”

Finally, the doctor was ready to see Mom and me with his results.

He told me that I had generalized anxiety disorder and depression. He prescribed medication for me to take every day, and said that if I wanted to leave the hospital, I
would have to go to weekly outpatient therapy. I agreed, even though I hated the idea. I just wanted to get out of that place.

Later that day when I finally departed from the hospital, I felt like I had left fifty pounds behind. I felt free and together, although still torn into a million pieces on the inside. At least I thought I had a chance. I thought I had the tools to put myself together again.

What I did not realize was that my single act had upset other people in my life. My parents blamed themselves. I had made them both cry. My family members were hurting, and I had caused their pain. Andrew didn’t know what to think, and I’d created another wedge between us.

I felt as if my friends and family were afraid of me or what I might do. Their pain made mine double. I began to think that I wouldn’t ever feel normal again. I had to figure out what was wrong inside me, and quickly.

*

Going to therapy was a chore until I found Beth. The first two therapists that I’d worked with didn’t help me the way she did. Beth was a sweet woman with a huge heart. She had deep brown hair and dark mocha colored eyes that were wide and understanding. I instantly connected with her and felt like I could tell her anything.

She listened with care and gave advice, but never lectured. She taught me techniques to conquer my anxiety. With a combination of therapy, medication, and taking time during my day just to breathe, I started to feel like I had the power heal. To feel human. Each week when I departed from her office, I felt as though I had peeled a layer
off my pain. When I spoke to her, it was as if I was able to leave some of my burden
behind.

Soon I was ready to go back to school, but apprehensive because I was unsure of
what my peers thought or how they would react to my return. I imagined getting dirty
looks and losing friends because they thought I was crazy or even worse, keeping friends
due to pity.

Walking into my dorm room again was chilling. I tried to block the night out of
my head, but saw a few Advil pills scattered on my floor and burst into tears.

The entire time I had spent in that dorm room was miserable. The last year had
pushed me over the edge, but I was bound to explode eventually after carrying around the
baggage of my past. I was about to embark on a long healing process that should have
started a lot earlier. It was time to take off the band-aid and start the stitching.

During a visit with Beth, she wanted to talk about Pa. She thought it was
important that I say a proper goodbye. She suggested that I go to his grave and talk to
him, as if he were there. I didn’t like the idea at first. I knew it would evoke emotions I’d
been burying for years. After I considered it for a while, I realized that it was something I
should do.

The overcast sky above mimicked my dreary mood as I drove to Pa’s grave. I
didn’t tell anyone except Beth about what I was planning on doing. I tried to remember
exactly where his grave stone was inside the cemetery. I had been there only a few times
as a child to drop off flowers on Christmas and his birthday, though I was confident that I
would remember where it was. Where he was. I still felt as connected to him as the last
day I saw him.
I pulled into the graveyard and clicked my radio off. I turned in and right away was able to recognize the first several rows of headstones. Pa was buried among other veterans with those distinct, matching gravestones.

I parked my car and started walking up and down the rows. I read name after name, but didn’t see Pa’s. I questioned whether I was in the right place, but dismissed the thought right away. I read over one hundred names before I gave up and sauntered back to my car.

I decided that I would drive a lap around, just to see if he was in another area. Driving through the cemetery felt like driving through a maze. I didn’t think it was this complex. There were different sections and one-ways. I called my search off when I ran into a dead end and felt lost.

As I attempted to find the entrance where I came in, I saw it. The small pond, the giant willow tree that looked despondent, and the section of rectangular, marble veteran stones, lined up as straight as soldiers. I followed the road down to where his grave was. I didn’t remember exactly which one was his, but I knew it was there. I was sure of it that time.

I slowed down in front of the section where Pa was and shifted my car into neutral. After rolling for a minute, my car came to a complete stop, without my foot ever touching the brake. I shut off the engine and stepped out of the car to begin my search. I didn’t have to go far. The very first gravestone, the one my car stopped in front of, was his. I felt a rush of happiness and of hurt, simultaneously. I fell to my knees, wrapped my arms around the stone, and kissed the top of it. I cried.
“I miss you so much, Pa. I can’t believe that you’re gone. I really need you. I love you,” I said as I ran my index finger along each letter of his name.

My entire face was soaked with tears. I wished for more time with him, but knew that would never be possible. I had gone there to say goodbye, but couldn’t. I didn’t want to. Pa would always be with me.

I grabbed napkins, water from my car, and wiped his gravestone down. I left some flowers and blew him a kiss as I drove away.

Beth was right; I did get closure from that day. Every time I miss Pa, I go visit his grave. Somehow, each time, I feel a little bit closer to him.

*

My next challenge was to forgive Mom. She had stopped hitting Joey, but I had trouble forgetting the past. When I’d finally worked up the confidence, I told Mom how much it hurt me to be around her when she lost control.

She was shocked at first, but then regretful. She apologized several times. She told me that Pa used to hit her when she was younger and that it was all she knew. She didn’t know how to handle her anger or her temper. She explained that she knew what she did was wrong and wanted to take those years back. She promised that it wouldn’t happen anymore, and I chose to forgive her.
Chapter Sixteen: *I will love the light for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars.* Og Mandino

It had been about four years since I was at Anna Jacques Hospital in Newburyport and three years since my car accident. I’d graduated college and moved into my first apartment in southern New Hampshire.

On a Saturday morning in August, I woke up with a sour feeling bubbling in my stomach. I didn’t sleep well the night before. The sun was bright and the sky was cloudless. I looked out my front window and was captivated by the new hydrangeas that had bloomed in my garden. I stepped outside for a minute, watched some cars pass by, and inhaled the new floral scent. When I was back inside, I left the door open and the crisp air flowed through the screen.

One thing I learned in therapy was that I had to make time for myself to rest. Not just to sleep, but to actually rest my mind. It didn’t matter if I became lost in a book, watched a film, jogged outdoors, or took a bubble bath, as long as I could unwind.

I think I landed myself in the hospital partly because I was so wound up for so long. I just didn’t stop moving all day until I crashed at night, making it easier to ignore the sadness I felt inside. I had just recently turned twenty-three years old and celebrated by spending an entire day at home, for the first time since I was an infant.

My plan that Saturday was to bask in the sun on my front lawn. Before I made it outside, I heard a knock on my door. When I looked out the window, I saw that it was Gramps.
“Well, honey, I hate to tell you this, but I’m here with bad news,” he said after I let him in.

I sat down on my black futon to prepare myself.

“Joey got himself into some trouble last night. He was in Malden with his friends, and they were involved in a fight.”

The hair on my arms stood up.

“A bad one?” I asked.

“He was stabbed, honey. He’s okay, though. He’s at Mass General right now.”

I couldn’t believe it. I had so many questions. “What? Where did he get stabbed? Is it bad? Is he awake? What time did this happen?”

“It happened this morning around two A.M. In his neck. He is awake. Do you want to go see him?”

“Of course. I want to leave right now, and I want to drive my own car.”

I grabbed my keys and purse and sprinted for the door.

“Are you sure you can drive?”

By the time Gramps had finished his sentence, I was already out the door. The hospital was about an hour away from my apartment, and I didn’t have any patience for the speed limit. I was about to pull onto the highway when I saw sirens flashing behind me. I thought about ignoring them, but realized that I would have to pull over. It seemed like an eternity before the policeman finally approached my car and I rolled down the window.

“License and registration,” the cop said.
I’d been crying, so I tried to catch my breath.

“I’m sorry. I know I was speeding. I just found out that my brother was stabbed and he’s in the hospital. I need to get there,” I said as I handed him my license.

He walked back over to his car, but returned quickly.

“You can go, Mam, but please drive safely or you may not make it there.”

I took off right away. Each mile I drove seemed as if I was traveling at a snail’s speed. My body felt like the core was being ripped out. I had to make it to Joey; I needed to see that he was okay for myself. It seemed like it had been hours before I finally arrived at the hospital. I sprinted inside as if I was racing in the Olympics. I refused the elevator because I knew it would go too slowly.

When I finally entered Joey’s room, I ran to him and grabbed his hand. I could breathe again, but the sight of him brought tears quickly. My heart ached watching him helpless in a hospital bed, hooked up to machines, his neck stapled together underneath the bandages.

“Hey you, how are you feeling?” I asked him softly, afraid to know the answer.

“I could be better,” he said with a smirk.

“You scared me.”

“Just think, now all the ladies will love me,” he said, trying to make a joke.

I forced out a laugh and admired his courage. I didn’t think I would have been able to maintain a positive attitude if the roles were reversed.

“So tell me what happened,” I said.
“It happened so fast. I was out with my friends last night and we stopped at Seven Eleven. My friend John was arguing with a kid named, Anthony, but only for a minute and then Anthony drove away. I thought it was all over,” he said and shook his head from side to side. “Then I saw Anthony’s car pull back into the parking lot. He jumped out of it and lunged at John. I stepped in to stop what I thought would be a fistfight, but Anthony had a knife in his hand. Right when I noticed it, he stabbed me in the neck. I don’t really remember anything after that.”

I found out that it wasn’t just any knife, but a double bladed butterfly knife. Right after it tore through Joey’s skin, Anthony dropped it, hopped in his car, and sped away. Joey was lying unconscious on the ground; his friend, Ryan, wrapped a cloth around his neck to stop the bleeding, and called 911.

At the hospital, doctors found that Joey had a torn artery and ripped muscle. The doctors performed surgery right away. He was lucky to be alive. I was lucky he was alive. I couldn’t imagine life without him.

The next day, I went to visit Joey again. Mom was already there. He was uncomfortable, in pain, and wanted nothing more than to go home. I hated having to stay in a hospital, but having him there was worse. I wished I could’ve switched places with him.

I saw Joey the next morning before I had to go to work. He was still asleep when I arrived. He was almost sitting up in the hospital bed with his neck craned to one side; his mouth was opened just a crack. My insides started to feel uneasy. It hurt me so much to see him that way.
I knew he would have a soar neck after sleeping in that position, so I stood next to him and propped his neck up with a pillow and my shoulder. His eyelashes fluttered at first, but he fell right back into his trance. I just watched him sleep. He looked so innocent and vulnerable, just like when he was a little boy. I remembered our childhood and all the times I’d tried to protect him and couldn’t. There I was again, helpless, trying to protect him.

My heart was aching after leaving the hospital that day. I cried when I left his room. I would have done anything to help him.

Finally, after about five days, he was able to leave Mass General, and I felt like I had Independence Day fireworks going off inside. We drove Joey home as soon as possible, where he had to rest, relax, and recuperate. Soon he was ready for physical therapy. After a few appointments, he was able to move his neck again. His progress was slow, but definite.

Joey’s scar is seven inches long. The red and slightly swollen scar tissue begins below his ear and continues down his neck to the end of his collarbone. Despite the ever so constant physical reminder he bears for the world to see, he must also hold the memory of torment and anguish he felt the night he almost lost his life.

The boy who stabbed my brother, Anthony, eventually turned himself in. He was charged with two criminal acts: assault with a deadly weapon and assault with the intent to murder.

I realized that life had thrown another curve ball in my direction. Experiences from the past taught me that there were two ways to look at this and two ways to react to
it. My brother was almost murdered. I could become scared again, crawl back into my cocoon. On the other hand, I could focus on my brother being alive. How lucky am I?

Life can create havoc in any circumstance, but when I figured out that I had control over how I felt, I knew I would be okay, no matter how much turbulence came along. I finally figured out how important it was to secure your own oxygen mask, in case of emergency on an airplane, before someone else’s. I didn’t realize that you could run out of air trying to help somebody. Then, both parties would be out of luck.

I was running out of air all those years, worrying about Joey and other people that I loved, trying to save them. I didn’t realize that first, I had to save myself. Once I figured that out, I finally allowed myself to heal. I spread my wings, and became free to fly.

“I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity.” Gilda Radner