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A Sisterhood that Never Existed

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A Sisterhood that Never Existed

Katelyn Greer
University of Tennessee
May 2010

Chapter 1

Therapy

The smell of wild flowers near
High noon
Everyday . . .

Gives her chills
In her mind, while
Reality drifts far away
Like a sailboat at sea with no safe harbor.

This was the saddest story I've ever known. It was my story, and they were my tears that fell on the pillow almost every night for more than twenty years. But when the tears stopped flowing, I found I missed them unbearably so. She and I were not twins, but we might as well have been. We were one year apart. She was my senior and I the baby of the family. We grew up in a small town that sheltered us from the corruption of large-minded city thinkers.

Summers were filled with ice cream, hopscotch, and fort building, and riding down the hill in the neighborhood with no hands on our handlebars. There was so much laughter that our ears rang with happiness through autumn. Winters brought just enough snow for sledding, snowball fights, and snowmen. Our childhood was normal, so normal that it was blasé. We lived in a white house on top of a knoll, overlooking the greater part of Staffordshire. Everyone knew everyone else. Staffordshire was one of those communities that were too closely-knit together. We had town meetings every two weeks, and everyone came out to the monthly fairs, bake sales, or knitting contest because everyone always knew someone else who was involved in one. It was obnoxious how picturesque our lives were.

Life wasn't all perfection. We had the annoying goat owned by Old Man Willie, who lived alone in a dilapidated house on the edge of town. His fence was run-down and Goat Tom ran freely through Staffordshire, eating Ms. Lucy's lettuce and plumber Joe's pansies. But it was basically perfection on a silver platter. Then the doctor's diagnosed her with mental retardation. We already knew, but our refusal to believe was so profound that when the best doctors in Connecticut uttered the final sentence, we never admitted to seeing the signs. She had an IQ of 69, which meant her case was mild. She had slower cognitive skills, psychomotor retardation, and aphasia. The doctors exchanged even more complicated words, but I stopped listening. We never saw it coming. She was always smiling.

Our parents had been trying for years to have children, and our community had held their breath, gnawed their nails off, and waited through seven failed attempts. Margaret, the owner of the best and only candy store in town said that some people were meant to be parents. She said our parents were one of those predestined. She had a way of making everyone a little more at ease with his or her lot in life.

Margaret was very observant and she remembered everything someone said to her. People whispered that she was a CIA operative before retiring at 84 to run the candy store. Perhaps Margaret only spoke truths because they were the words others had poured into her, just to spill back out when they needed them the most. But whatever she said, it was always true. She once said to me that I would turn out all right and that my future was filled with challenges and also endless laughter.

I was seven and my sister and I had just split a box of Mild Duds. This was after we had found out about my sister's diagnosis. So much of my time with her is partitioned into BC and AD centering on her diagnosis. I needed to hear Margaret's words, but I wasn't sure if I believed them. It was the first time I questioned Margaret's magic. At the time, I thought she had finally gone senile in her old age. How could her words be true? I didn't believe, but I wanted to. Her words kept coming back to me when I felt hopeless, and so I waited to see if her prophecy would come true.

For a time, I thought things were improving, but by her ninth birthday I knew I would always be her keeper. She couldn't speak fast enough for the children our age to remain interested as her friends. Although they were never rude or bullied her, it wasn't the same. Thinking back, she never changed. It was us that changed. After the doctor's verdict, society labeled her and so did we. I loved her more furiously and acted as her ultimate protector, a role that naturally came to me. It would become one I would regret taking, as I grew older and she younger. But truth was that the whole town loved her more, not just me. Her crooked smile called us to action without ever parting her lips.

She never learned again after the fourth grade. She was like everyone else in all aspects, and maybe even more so because her capacity to hope and her human spirit was alive and vibrant instead of diminishing with age, but her cognitive development seemed to come to a halt. The labels that we said we didn't use but tagged her with, weighed her shoulders down. As she grew up, nothing else did in her world. She didn't learn to filter her language, instead maintaining childlike parakeet habits of repeating everything she sees or hears. She still hated to brush her teeth and go to sleep at designated bedtimes. She loved wearing bright colors and mixing patterns together in her outfits. She liked to wear her hair long so I could braid it or pull it back in pigtails. Her body developed much like mine, biologically. We were 5'6" with long brunette hair. I wore glasses, but she never had to. It was like her distorted view of the world existed once I took off my glasses at night and slipped away into silent dreams. Life was like an Alice in Wonderland movie, where I grew older and she grew larger than life.

Fifth grade was hard for me. Our parents had decided that since it made no difference, she and I would go to school together. It was the best decision for her, but they never asked me. One morning I woke up at 7:45. My sister was still in bed, but these days, my parents let her stay at home for almost any reason she could come up with. I brushed my teeth, threw on clothes that our mother had laid out last night after she mummified us during bedtime story.

We still shared a room and although I had outgrown most of our nightly rituals, I still secretly enjoyed them, though they did them for her benefit and I happened to share a bedroom with her. I tromped downstairs and found a bowl of cereal waiting for me – Cinnamon Crunch. Our mother had stopped buying Cinnamon Crunch after she read somewhere that eating oatmeal could stimulate children's growing mind. I didn't question my change of fortune; instead I vigorously ate through two bowls.
"Where's your sister?"

"In bed. I guess she's sick again. Or something," I said between mouthfuls of crunchy sweetness.

"Go and tell her to get up please."

"But she already missed two classes by now, and she'll be whiny!"

"No she hasn't. She's going with you to school."

"What? She's in middle school now." My mouth stopped chewing in confusion.

Our mother could be so ditzy at times. I wasn't about to let my true feelings show. She had gotten Cinnamon Crunch, which had to mean something. I was nine, in the fourth grade, and eating my favorite cereal for breakfast was no small triumph. But then I looked up from my cereal bowl and saw her face. That was when I understood what she was not saying. When it came to my sister, there was an automatic understanding with everyone. I remember an inner sigh that flooded my tiny adolescent body with a foggy weight. It was like an inevitable fate that was finally fulfilled.

From then on, we were attending the same school, the same classes, had the same friends, ate the same food, and lived in the same house. She became a heavy right arm, paralyzed from the elbow down, rendering it useless. Looking back, I do believe that our treatment of her inabilities kept her from growing and developing further. We had resigned ourselves to her fate without ever asking her if she could do more. Sixth grade was a particularly hard time for us. It was a new school with a combination of old friends and new enemies. I constantly worried about her not getting used to our new school, new teachers, and even new facilities. She wasn’t a baby, incapable of everything, but somehow her dependency upon others became that one-sided nurturing relationship of an infant.

“What’s wrong with her?” asked a classmate.

Our classrooms now had desks set in straight lines creating aisles for the teacher to walk down. It was the last hour of the day, always the hardest to endure. The clock hung above the door and everyone's eyes twitched like an epileptic seizure every few minutes to check the time, but time slowed down and Mrs. Sharp's words floated through the air, hanging above our heads. My sister didn't like this last hour ten times more than the rest of us. She would get more agitated the closer it got to the bell ringing.

She always scooted her desk next to mine in an attempt to recreate the cluster arrangement our elementary teachers had setup in their classrooms. I always sat in the back of the room so our desks wouldn't block others. Our teachers already knew about my sister and were sympathetic; apparently our parents had conferences with all of them prior to the start of school. It was hard not to feel like a pawn in their games at times.

Alicia wasn't a submissive person, which was one reason why I liked her. She would not have allowed herself to become a pawn for others. She was brash and a force of nature. She was the girl chasing after the school bus because she overslept. Sometimes she would show up to class early after lunch with a fruit cup for our teacher. I didn't understand her, but nobody did. She was a curiosity to the students of Staffordshire. She was an exotic creature from the city dragged by her parents to live here.

I loved her. We quickly became friends, but in one of our earlier encounters, she was unnerving. She joined my class, a quarter into the school year. Her family moved to Staffordshire, Connecticut from New York City, so as a general rule; we were all fascinated by her strange ways. People don't frequently move to live in Staffordshire and few ever left our hamlet.

There was only five minutes left of class and Mrs. Sharp had given up trying to teach American history. Alicia sat in the aisle to my left. As usual, my sister had pushed her desk up next to mine, on my right side. She was playing a game of thumb war against herself. So engrossed was she, a bit of drool perched perilously close to the edge of her lips.

"What's wrong with her," Alicia said as she leaned over as if we were having a covetous conversation.

"What's wrong with you," I said defensively without even thinking.

"Hey, I'm just saying. There's nothing wrong with being stupid. I'd rather be stupid than brilliant. I could get away with less work but still get the same perks because people would feel sorry for me."

"It's not like that."

"But it is, isn't it."

And just like that, we were instant friends. I think it is essential for all children to have inseparable childhood friends. I'm a far better person now for having known Alicia. She made me more aware of myself, but not in a bad way. It was like she understood how I thought and often thought that way herself. There was no kettle calling the pot black, just a level of camaraderie built upon the appreciation of hating school. After all, sixth graders only know the regiment of school.

Alicia lived two subdivisions away from mine off of Main Street. Although the bus could always drop us off at our own street, we started taking turns and getting off at each other's subdivision. We'd walk to the other person's house and study or play until dinner and run back to our own home. Wherever we went, my sister went too, but it was easy to forget she was there. At first she used to play with us, but as we got older, our activities didn't interest her and although she always accompanied me to Alicia's house, she no longer participated.

"Polly doesn't take her tea with sugar, but Nancy takes two cubes," Alicia said. We were in her bedroom and our backpacks were piled on her bed, temporarily forgetting our social studies test.

"Polly is very particular isn't she?" I laughed at Alicia's instructions.

"You can't say anything Miss Picky."

"Not about everything!" I exclaimed, but laughed because she was right. I was picky about a lot of things, but I never followed through with them, so did that still make me picky?

My sister laid on the bed reading a picture book while we were at a hot pink, plastic table set – the kind that every little girl gets on their sixth birthday. The table was set for a tea party fit for the Queen of England. Alicia's dolls sat in their respective chairs with tiny doily napkins on their laps and an empty teacup on their saucer. A few teacups held small cubes of sugar and Alicia had propped up a doll's hands to hold her teacup.

It was easy to be friends with Alicia. She could be erratic at times and many of the children at school were afraid of her because they didn't understand her. I didn't understand her either, but I didn't have to. It wasn't a matter of understanding that was necessary for the foundation of our relationship. We just needed to know that the other

person would be there if something happened. But what could happen to you when you're still in elementary school?

"Ha. Ha. HAHAHAHA!" This unnatural laugh came from Alicia's bed. We both looked up. My sister had this laugh that could make your heart melt, but she also had a laugh that could crackle ice on a winter's day. This duplicity came out more and more as we grew up. Alicia never questioned why my sister was the way she was. After that first day, it never came up again. Did we avoid it like a hot potato issue? I don't think so; we were too busy growing up and pretending to be normal, knowing that neither of us was like our peers.

On another day, it was raining so hard that the school bus ride home took twice as long. Mr. Barnas couldn't see two inches outside of the school bus and inched along the road, dropping each student off with a concerned looking parent, wet from standing out waiting.

It was Alicia's turn to come home with me, but she didn't want to walk through the rain later. I couldn't blame her, but at the time, I felt slightly betrayed. When our street came up, neither of us said anything. I tugged on my backpack and stalked off the bus in a huff – the bad-tempered, child's play grudge that felt like it would last centuries but never lasted more than a day. Both of our parents were huddled underneath the umbrella waiting for us. My sister saw them and immediately jumped into a puddle, splashing muddy water down my front side.

Dad laughed and pulled her into a bear hug. I just stood there and the world slowed down. The school bus inched away with the brakes squeaking and Dad's laugh came deep and hollow. I could feel each individual rain drop like a personal slap on my face as it pounded against my face. Mom's hands moved over to rub my sister's back and her face turned up to look at me. For a second I thought I saw what I needed to see. There was an infinite sadness in her eyes. Her eyes were a natural hazel-green, but what I saw was a deep abyss that opened wider and wider, threatening to pull me in. Time sped up again and I could feel her other hand grabbing mine to pull me underneath the umbrella. We walked like partners in a potato sack race into the house where a cacophonous of noise pounded my ears. I could not get used to regular time again. It was sad and lonely when the world slowed down, but it was also quiet and peaceful.

I squeezed my face in pain and covered my ears. I couldn't control my body. I fell down and curled into a fetal position. I just wanted everything to slow down again. It was so noisy. Imagine every noise you've ever heard coming at you all at once. It was too much. It was my first breakdown. Mom and Dad blamed themselves for it. I blamed my sister. And she didn't notice anything different.

“I think that’s enough for today. You did very well. I can tell this session has been hard on you so try and not reflect and think too much about your past or the emotions you feel now. Go home and rest and I’ll see you next week, and a small homework assignment - I think it would be a good idea for you to contact Alicia again. Try and reconnect with her and see where she is in her life now. I know that it has been years since you last talked or even thought about the other one, but track her down if you can. I think it would be good catharsis and closure for you. Plus, it’ll keep your mind preoccupied. I know it will be hard, but try and not think about your sister.”

“You’re a very odd therapist. You tell me not to think about my past and then tell me to reconnect with a friend from my childhood.”

My statement caused a tinkling laugh to cascade forth. “It would appear contradictory, but sometimes therapy can be like that. Again, you are doing great, and we’ll pick up from here next time.”

I stepped out into the sunlight from the stuffy office. I liked my therapist, but like most offices, an interior designer had been paid an absorbent amount to transform the office into a cozy living room, but in actuality, they only succeeded in an overbearing feeling of discomfort. I squinted my eyes as I stood still, bathing in the glory of a beautiful day. It gets easier every day. I used to scoff at those who were in therapy, but now I understand. It's a lot like having a pet, except it can talk and walk. The unconditional attention costs a little bit more than dog food, but it can mean a world of difference when you find yourself trapped in your own mind.

Mark pulled up in the rumbling SUV with a smile that catches me off guard. My lips helplessly spread out into a smile in response and I jump in.

"We really need to upgrade this car, you know,” I said as I buckled up.

"This ole' lady has been running just fine for years. Nothing wrong with a few character traits." He laughed and took my hand in his, driving with his left hand. Mark had his flaws, but his redeeming factor laid in how much he wanted to save me from myself. It had been a dark few years, much of which I suppressed.

Mark had negotiated with my work to get me to go to therapy, which has really helped my recall of many memories that I locked away even from myself. These memories and thoughts are still in me. It is a part of whom I was during that time, which will always exist inside me. How can the two coincide? How can these two different people belong to the same person?

That evening, Mark was running the water in the sink to clean the dishes. I could hear him humming a song to himself, but the walls muffled the sound enough that I couldn’t make out the tune. Moments like these I loved. The dinner Mark made sat heavy on my

stomach making me drowsy. My head was filled with soft layers of fog that swirled in patterns I couldn't really make out. The crickets had already started chirping their lullabies and the crescent moon's light filtered softly into the dimly lit living room. I sat half dozing and half recognizing the letters in the book I was reading.

Everything felt so comfortable and warm. Out of the corner of my eye, I started detecting some movement. My head was so heavy I couldn't seem to turn my head to look at it straight on. Was it a mouse? My imagination? I couldn't fathom why my head wasn't moving. It all felt so surreal. I needed Mark to reassure me so I made to get up to enter the kitchen, but my limbs were so weighed down with fatigue that nothing happened. I began to panic as I realized I couldn't move. My body was asleep, but my mind was awake.

There was laughter in another room. The soft, hushed type of children giggling together as they peak into a room they shouldn't or as they grab cookies from the cookie jar before dinner. The sound calmed me and my mind floated towards it, focusing on it and internalizing it – as the therapist had taught me to calm myself.

It was two laughs – one higher than the other. It was her laughter, the one that warmed your heart. It came out in one burst and a slight hiccup at the end.

"Sissy, you're going to get in trooouuble!" There she was, her 17-year-old body and eight-year-old mind, crouched low next to mine, convulsing in little bursts of laughter.

"Not if I don't get caught. Just be quiet, and don't laugh," my 16-year-old counterpart responded. I smiled. Today was a good day. That day I remembered loving my sister for who she was. She loved it when I snuck into the kitchen while Mom cooked, grabbing tidbits of food here and there while her back was turned to the stove. Our kitchen was in a closed room with no door so it was easy to slip inside undetected.

Mom was making chicken nuggets and fries for her and lasagna for the rest of the family. I blamed my parents for being indulgent of my sister's desires, but I was as much at fault. It was hard not to at times when you saw her helplessness. I peaked around the doorframe and saw Mom's back turned. I looked over my shoulder at her. She was nodding her head in encouragement and her crooked smile grinned back at me. I gave a serious nod like James Bond on a mission and military crawled into the room. Our kitchen had an island so if you could make it in undetected and get behind the island, Mom would never know.

My hand darted up and down and left and right. I military crawled back out of the room and my sister laid in fits of convulsions as she silently heaved with laughter. My hands were greasy from the butter on the dinner rolls I managed to snatch. We tiptoed back to our bedroom to eat our treasure.

We sat cross-legged on our beds tearing the dinner roll into small bite-size pieces to make it last longer. Our stolen bits of dinner were always more savory than the dinner itself.

"Sissy, this is sooooo good!" She smiled with her crooked lips between bites. The butter glistened on her face and made the points of her teeth come down to sharp points.

"That's so gross! Don't wipe your hands off the bed sheet – Mom will know what we did then!"

Her mouth formed a small oval in realization and ran to the bathroom to wash her hands. I just shook my head and chuckled, finishing off my roll.

The soft, buttery goodness warmed my tummy and felt nice. It didn't feel me up, but I felt relaxed and lied back down on my bed. My sister jumped onto my bed and lied down with her head next to mine, and her feet down at the opposite end. Our brown hair lay like a placid lake around our faces.

"That English exam was hard, wasn't it?" she whispered.

"Not to bad. I should have studied more, but oh well," I said, shrugging my shoulders that made a ripple in the brown pool surrounding our faces.

"Is something wrong with me?" she asked.

"Of course, you're a dork. Duh!" I automatically responded without thought.

"I mean, like something that makes me different than you and everyone else? Sometimes I feel like I'm missing out on something or something is missing from me."

A lump formed in my throat. This was the first time we had really talked about her condition. After her diagnosis, the parents told her she was special and different, always careful to avoid the actual two-word necessary to nail down the message. She didn't accept this explanation for a long time, but she never asked for my opinion.

I'm not sure why my parents never explicitly said it to her, because the children at school inadvertently shared the cruel information. I had never attempted to answer any of her questions because I supported my parents' decision, despite my anger at them. A part of me blamed them for her condition; after all, it was their genes in her that caused it. But it was there genes in me that created me, as well.

I didn't respond for a long moment, lying with my eyes closed and counting my breaths to see how slow I could make them before I needed to gasp for oxygen.

"I know you're not asleep," she said. I got to twenty slow breaths before I gave it up and took in the toxic air hanging around us. Her face was inches from mine as I turned to face her. I could taste the stagnant air she pushed in and out.

"The parent's say you're special. Don't you feel special?"

"Even I know that's not a real answer."

"Why does it matter?"

"I guess it won't change anything. Everyone calls me a retard and I'm used to it now. They think differently than me. I think that's why. When I'm talking to them, like in the lunch line at school or something, they are always like going on and on like about something." She turned her head to look at the ceiling. The outline of her profile made everything appear black against her face. She filled up my whole world. Nothing else was visible around her. "They talk about, like I don't know like I'm not there sometimes."

I had never put much thought into her condition. I just dealt with her everyday, but I never had stopped to wonder what it really meant for her and for the rest of us to live with her.

"I just want to know . . . am I okay?"

"Ya, you are okay."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just can. I'm your sister and I've known you all your life. You're okay."

"Okay."

"Okay."

We lay there side by side wondering what the other was thinking. I wanted to tell her, but it seemed pointless since she already knew.

"Do you think I'll ever get better?" she muttered, barely audible. I pretended not to hear and didn't answer. It was uncomfortable to leave it unsaid, but it was comfortable just to lay next to each other, feeling the warmth of each other in our own isolated thoughts.

I could make out the slow ticking of the wall clock hanging by the door as it echoed the seconds and minutes that passed by. Then Mom's soft, hollowed voice floated up the stairs to tell us dinner was ready. We didn't move.

"The doctors said you were mentally retarded. That your brain functions have stopped developing."

"That explains a lot," she said turning her face to mine. Our noses lay inches from each other and we shared one breath. "Like sometimes I feel like I can't grasp an idea. That it's just out of my reach, but like I don't think like that, like others so I can't know what it

is . . . That's how it feels."

I never stopped to think how it would feel to be her. I had always assumed that she couldn't understand it. She was a borderline case, but enough for the parents to get government aid and everyone's sympathies. Her curiosity marveled me. Why did I think she couldn't think? She could and did. Her capacity for logic and rhetoric will never mature, like a bloom cut off for an arrangement before it has a chance to open, but she was still a sentient creature capable of limited thought.

"You should know, you are perfect just the way you are. I love you," I said. She gave me a crooked smile, a constant reminder of the day when her brain damage set in.

She threw her left arm over on top of my shoulder. We laid together until we could hear Dad's heavy footsteps pounding up the stairs. Then we both erupted into smiles and giggles and jumped up to beat Dad to his punch line.

"Hey now! Don't run down the stairs!" He yelled as we laughed passed him.

We fluttered and flitted around the kitchen being useless while helping to bring in the dinner plates and getting drinks. With a struggle, she and I calmed down enough to say our prayer and dig into the spaghetti.

Chapter 2

The Other Side

I could not pin her down like a butterfly on a corkboard because she took flight faster than my hand could react.

The grass felt cool and soothing under the shade of the Sycamore, but it scratched mercilessly underneath the bends of my knee and elbow. It was hot and humid like any other summer day. We were playing hiding-go-seek and she never thinks to look underneath the porch so I there I ran to hide away.

The porch sat about three feet off the ground with a little storage space underneath where the rakes and lawn mower hid. I sat Indian-style underneath the porch looking out at the beautiful day through the holes in the filigree grating that kept looters from knowing where we kept our lawn care tools.

The sunlight danced like fairies on my t-shirt making me drowsy. While I sat there nodding off, a memory of a shady place I stumbled upon last summer came back to me. It was another day and we had been building a fort in the woods in our backyard. In one section, the forest had gone to ruins and the trees looked like interlocking fingers where they have fallen down. Dad never liked it when he saw us heading into that area, but the fallen trees made the best support beams for our imaginary rafters to the mansions we will one day live in.

Beyond this area of the forest, the trees cleared out into an open meadow that used to be a part an old little league baseball field. Now that it has been abandoned, grass overgrew the field, but the warped aluminum bleachers peeked through revealing the top seats of its four-seat high-rise. At first glance, you'd never see the bleachers, but one day we ventured farther out into the meadow and found the metal seats still standing.

A Sycamore tree stands regally near the field, away from the rest of the forest, probably where the hotdog stand sat selling the best baseball food available. This memory floated back to me, beckoning with its vague promises. I crawled out from underneath the porch after I heard her running to check inside the house for me. I stayed crouched and ran around to the edge of the forest. When I entered the trees, I stretched out my body and ran at a full sprint. I could feel the oxygen rush through my bloodstream and my blood pounded in my ears.

I loved the feel of exertion for exertion sake – it was a runner's high. It surprised me how much strength my little body held as I leaped over fallen tree branches.

When I broke through the forest and entered the meadow, I was wheezing from exhaustion. I collapsed underneath the shade of the Sycamore and viewed the world through closed lids that tinted everything a peachy red. I hummed along with the twittering of birds and rustling of squirrels.

It felt so comfortable lying in the shade during the magical hour of the day when even adult's eyes will fight the sandman.

I dreamt of an ice cream parlor that only sold candy and of dancing in my school's talent show. I dreamt of people who only sang and never talked and of my Barbie doll moving around without help.

"Wake-Up!" she yelled as she shook my shoulders.

The air was cold; the sky had turned grey, as a storm was about to come in.

"I can't believe you! Come on! A storm is coming in and Mom and Dad are so Mad!"

She yanked me up and tugged at me to run faster as we jumped over tree roots, hurdling through our backwoods.

Then it came up on me and I never saw it. I went head first toward the ground. Time slowed down and I could feel my body shifting forward too far. My feet went up into the air. I must have been screaming because her face turned back toward me and froze in an expression of horror.

Gravity ripped my body from the air. Her face was the last thing I saw. Her lips were moving but her words fell on deaf ears. My world went dark. I was alone.

I couldn't figure out what happened. I was lying in bed with the sheets pulled up to my chin. Someone had mummified my body in my bed sheets and it felt cozy. It must have been the dead of night. No light came through the window, but the shade was pulled down. Sounds started coming back to me before my vision returned completely. Everything was muffled and soft. Then my family's voices came louder and louder.

They were all in the room with me and a small bedside lamp had been turned on. Mom's hand smoothed the hair away from my face and she leaned down to kiss my forehead.

"It'll be okay. Just go back to sleep. I'll stay right by you through the night," she said.

I closed my eyes and her words carried me back into the darkness.

When I awoke next, the sun peered around the shade. I felt fine and jumped out of bed. I

ran down the stairs to see everyone having breakfast.

“Hiya!” I said pulling up a chair to the kitchen counter. I kicked my feet against the cabinet since they couldn’t touch the floor. I started pouring myself a bowl of cereal and mixed it with chocolate milk.

“Looks like someone is feeling better!” Mom beamed.

“I’m fine. What happened?”

“You gave us a scare. You fell pretty hard and blacked out. Don’t slurp your chocolate milk.”

“O, well . . . I’m fine now,” I said between slurps. I wiped off the droplets off my chin with the back of my hand and jumped down from my chair.

“Are you sure? Do you feel any pain anywhere?”

“Nah, I’m fine.”

“Fine is not good enough for me. Just do a body inventory for me: all your fingers moving, toes wiggling, nose smelling?”

“Yes, Mom! I don’t even really remember what happened.”

“Do you have a concussion? Maybe you should go to the hospital. I don’t know. Well, you fell down running through those woods that your dad and I have repeatedly told you not to run through.”

I half listened to her as she was partly speaking to herself and to me as I slurped up the last bit of cereal. My body was starving as if I hadn’t eaten in days. I finished my second bowl of cereal and said, “Really Mom, I’m fine. Don’t worry so much.”

“Put your bowls in the sink,” she said. “And don’t watch too much cartoons. Only an hour and then we can work on some homework,” she told our backs as my sister and I ran into the living room.

I lied on my stomach as we flipped through the channels arguing about what to watch. Cartoon Network was my favorite. She liked Nickelodeon. She snatched the remote from me as my cartoon show ended and flipped it back to see the ending of “SpongeBob SquarePants.”

Dad came through mussing up our hair as a goodbye. Dad owned a diner in town and his weekends were Mondays and Tuesdays. This being Saturday meant it would be one of his busier days.

"You kids don't watch TV all day and mind your mom." He walked back out and was gone shortly afterwards.

SpongeBob was fighting with Mr. Krabs. We rolled around laughing but our hour of cartoons was up and Mom came in and switched off the TV.

She gave us her stern look before we could complain and we went to pull out our books and papers. We spilled the contents of our backpacks onto the dining room table for Mom to sort through. She grabbed our folders and set us down at opposite ends so we couldn't distract one another. I had math homework left undone from class.

I kept looking at the page and all the numbers blurred together. I gave a sigh of exhaustion before even picking up my pencil.

"Don't write your answers with colored pencils!" Mom said after a glance down the table at me. I hadn't even realized Crimson Red was in my hand, but it made me laugh and a giggle escaped from down at the other end of the table.

Hmmm…. 49/7= what?

"Margo why are you just sitting here?" Mom said as she leaned over my shoulder to look at my work.

"I don't get this one?" I said looking up into her chin.

She patiently took my hand holding the pencil and pressed it to the paper, guiding my hand to write down the work.

"Okay, think it through… Dividing is like multiplying but backwards, and we just went through our multiplication table. Do you remember what you multiplied 7 with to get 49?"

"No."

"Margo, don't be stubborn. You know this. Just think about it."

"Mom, no, I don't know."

"Yes you do. If you can't remember try working it out. 7 goes into 4 how many times? That's right, zero. Okay so drop those numbers down. Now think, 7 times 4 . . . Do you remember? Good. Okay, so 7 times 5 is? Good, and 7 times 6 is? Just add 7 to 35. Okay, and 7 times 7 is? Good Job!"

"7. Okay, can we do English now?" I asked.

"No, lets finish this worksheet. You've only got three problems left. I'll check back with

you in a second," Mom said as she walked out of the room to answer the phone. I could hear her voice murmuring in the other room. It sounded like Dad had called.

Math was giving me a headache, but I kept at it until the worksheet was finished. I knew that if I could get all my homework done before lunchtime, Dad would come home with dessert from the diner. On weekends when Bennett and I were home, Dad always brought us lunch and ate with us, leaving Josh on the griddle to run the shop for a couple of hours.

Mom came back into the dining room with the cordless phone to see how we were doing. "I think they'll be done in time. Okay, honey, bye," Mom said, as she went to hang up the phone.

Bennett peeked up at me through her bangs and smiled. We both knew we were going to get the berry ice cream we had been eyeing for weeks. The parents regimented our sugar intake like hawks knowing how easy it was for us to become hyper.

We bent back over our homework and diligently worked until every blank line was filled and every 't' crossed.

Mom had come back into the room, leaning against the doorframe to watch our progress. Her arms were crossed as she saw us scrabbling to finish before Dad came home with lunch.

I looked up at her as I finished my last assignment for Mr. Evans. I smiled and jumped up. I ran up to her, hugging her waist and propped my chin against her stomach. I grinned up at her because not only had I beaten Dad to coming home, but I had also finished before Bennett.

Her face seemed frozen as it looked down at me while her arms held my shoulders stiff. Her lips still formed a smile, but it seemed stiff and forced.

"What's wrong Mommy?" I asked, trying to figure out why her body seemed so rigid.

"Nothing honey. You did good. You can watch some cartoons until Dad gets home."

I didn't question her anymore, and ran into the living room to watch some "Fairly Odd Parents."

Half an hour later, I heard Dad's footsteps stomping up the porch steps. I heard Bennett's squeal from the dinning room and we both dashed to greet him at the door. We wrestled the brown paper bags from his arms and dashed back to the kitchen for plates. Despite our harried tossing of wrappings off the meatball subs, the murmurings from the foyer caught my attention as we passed by the hallway on our way to the table, with plates heaped high with French fries and ketchup.

“I think something happened to Margo after her fall. I’m going to take her to the hospital after lunch. I don’t know how serious it is, but . . .”

“Honey, it’ll be okay. We’ll get her to the best doctors and make sure everything is okay. I’m going to call Josh and take the rest of the day off. I’ll go with you. But for right now, let's have lunch with our beautiful, healthy daughters.”

Dad and Mom came into the dining room with smiles and equally heavy plates to match our own. We munched away with no worries. Whatever shadow had fallen over Mom had seemed to lift and that relieved me. Bennett and I were like barometers for our parents when something was wrong. We could just tell in the way they walked and talked, but sometimes they could hide it well.

They passed around the ketchup and smiled with greasy grins, but the air seemed charged in the house unlike the usual sedative atmosphere of our home. Mom and Dad held a conversation above our heads with squints of the eyes and hand gestures unseen by us. At the end of lunch, Dad cleaned the plates off and went into his room to make a phone call.

Bennett and I shared a look across the dining room table. We knew something was up, but no words were spoken. Mom busied herself with household chores and we headed for the backdoor.

“No, don’t go outside. Why don’t you watch some more cartoons or read a book or something,” Mom suggested as she poked her head into the room. The tone of her voice was more serious than a suggestion, but we both innately started to whine.

“But Mom, it’s sooo pretty outside!”
“Come on! Why?”

“We might have to run some errands here in a little bit, so just go sit your tooshies down.” She ended her sentence with a declarative period. That was the end of the story. We grumbled, mostly for our own benefit, and headed toward the living room. Bennett pulled out some domino pieces and we began to setup a maze on the living room carpet.

The room transformed into a labyrinth as the maze grew and grew. Every tile we placed down grew six foot tall, blocking another exit. It became a race to reach my sister. I knew she was somewhere in the maze but I couldn’t see her. I jumped onto the cushions of the couch in hopes to peer over the walls, but the more I tiptoed, the more the walls grew. It was impossible to see Bennett. I could hear her calling me to rescue her, but I needed rescuing.

“Yikes!” Dad yelled as he collapsed the walls back into domino pieces and threw me over his shoulder. “I got ya!”

I laughed and laughed and laughed, and his hands gently plopped me down onto the

couch. Mom came in laughing, holding our shoes and light jackets.

"Come on now, put on your shoes and jackets, we need to head out," She said. Her smile faltered, but held steady as she pulled my arms through the purple sleeves. She tied Bennett's shoes and shushed us when we started whining again.

"Don't whine, your mom and I have decided to take Margo to the hospital. She took a really hard fall the other day, and it's best that we get the official bill of health from the doctor's before letting her go back to school. Now, Bennett, you're going to have to go with us, because I couldn't get Erin to come and babysit on such short notice. There's nothing to worry about it," Dad said with a sad smile to reassure himself. He pulled me onto his back and we piled into the minivan.

"You nervous?" whispered Bennett to me in the backseat.

"Nah. Why should I be? I feel fine," I replied.

"Well, that's because you haven't seen what they do in hospitals . . ." trailed off Bennett.

"Don't scare your sister! Doctors are very nice people and they help everyone feel better," Mom said without turning her head. She sat preoccupied in the front seat but remained constantly vigilant over her two most precious things in the world.

We rode the rest of the way in silence. Bon Jovi spilled out of the speakers as the trees thinned out and tall buildings replaced them, as thickly and closely squeezed together as the trees. We were heading out of Staffordshire and into the big city.

The drive took us into 3 o'clock naptime hour and Bennett and I dozed off. When we finally arrived, Mom and Dad tag teamed us, each taking a child-in-hand. The sleep hadn't been rubbed from our eyes yet, but the florescent lights tinted the white walls an iridescent blue and the sanitation chemicals burned our nostrils so our flight and fight responses were awaken. Bennett was right, I didn't know a lot about hospitals. We had both been healthy children, never getting sick enough to require a doctor's visit after we left the natal care unit and pediatrics ward.

The chairs in the waiting room formed a long L with some games and coloring books by the short leg of the L. The nurses had attempted to cheer up the place with flowers and greenery, but Bennett and I sat quietly on the rug by the coloring books as we flipped to find an appropriate picture to fill-in-between the lines. Mom sat down with a clipboard of papers filling out her own lines while Dad sat down next to her, absentmindedly watching us color. A combination of just waking up from a too-short nap and the dowdy hospital made me moody and sullen. I kept pulling crayon after crayon out, not satisfied with any of the colors Crayola provided.

I'm not sure how long we waited. I had finished coloring one picture and was halfway through another when a nurse in a muted, pink scrub uniform called my name. We

followed her back into a smaller room. Dad stood quietly with his hands tucked into his pockets. Mom fussed over my hair and smiled reassuringly at me. Bennett had taken the page she was coloring with her and a fistful of colors to finish a picture of a gingerbread house.

A man entered with a white, pressed lab coat. On his pocket was embroidered his name in cursive so I couldn't make it out. Hi teeth were shiny and white and had to be false. He kept smiling with his lips apart so we could be impressed by their brilliance, but it became more annoying than anything.

Mom seemed to be reassured by his calmness. He shined a light into my eyes and peered into my ears. I said "ahhh" while he held down my tongue with a Popsicle stick with no sugary treat at the end. He kept trying to make me laugh with jokes and chitchat, but I refused. After all, you aren't supposed to trust strangers – Mom always said.

He took Mom and Dad into another room and I went over to where Bennett sat on the floor coloring and picked up Powderpuff blue for her sky.

Minutes passed and the page changed from black and white lines into a scene from a fairytale. They hadn't come back yet. We gave yellow stripes to the bumblebee on the back of the page, but no one came to interrupt us. We pulled cotton balls out of one of the glass jars lined up on the counter and made mini-Michelin men. No one had said anything distressing to me, but my stomach sat in a knotted pretzel.

They finally came back. The room filled up with noise and movement. There were three adults and two children squeezed into the space that had shrunk since their absence. Once the bedlam of opening doors, closing jars lids, and chair scooting was finished, we were the perfect image of a doctor, patient, supporting family scene from any Kodak picture.

The doctor held a clipboard in one hand and leaned forward in his chair toward me. His expression was dour, but he held a steady smile to reassure me. My mother's hand gently rubbed my back in small circles to calm my nerves. My Dad's reassuring presence on my left, standing behind my chair, acted as a staunch supporter. Even Bennett stood demurely waiting for the verdict.

"Your fall the other day was more severe than what your parents initially thought. You've sustained some brain damage. We'll need to run an MRI to see the full extent of the damages, but since you are young, you may yet have a full recovery. You say you haven't experienced any long term memory loss?"

I just sat there with my hands folded together in my lap staring dumbly at him. What???

"I mean that you can recall all your past, all the way up to the fall, correct?"

"Ya."

"That's a good sign! You don't have a concussion, but have you noticed anything specific when you laugh or smile?"

What??? I thought, but no words escaped my mouth. Everything got trapped between my head and my mouth. All the thoughts left unsaid got lodged in the passageways of my head.

He continued, "What happens sometimes when people take a hard hit to the head, things get knocked around in ways they shouldn't. And sometimes, this will mess up the way our body works. Your mom noticed that when you smile, it seems like part of your lips is paralyzed. Paralysis is more common in spinal injuries, but head trauma can manifest in many ways. What I want to do is schedule an MRI for you and we will keep a close eye on how your body feels for the next few months. Okay? Do you have any questions for me?"

Finally a word eked out. "What?"

"I know it can be overwhelming at first to think about consequences of what you might think as a minor fall, but the bump to your head was severe enough to make you blackout and for part of your face to be paralyzed. This most likely means that more is messed up than we can see on the surface. I'm going to have you come back in for your MRI and do a few brain tests to check your functioning skills. There is nothing to be concerned about at the moment. Nothing is affirmative yet - meaning we don't really know anything until we get the results from the labs back."

Mom leaned over and her hair fell like a curtain to hide the doctor's face. "Don't worry Margo. We love you," she said with a smile. There was too much smiling going on in a hospital. We left the doctor's place with no answers and more questions. I resolved to put it out of my mind. The parents seemed worried enough for both of us.

Bennett leaned over in the backseat and whispered, "I was just kidding about the hospital stuff. You're going to be okay. Right?"

"Ya," I said with a shrug. We promptly fell asleep on each other's shoulders and it was well past dinnertime when we finally made it back to the house. Mom ordered pizza with anchovies. We ate quickly and watched some TV before bedtime.

It seemed like everything went back to normal. The doctor's visit didn't cause a visible change. Every morning, though, I scrutinized my face carefully. My reflection stared back at me as I made different faces. For a while, I refused to smile. My face looked funny as one corner of my lip went up and the other stayed frozen. It wasn't terribly noticeable when I talked, but I could never smile again. Yet, I still felt like the same person, but could I still be Margo without Margo's smile.

Chapter 3

Home is not Where the Heart Lies

The scream escaped baby pink lips, but no one was around to hear it, does it still make a sound?

"Bennett, wake up," Mark said with a shake of my shoulders. "You don't want to sleep in this position; you'll get a neck cramp. I'm tired too so let's go to bed." He took my hand and we walked back to the bedroom together.

The hollow sounds of laughter haunted me. I couldn't shake the dream, if indeed it was a dream or a forgotten memory. The therapy sessions had brought more and more to the surface, but it all got mixed together as soon as my hour was up. Mark could tell something was wrong, but as much as I wanted to share my thoughts with him, I couldn't. Sometimes I came close and Mark always seemed eager to continue the conversation, but something prevented the words from coming out.

So much of myself gets trapped inside me. I never realized how closed off I was until I entered therapy. Despite being aware of my behavior, it didn't help me open up anymore. I held onto all the fragments of myself, begrudgingly giving it away. Mark brushed a strand of hair off my face and I smiled. I couldn't bring myself to broach the topic with him.

It constantly surprised me that Mark has stayed with me through the years. They had been hard years but maybe that's what bonded us closer than all the middle-aged divorced friends of ours. But a small part of me wondered if Mark was scared to leave me, knowing that it would devastate me. I asked Mark once if he wanted out. I could understand why he would want out. He said he loved me, but he's a good liar.

We laid in the dark facing each other. He pulled the blanket up and gently rubbed my back.

"Bennett, something on your mind?" He wanted me to tell him. I knew this, and I wanted to tell him.

"Nah, I'm alright, just tired I think," I responded. He nodded slightly and closed his eyes. I lied awake watching him doze off wondering how I could keep so much from him. I started counting the dots of our popcorn ceiling to try and fall asleep but my thoughts kept pestering me.

Did I love Mark? Did I love him enough? What was that dream? Did that really happen? I kept seeing her smile - that smile that could lead me into a battle and whip me in flagellation. Stop thinking, stop thinking, stop thinking.

By the morning, the dream had left the peripheral of my mind. My thoughts had settled down and I was the same woman Mark had met and fallen in love with. I was the same woman who loved her husband. I was the same woman that could function in society without a mental breakdown. The words of Margaret reached out to me from the past and seemed to finally fulfill its prophecy.

Mark had already left for work, but the bed was still warm and curved from his body. The clock read 8:30 a.m., and I forced myself to get up. I had another therapy session today. I was on an extended leave from work - a three-month leave of absence to be in intensive therapy. After my mental breakdown at work, the boss gave me a generous amount of time to get back on my feet. I meet with my therapist three or more times a week, every week for a couple of hours. The idea was that I would be completely better by the time I had to go back to work.

The company had just promoted me to a partner right before 'the incident' and was more embarrassed than me as they reassessed their decision. Ultimately the other board members decided it would look more ethical if they stuck by me as I took a leave of absence to seek professional help and reaccept me into the company upon the advice of a licensed professional. It was June and I had made it halfway through the second month of therapy.

Although I knew the board would like nothing better than to fire me, and even though their decision to keep me was purely based on political motives to maintain an image, I was still grateful. Mark was a schoolteacher, and we needed my income with the rocky economy threatening to eliminate his job. I was determined to keep an open mind about therapy. I couldn't afford to skip a session. It was on the company's tab after all. It was just another way for them to own me, but I had no choice but to be submissive after the humiliation.

My appointment was at 10 a.m., but I needed to walk and feed Dodger, our Golden Retriever, before I could leave. By the time we had lapped our street for the third time and his food dish lay emptied, it was nearing 9:30 a.m. I debated skipping a shower, but figured my therapist would rather wait 30 minutes to talk to a clean Bennett instead of sitting through a two-hour session as I reeked sweat and doggy-odor.

By the time I arrived for the session, I was slightly breathless but sweet pea-scented. I made my apologies and settled down in my usual position on the couch.

"We are going to try something different today. I did some homework and talked to the family that now lives in the house you grew up in. They've agreed to vacate the premises for the day so we can take a trip there. Do you have anything else scheduled for today?

Could you reschedule it? I think this is a very important step to help you face your past and understand how it shaped you. I figured we could use this trip to perhaps trigger more suppressed memories."

I was slightly taken aback by the thought of returning after all these years of running away, but I nodded in silent agreement. It somehow felt more like a death sentence than an invitation, but we walked out to the car.

"Since it will be about a five hour car ride, why don't we do our normal sessions in the car? Today is going to be an intense session, but I think it will be worth it."

The black Escalade was a giant and its interior was designed to be soft and cozy, much like the office we just left. The leather seats were soft and plush and NPR played in the background exuding luxury. The company was obviously paying too much.

"Where do you want to start today?"

I watched the trees and buildings pass by the window, allowing the scenery to hypnotize me.

"Well, there was this dream I had last night, but I can't really remember it now. I think I saw my sister again, but I can't be sure. It was after dinner and I had dozed off on the couch. I remember hearing our laughter, but really nothing else." Like the vapors disappearing on a hot summer day, the memory of the dream was too thin and intangible to grasp. The more allusive the creature, the harder I chased after it, but I could not find the words to describe it and my brow furrowed in frustration.

"I'm glad you are trying harder to remember things, but why don't we let go of the dream, for now. Let's concentrate on the past. Take me back to where we were last. What happened next?"

"Where did we leave off? Oh, ya. We started growing up. Dad said we shot up like weeds, but girls develop faster then boys and by the eighth grade, we were already the size you see me today," I said as I watched the trees and buildings trade places outside of the window.

"The older I got, the more I resented her for imposing on my social life. I remember our last dance at the middle school being infamous. I bet they still talk about it . . .

Mom had made us dresses. I had chosen this beautiful royal blue fabric that looked like the dark blue sky after a thunderstorm. She had picked out a baby pink, metallic fabric that shimmered and she looked like Glinda the good witch of Oz. Mom spent endless hours making our dresses into perfection. Grandma had made her dance dresses and she had always wanted to make dance dresses for her daughters. The process took months of advance work.

We had not been allowed to attend any dances until the eighth grade, but we had a lot of appointments that year that prevented us from going to any until the last one.

We had been resigned to our mom's disposition long ago, but a loving parent will never really give up hope for a normal life for their children. They sent her to different learning programs to see if there was a good technique that might be able to reach through to her isolated mind. We were fettered between different learning coaches that tried Rorschach inkblots, Legos, to electroconvulsive therapy.

It was a Mary Poppins assortment of therapy attempts. Mom had taken us to Margaret's candy store after an appointment to let us pick out some candy as an award. Everyone knew that we were trying some alternative methods to see if it would help. It didn't, but it helped us feel less useless. I remember turning around to ask Mom if we could get the double pack of Twizzlers because they were more expensive. I glanced over my shoulder and she was leaning against the quarter machines. She was rubbing her temples and looked older than I had ever seen her.

I could usually read her face. It smiled and frowned. It shook for no and nodded for yes. We didn't try to hide our emotions from one another, but this was the first time I realized that I had no idea what my parents really thought about her. Everything they had said to me was falsified for my benefit, or maybe hers. Who were they?

I didn't really know.

Margaret walked out behind the counter and enveloped Mom with her love and said, "It's okay to love her just the way she is, it doesn't mean you are giving up hope for improvement."

I don't think I was supposed to see this moment, and I felt like I had watched a private scene in someone's bedroom. But who we are, are built upon these bedroom scenes of our lives. I just saw the first glimpse of the woman behind the person I called my Mom. It was unnerving to know that she was human, filled with worries and sadness like the rest of us.

This knowledge shook something loose inside of me. I didn't blame her for being human, but I could never forgive her for not being everything I had wanted and needed her to be. I guess in many ways I had failed as well. I couldn't be the daughter that she needed me to be.

All the failures of the year had somehow injected new vigor into Mom and she put her extra energy in making sure we had the most amazing experience at the dance. She even got tiaras for us to wear, bejeweled with enough cubic zirconium to add five pounds to our weight. The dresses, the dresses! They were magnificent creations from a fantasy world. Mom somehow made her look like a pink fairy. She floated on a pink, cotton candy cloud all night. I've never seen her lovelier or more natural in her whole life. I remember putting on my dress and the blue satin skimming my body – it felt like magic.

Mom had put a little peephole in the back of the dress and the reflection in the mirror no longer resembled me. I had stepped into my sister's world. That exact thought went through my mind. I can't believe I remember thinking that after all these years.

It was a perfect night. Mom was part of the school's PTA board and was suppose to supervise the dance. She had made the dance a fairy theme, and with her magic wand, she had transformed the school's gym. Large, glittering butterflies and insects dangled from the ceiling. A live band was dressed in penguin tuxes on the stage. The bleachers had been pushed up against the walls and large banners depicting a jungle forest scene draped over them. Sand mounds anchored the drinks and food tables.

The gym became a Tim Burton's vision and we were merely actors on a stage. None of the previous PTA members' had ever put as much effort into a dance before, and although I've never returned to the school since I've left, I doubt any middle school dance has ever met its standard.

We danced all night long and were the last two students to leave, partly because Mom had to lock the doors after the dance was over, but we would not have left a second earlier than we absolutely had to.

My first crush asked me to dance that night. Logan asked me to dance and even asked my sister to dance so she wouldn't feel left out. Logan was the perfect first boyfriend any parent could want for their daughter. He did everything right. When my cup was empty, he'd bring me another. When I looked bored, he'd ask me to dance. When I looked tired, he'd feign exhaustion and asked to sit down. We had never spent a lot of time together prior to the dance. We hadn't even gone to the dance together, but found our way to each other underneath the disco ball.

When we got home, it was after midnight and we both fell into our beds without removing our dresses. When we woke up, our bed shimmered from the glitter that rubbed off from the body glitter Mom had sprayed on us. Mom stood leaning against the doorframe smiling. She looked beautiful and young again.

"You two look like a hot mess," she laughed at our sleepy faces. "Get undress and take a shower. I've got some breakfast waiting downstairs for you," Mom said. She helped rub the sleep off our eyes and unzipped us from the dresses. We were so sleepy from staying up way to late that we didn't put up a fight. The hot water felt like a baptism. I stood underneath the faucet, not wanting to move.

I heard a soft knock on the bathroom door and Dad's voice sounded hallow as it wound its way though the steam to my ear. "Are you still alive in there?"

I laughed and said, "Yes, Daddy. I'll be out soon."

"Okay, we'll keep your plate warm."

I had no concept of time as I stood underneath the water. Nothing had felt so refreshing than that shower. I eventually got out and dried off. Mom had made pancakes and formed silly faces with M&Ms and chocolate kisses on them. I drenched my pancakes in syrup as Mom and Dad shared a look of horror at the amount. My sister and I just grinned back with our youth and ambivalence.

We didn't have any appointments this weekend, and when I checked the calendar later, I found a red line had scratched out all the doctor's names and times. Something Margaret had said had reached through to Mom. We watched some TV and went over to Alicia's house after lunch. We flipped through fashion magazines gossiping over what celebrities were wearing.

Alicia had this obsession with Keri Knightly ever since someone had told her they could be look-a-likes. She started collecting every magazine with a mention of Keri Knightly. We would hold the pictures up to Alicia's face and laugh as she mimicked Keri's posture and face.

By the time we wondered back home for dinner, my stomach had started to growl. We were running a little late, but it was a beautiful day without a cloud in sight so we ambled along. The front door opened with a whack against the wall as my sister ran ahead of me and swung the door open without thinking to catch it before the hinges snapped.

"Goodness! Are those elephants entering my house," Dad exclaimed as he entered the foyer. "You know better than letting the door do that," he said with a stern look at me. I was used to taking the blame for most things and closed the door without any complaints. The house was filled with the smell of meatloaf and steamed green beans. My mouth began to water even before entering the kitchen.

We herded dishes and drinks into the dining room, and amidst the shuffling Mom grabbed my elbow and dragged me out of the mayhem. She had this secretive grin on her face as she leaned down to whisper into my ears. We stood huddled together in the foyer out of earshot of everyone.

"Guess who called to talk to you while you were gone?" Her eyes were bright and wide like a child in a candy store.

I couldn't help but smile, despite Dad's chiding earlier. "Who?" I was honestly puzzled that anyone outside of Alicia would call me at home.

"A boy named Logan called for you. Isn't he the one that you danced with last night?"

"Oh!" My mouth hung open a little and I looked a little dumb, but I felt dumbfounded. It was the first time a boy had called. It was the first dance. It was the first dance with a boy. It was too many firsts for me to comprehend all at once. Now I knew why we were in the foyer. Dad wouldn't know how to handle this news, and neither did I.

"I wrote down his number and put it in your bed. Why don't you call him after dinner?"

"Okay."

"Okay." We walked back into the kitchen and only seconds had passed. No one noticed our absence. Dinner was delicious, but it felt like time dragged by. One moment I wanted for dinner to be over and the next I didn't. What would I say? What did he even want?

As soon as Mom's plate was clean, she glanced over at me and took our plates into the kitchen. Dad pulled my sister over to his chair so they could finish her homework. Mom smiled at me as I passed by. I grabbed the cordless phone and headed up to my bedroom. I sat on my bed clutching the slip of paper with Logan's number on it. The phone sat next to me on the bed, but I didn't know what to say. I took one deep breath, and decided to just wing it.

"Hello," said a woman's voice, Logan's Mom.

"Hi, is Logan there?"

"Yes, may I ask who is calling?" asked the woman.

"It's Bennett, from the dance." I hid my face in my pillow. Why did I say from the dance? I might as well have said the one with the stupid sister. I laid faced down on my bed hoping I would suffocate before Logan's Mom could find Logan.

"Hi Bennett! . . . You there?"

I realized my mouth was still muffled by my pillow and jerked upright. "Hi! Uh, my mom said you called. Sorry I was out and missed it. I had a great time last night!" What is coming out of my mouth? Why did I have to have verbal diarrhea with the only boy who's ever shown any interest in me? My mind raced for what to say next, but empty words filled my mouth.

"Ya, I did too. Just wanted to say I had a great time last night and didn't know if you'd want to do something, sometime, again. I've got a baseball game next weekend, maybe you could come watch me play?"

"Ya! That'd be cool."

"Okay. It's Saturday at 3 p.m. I guess I'll see you at school on Monday?"

"Ya!"

"Sounds good. Uhh, bye."

Click, the phone went dead. I had this goofy smile on my face, but I couldn't make it go away. I was going to go see a baseball game. I knew absolutely nothing about baseball. She walked into the bedroom as I sat on my bed rewinding and reviewing the conversation with Logan.

"Whacha doing?"

"Oh nothing. You'll never guess who I was just talking to."

"Oh, who?" she asked as she lied on her bed with her face cupped between her hands.

"Logan Mayen, from the dance! Do you remember him?"

"Ya I do! I really like Logan! He's cute; do you think he likes me? Was he calling to talk to me? You know he asked me to dance with him a couple of times!"

My smile vanished as I realized what was happening, but I didn't know how to stop it. She thought Logan liked her, and for her simple mind, it would appear as if it was true. No, I didn't want to give Logan up to her. She had taken everything else from me. My friends were her friends. My life was her life. She was my annoying shadow and a guttural sound escaped my lips before I could suppress it.

She looked taken aback by my animalistic response, but laughed it off and said, "Why didn't you get me? Should I call him back?"

Mom walked in at that moment and heard the last few shards of my heart rip apart. I looked up into her eyes and all the tragedy I felt trapped inside was visible. She simply nodded her head at me to be patient.

"Margo, time for bed! Go take your shower first; I want to talk to your sister."

"Okay," Margo said as she grabbed her pajamas and headed toward the bathroom, oblivious to my obvious pain. She was lost in her own fantasy world, in a vicious, selfish cycle of childhood innocence.

Mom sat down on the corner of my bed and pulled me into her arms. I rested my head against her shoulder wondering how something could end before it even began. Mom combed my hair with her fingers.

"Honey, I know this is your first crush, but she's your sister. I'm going to let you make your own decisions, but I want you to consider what a first crush means to your sister versus you. Try to be understanding about how she could confuse the matter."

I already knew how the conversation would go, as all the conversations about her 'confusions' always went. I would ask why her feelings matter more than mine. Mom would reply that they don't and that both of our feelings matter. But it is important to be understanding of those less fortunate than ourselves.

For some reason, Logan's phone call meant more to me than the silly fights of who gets to go shopping with Mom or why can't Dad help me with my homework. I already had to share my parents with her, but Logan was another matter. He existed outside of my family and circle of friends. He was solely mine, and he belonged to me. I wasn't going to give him up easily, I thought to myself because anything I said to my Mom would be twisted. She had a way of making me feel guilty and changing the way I saw things. After years of this same conversation, I learned to keep my silence because only then could I maintain my own thoughts with no intrusion or fear of influence.

I hugged Mom back and let her hold me because it was comforting despite the mental conversation I had with her in my head. I remembered the secret moment we had in the foyer before dinner, but the feeling of closeness with her was already starting to fade.

"We are here," said my Therapist.

We pulled up into a caricature of my former home. The current residents have painted the house a cream color and had poured an extensive amount of money into landscaping. This wasn't my home. I wasn't sure how I was going to get closure from a place that wasn't my home.

As we walked up the driveway to the door, the therapist shaded her eyes, looked at me and said, "Do you think you blame your mom?"

"Yes. Logically it doesn't make sense because the situation wasn't her fault, but I do."

"Did you ever think she was on your side when you were growing up?"

"Yes and no. Most of the time not, but I know she loves me."

"You know, but how do you feel?"

"I guess I always felt she wasn't on my side and it made me guilty because I wasn't on her side, which was my sister's side."

"Now that you can look back, can you start to feel the love that you know she always had for you?"

"I don't know. I think I can, but I don't know if I can feel something that I haven't felt."

"Before your sister was diagnosed, didn't you feel like you were equally loved between your parents? Can you remember back to that part of your childhood?"

"I could try, but what I know to be true and how I feel are two very different things," I said as we entered the house. The walls were in the same places, but the furniture was wrong, the smell was different, and even the way the light entered the windows seemed starkly harsh to the fuzzy memories from my childhood.

“It can be hard to see something from your past resemble nothing you remember. Try to overcome this feeling of, possibly revulsion, and see how in many ways it is the same home you’ve always known.”

The floor had not been redone and the wood in the foyer was the same grain. The new residents had put another lacquer on it so that it reflected my face, but it was the same floor. Dad had put it in himself, and the summer he replaced the linoleum with the wood, he had never sweated so much. I remember he was soaked by 10 a.m. When we would hand him the next wood piece, we'd play a game of avoiding the drops of saline dripping off him. He had worked from the back up to the front door, and by the time he'd reached the door, he realized he'd placed one of the earlier wood pieces in the wrong slot. He ended up creating a mini wood square like a mat at the entrance to cover-up his mistake.

We were standing on the square by the door looking into my former home. I didn't feel like it belonged to me anymore, but nostalgia set in as I walked through each room.

"What's one of the best memories from your childhood?" The light reflected off the sunglasses on the therapist’s face. We had made our way through each room, opening closet doors and kitchen cabinets, and had come back to the front of the house. I felt mentally exhausted. The therapist had remained silent up to this point. I sat on the couch and sighed.

"There are a lot of good memories. I know I talk about bad ones, but my childhood was honestly not awful."

"I understand, but breakdowns, like the one you experienced, are triggered by something. Our first month we talked all about your present life and now we are heading into your childhood to see if we can find a trigger. So please, tell me about the best memory you have of living in this house."

I sat and thought for a moment as I combed through my past. There were lots of really good birthday and holiday memories, but it's normal to have good memories like that. Then it came to me. It was the first snow of the winter in 1993. Our little hamlet always got a good amount of snow ever year, so it was no surprise on one November Monday when it began raining down from the sky in soft white feathers, hiding everything in sight.

“In the winter of ’93, we had gotten a new snow sled. It was huge! Alicia, my sister, and I could all fit in it comfortably. I wanted to take it to Alicia’s subdivision because the hills were bigger in her neighborhood. We both grabbed a side of the sled and between the two of us, dragged it over to Alicia’s house. I had told Alicia that we had a surprise for her, but that she would have to wait until we got there to find out what it was. She was bundled up like the kid from the “Christmas Story” sitting on her porch swing, waiting for us to show up with our surprise. When she saw us dragging the big sled, her face was priceless. I can’t believe I’ve forgotten about it all this year. I bet my Dad has that sled in the attic still.”

I laughed at my recollection of Alicia's face becoming instant smiles. "She had jumped down off the porch, fell face first in the snow, got up without even brushing off the snow, and ran down the hill to help us. We spent all afternoon sledding down her hill. Sometimes we would fall out and tumble down like Jack and Jill, but the snow cushioned our falls.

We spent all day playing in the snow. I remember flying down that hill without a care in the world. The winter temperatures numbed our fingers and toes long before we quite. It was the perfect day. Alicia's mom took a picture of us falling out of the big blue space ship as it spun wildly out of control. I'm sure I still have that photo somewhere . . .

I say my childhood was normal. And it was. But I spent so much of it worrying about my sister. Were the other kids making fun of her? Did she remember to brush her teeth this morning? Why is she just standing, mute looking at my friends weirdly?

I had to always be vigilant to make sure that she wasn't acting abnormally or scaring anyone. When we were younger, her mental handicaps were less noticeable, but the older we got, the more everyone could tell that we had all left her leagues behind ourselves.

I told myself I loved her and that she was my responsibility, this being all true. But I still felt so much resentment toward her for stopping me from doing the things I wanted to. Alicia was my only friend who got into my inner circle. It didn't matter that my sister would suddenly double over in a fit of hysterics or if she couldn't follow her train of thought and made you repeat yourself over and over again. Alicia didn't mind if my sister demanded immediate attention or if she was having an episode and refused to do anything but stand still. I never felt that Alicia helped me the most by taking over some of the responsibility of watching over my sister when we were out in public together, but she did.

For a long time, I blamed my parents for not being there for her. I felt like they forced me to be her caregiver. But I guess the truth of it was that I forced myself. Alicia took away some of that burden. I didn't trust anyone else with her, except for Alicia. We both knew the way she liked her sandwich – white bread with no crust and more jelly than peanut butter. She could be so particular about some things, and the older she got, the more of a regiment her life had to be. I think it helped her feel more secure when everything and everyone else was changing, and she was staying the exact same person that we all knew and loved, but couldn't understand.

I'd like to think I tried really hard to put myself in her shoes, to remember to be compassionate and caring, but my mother always could find some fault in me that could never exist in her other daughter. I don't know. I'm not sure of much these days. The more therapy I have, I think the less I even understand these things. I think myself into circles."

"But you're thinking about them, which is a step in the right direction. Before therapy, how much time did you spend thinking about these things? . . . That's very normal. Most people don't put too much thought into their past, but truth is, we should all look toward our past more for the answers to the questions we have today. Who we are is defined by the journey that took us to this moment. I'm glad you are finally taking sometime to think about your past. If therapy can do nothing else for you, I hope it has taught you to not fear your past."

I nodded, but was lost in thought. The house wrapped its arms of memories around me, making everything just a little foggy.

"It's very important that when you start thinking about your past, try to recall the most finite details. Be honest with yourself. There are things that you will not remember, but think you do because people have told you a story – it's called the Implant Memory Theory. If we are told something frequently, as a factual story of our own past, by someone we trust, it's been researched that we will start to believe that it did happen."

"I know my story better than you. What are you implying? I'm trying the best I can to remember everything accurately."
"Why do you think you are so defensive about not remembering everything accurately?"

"I'm not being defensive!" We stared at each other in silence as my words hung in the air between us. With no response to retaliate against, I realized how defensive my tone was and how my words had come out. A sigh escaped as I realized I was wrong, "I apologize. I'm not sure. I know I'm very sensitive about anything relating to my sister."

"Have you noticed, you've never have said her name to me before?"

"I haven't?"

"No. It's in the report that your firm gave to me when we started our sessions, but you, yourself, have never said her name out loud – at least to me. Don't feel the pressure to say it now, but why do you think it hasn't come up yet? We've only been talking about solely your relationship with your sister for the past couple of weeks."

"Surely I've said her name? Her life and mine were so entwined; looking at one is like looking at both. I could tell you about my parents and my school, but I think we both know that most of my issues are evolutions from my relationship with my sister."

"I would agree. You've talked and talked, but you've never analyzed and put into words what issues you feel you have."

"Do you want me to? I figured that's your job," I said with a slight chuckle that died in mid-gasp. "If I had to make a guess, a gamble, I'd say that she made me resentful and angry and love her all at once. How can you feel so much opposing emotions toward one person? There is something inalienably perfect in the way my sister and I are the same

individual. Yes, she was imperfect and so was I, but we completed each other in ways I don't think I'll ever understand.

We never discussed politics or secular matters. She was never the big sister I needed. She couldn't tell me about boys or how to wear my hair. But, she was still like my other half – she was my sister. She could tell when I was upset, even if she didn't know how to cheer me up. I guess you could call it a sister's intuition, but on a raw emotional level, we understood each other. I knew how to handle her when she was being stubborn and unwilling to adjust to reality. As much as a hindrance she was, she loved me unconditionally and accepted me in a way I don't think anyone else in my life has ever done."

"I don't think I understand. Is it just because you were sisters that made you so close to her? Because, after all, everything we've discussed has put your sister at fault for your many of your insecurities in relationships and your inability to create healthy attachments with others. Her sometimes episodes – as you've called them, when she becomes overwhelmed by stimuli and shuts down while in public – has given you a certain level of paranoia. The reversal roles you played with her as the big sister has also affected your abilities to maintain healthy relationships and probably a key factor in your control issues. I understand that you believe all these various issues are consequences of your unhealthy relationship with your sister. But have you considered that it could be caused by anything else? Unhealthy relationships can be balanced out when the love one party feels is reciprocated by the other. Do you think there are other roots to your current issues?"

"Are you trying to say that I am painting this horrible picture that blames everything on my sister? That's not how it was. That's not what I meant to do. I figured you'd like that I could admit that my issues are related to my dysfunctional relationship with my sister. After all, aren't people always saying how admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery?" I asked as a poor attempt at a joke. My therapist remained stone face with inquisitive eyes piercing me with the facts that I wasn't admitting to myself.

Therapists have a way of hiding behind their silence and poker faces to pull their patients out of their shells. I knew I wasn't saying everything, but putting everything into words is like laying down your autobiography on paper, the black and white permanence of truth hurts more to admit and accept than saying half-truths. We all live off of half-truths that we tell others and ourselves. I remained stubbornly silent to match my therapist's silence.

We sat opposing each other, despite being on the same side – my side. I eventually sighed, knowing I would never be able to outlast my therapist in a match of silence.

"I should be blaming myself right? We can't control what others do; we can only control ourselves and how we handle different situations. A lot of it is rooted from my relationship with my sister-"

"Take your sister out of the situation for a moment. Imagine if she didn't exist? What would your life have been like? Who would you be today?"

"It's funny, growing up, I wished for that to be the case. I now know better than to wish the impossibilities. I try to live in the reality of my life. Truth is, I don't wish that to be true anymore. Despite all of the emotional roller coasters I've been through and the ups and downs . . . I wouldn't want it any other way. I am a better person for knowing and loving my sister."

Time had passed without my noticing and the sunlight moved from my left shoulder to my right. It was warm and soothing, but the sunlight no longer warmed the therapist's face. It remained a placid lake refusing to reveal any ripple of emotion or thought.

"I remember one time when we were probably only thirteen and talking about nothing really. I had my first boyfriend at the time and I was trying to explain to her what that meant. She asked me if it was like 'you'd-better-be-there-for-me-sister-love'. That was what it meant for her and me when it came down to our relationship. I accepted my role as her caregiver because it was a 'you'd-better-be-there-for-me-type-of-love' that I think really only exists between siblings. To imagine my life without her now would be almost sacrilegious. After I got that letter, and had my embarrassing breakdown at work, I was immediately a different person. I blamed myself for what happened to her. I blamed myself for not being her sister and being there for her. I wasn't me anymore without knowing that she was somewhere else in the world, just existing.

I cried my eyes out every night for weeks, poor Mark. He was amazing during this time. He held me every night as I shook with a grief I wouldn't wish upon my worse enemies. I love her. I know I blame her for all the wrongs in my life, but I still love her."

"Bennett, this is just an exercise. I am not implying anything by it. Just try and tell me about your life without your sister. Please."

"It's like asking for the impossible, but . . . if she didn't exist, I probably would be a happier person," I said hesitantly, part of me not wanting to admit to the truth of this statement.

"Don't feel guilty that this might be true. It's just an exercise. Try for me. Please."

"Being an only child probably means I would have been more spoiled. My parents had a lot of difficulties getting pregnant and having two babies for them is equivalent to a miracle, so it really wouldn't be far fetched for them to have had only one child. I didn't attend many school events because I didn't want to bring my sister with me. I'm ashamed to admit that I did do this. I would go through phases and sometimes I would be overly proud of her, in a defensive manner. I would take her everywhere daring them to say anything bad about her because I knew I would jump to her defense. It was a balancing act between responsibility and shame that I never quite got right all through puberty and even as an adult. I struggled with my feelings about her and the effect she

had on my life and me.

There is no doubt in my mind that I would have definitely gone to more dances, maybe have tried out for cheerleading or some other extra curricular activities. For awhile, I joined theatre in high school, but it consumed so much of my life with rehearsals and getting ready for the final production. I felt guilty for not spending enough time with my sister, but then I remember feeling a lot of resentment toward her after quitting. She didn't really ask me to quite; actually I don't think she even noticed my absence, which probably fueled a lot of my resentment as well.

I would have married Mark earlier in my life. I postponed our marriage for many years because I feared he wouldn't accept the idea of living with my sister as well. After my mom passed away, I knew she was solely my responsibility. Whoever I married would have to accept that responsibility as well.

I would have gone to a University further away from home. I would probably have majored in something else. I chose finance since it seemed like a fairly easy major that I could make a decent salary to support both of us for the rest of my life. I always liked animals and might have pursued vet school. I'm not sure. I wouldn't want to go back now, but I remember considering it when I was going through college application process."

Now that I had started thinking about my life without my sister in the picture, I couldn't stop the ideas from coming out. It was like verbal diarrhea for all the pent up ideas I stored away all these years. I know that I love my sister, but I also know that I often thought about exactly the words and life that I spoke of now.

"I think I would have made more friends in school. I think part of me stopped my circle of friends with Alicia because I already knew that Alicia accepted my sister. How was I to know how others would react? How could someone be my friend without being my sister's friend? She was my shadow at school, if you interacted with me, you would also have to deal with her too. I'm shocked that I even had the amount of boyfriends I did while I went through secondary school. I wasn't an unfortunate looking child, I probably would have had more boyfriends."

"So you're saying that if you sister wasn't part of your life – if she never existed – your life would be better. You'd be happier, have more friends, be in a job you enjoy, and have moved farther away from Staffordshire than a half-day's drive. Is this correct?"

"When you say it like that, it makes it sound like I'm a callous person. I'm not like that."

"Please don't become defensive. This is an exercise, but it can only be effective if you are honest with yourself and me."

"Fine," I said, letting a sigh escape. I knew what I said was the truth, but it was a painful truth to admit. I couldn't maintain eye contact anymore. This game of cat and mouse

that we played was mentally exhausting, I'm not sure if I can make it through another month. I stared down at my hands and played a solo game of thumb war as I debated the best strategy to tackle this new devilish exercise. I almost always felt trapped and worse after one of my therapist's exercise.

"It's hard to admit, but it's the truth. My life would be easier if she hadn't been my sister. How could it not be? In the physical sense of my reality, my life would have been a lot different if she never existed. However, I think on a metaphysical level, she enriched me in ways immeasurable by human standards."

My answer greatly impressed me. There are few times in my life when I am both articulate and honest and I looked up to see surprise and bewilderment in my therapist's eyes. This made me reassess what I had just said, but it all had made sense and seemed free of any guilty implications, or at the least I didn't believe anything I had said could have elicited such an unusual response from a poker face.

"I'm caught off guard by your response," the therapist said in acknowledgement to her temporary loss of composure. "Let's try something different. We've spent a couple of hours already in your childhood home. Are there specific memories and things that you associate with your sister? I want you to find something in this house that is a tangible connection to your sister."

I couldn't immediately recall something to suite the therapist's needs and meandered through the house again in search of a tangible link to prove the special existence of my sister's stunted life.

By my fourth room examination and still empty-handed, I said,
"This house has changed so much. I don't think there is anything here to clearly represent her, but likewise, I'm sure, there probably isn't anything to link me to my past even."

"How about you try to find something that reminds you of something from your past about you?"

"Well, this isn't our furniture or our house. But I'll try." I took us upstairs to the bedrooms. "This one was my bedroom. We had bunk beds up against this wall," I said as I pointed to the wall opposing the window. A boiling fury was brewing in my stomach and my cheeks flushed.

My cheeks flushed red with a hot anger that I could not understand. Why was this exercise so infuriating? I had been put through the wringer many times through therapy, in fact that is all therapy is really – a constant test. My hand involuntarily balled into fists in an attempt to calm myself. There was no way to hide this emotion from the therapist and I felt a warm hand pressing on my shoulder, in an effort to keep me grounded.

"Have you talked to your husband before about your past?"

"Yes, but I don't anymore. I can't really remember why."

"Do you think the reasons have to do with suppressed memories? Might it be in relation to some of your suppressive memories about your sister?"

"Those aren't suppressed anymore. Therapy has really helped me open up about my sister," I said as I turned around to stand face-to-face.

"My point is that are the reasons you don't remember why possibly because you've suppressed these memories because they are related to your sister."

"Um… probably."

"In possibly a negative way?"

I just shook my head in frustration because I remembered this feeling. When we had started the second-leg of my therapy, we were beginning to focus on my childhood, and often when I tried to remember I would come upon a brick wall in my brain. I knew it was put there by me at one point. I had carefully laid brick on brick to build a fortress of safety for myself. There is a haven of memories in my brain, watertight and sealed away for safekeeping. No admittance allowed, not even the owner.

Part of me felt like I should leave this haven alone. I made this wall for a reason. Why should I mess with something I've handcrafted for my own protection? Resentment and anger were always my immediate response. These confrontations always left me astonished at my lack of self-control and willpower. These moments always took me by surprise. I never suspected a person could put up so many barriers of entries even for themselves. There was no common marketplace of ideas in my head; they were all safely locked up so they couldn't hurt me. Therapy helped me question how much good it was doing for my memories to be suppressed.

At the beginning of our sessions, despite my years of skepticism of the helpfulness of therapy, I entered the office doors with an open-mind seeking for aid. What I ended up finding was myself. It took a couple of weeks of prying and different thinking exercises, some built to distract me while I poured my soul out to a stranger, but I eventually was able to let down some of my walls. I wasn't still convinced about therapy and its potential to help me discover my problems, but when I finally could accept that locking my memories away were doing more harm than good, in my relationship with my husband and at work, was the moment our sessions really began to take affect.

There had been many moments of relapse in the following weeks of the initial breakthrough in my therapy sessions, but I could tell that this brick wall was modeled after the China Wall.

"I don't know why, but it's harder to tap into these memories."

“Which memories? The ones holding the key to why you stopped talking about your sister with your husband? The ones that something in this house remind you of your sister?”

“I’m not sure. I couldn’t say. I think they are all connected somehow. It’s the same feeling that I told you about originally. It’s a wall. But this wall is different than all the walls we’ve been able to breakthrough. This one is far bigger in size and strength.”

“How so and why do you think so?”

“It’s gotta be a really bad event? Maybe something traumatic that I can’t really recall. I’m not sure. I’m guessing here. Honestly, I’m exhausted. Can we end today?”

“Okay. Today has been an emotional roller coaster. I understand. I’m sorry for getting you back so late, as it is. Let’s head down to my car and I’ll let the family that lives here now know that we are through.”

We plodded down the stairs and left my old house exactly as we had arrived to it, but something had changed in between the span of time I spent there. We were about halfway through the car ride home and I had been dozing on and off, when the therapist said, “Don’t forget, I want you to try and find Alicia still. I think it would be very important for you to meet and talk with her now.”

I nodded in simple obedience. The day had worn me out and I had no energy to fight her. I didn’t have a clue to how to even begin finding a long lost friend.

I’m going to give us a little bit of a break. Let's see each other again in a week. I want you to call this man,” my therapist said handing me a business card. “I’ve already explained the situation to him and he should be able to help you find Alicia. Don’t worry about paying him, we can bill his hours to the company.”

My eyes had glazed back over already, but a small part of my brain registered what was being told to me. I don’t remember much of the car ride home or how I got myself back home.

Chapter 4

Fragile Memories

I hold all the sunlight and all the water in the world in my cupped hands, but it only takes a breeze to blow it all away.

I awoke the next day to an afternoon sun. I checked the clock and it read 11:45 a.m. I don't remember when I got back home last night or if Mark had been there in bed fast asleep already. It felt surreal trying to recall yesterday. The visit to my old house and all the mental stress had almost formed another foggy memory to unlock, but I lied still under the covers and squeezed my eyes shut. I focused on all the details I could remember from yesterday and held them tight, reiterating them over and over again to try to hold them firmly in my mind. The details began to come back to me slowly.

I had come to the office running a little late but clean. We left in a luxury mobile and drove for four hours to my old house. The garden was overwhelming with colors and scents, something my mother never had time for because she had gotten so involved in my school and myself as I grew up. Someone else lived there now. Some strangers were eating in our dining room and sliding in new socks on the wooden floors. It wasn't my home anymore but nostalgia had set in. I flipped through our conversation yesterday like a picture book. It was a typical session, except it lasted for hours on end.

Then I remembered why I had gotten so hostile and felt so tired today. I had found yet another patch of suppressed memories. I used to never be able to recognize them, and then I used to never be bothered that I couldn't remember them. Now finding them is finding another betrayal to me.

It wasn't even the lost memories that bothered me as much as what my therapist had implied. Insinuations after insinuations crept back to me from yesterday's conversation. That poker face had kept her hand covered, but I had heard this conjecture before. I heard it often and wondered why it kept coming back.

My eyes flicked opened and I stared outside my bedroom window. The rain made a pitter-patter on the gutters as it drained into the rain barrel Mark had setup years ago for tax deductions. I couldn't wash away my thoughts no matter how long I watched the raindrops fall, blazing a path down my windowpane. I wanted to not think. Just not to think. It hurt to think these thoughts. It was so much easier to follow the lives of each raindrop as it entered my world and left it.

I had been in therapy long enough to know that I was dissociating again, but I didn't want to stop. How do you stop your worst enemy when it is yourself?

"Woof! Woof!" Dodger joined me in bed, taking over Mark's side of the bed. I rolled over on my other side to be able to reach his belly. It was soft and plush. I lied there with my eyes closed rubbing his belly. His tail smacked my thigh with happiness and I was pulled back into reality. I pulled out the diary my therapist had wanted me to keep during our time together to record my progress according to my own standards and for my own purposes. Apparently, I was never going to have to hand this journal over to the authorities, so I was encouraged to write in it all the details of my life with no fear.

I was never much of a writer, usually always just making good enough grades in my English classes to get me through school. But I promised Mark. I owed him this promise for all the things I've put us through. I needed this therapy even if I didn't want it. I repeated this to myself like a mantra to give me the willpower to do it.

Most of my journal entries were incoherent. I had a short attention span in real life, and this translated to my writing. As I flipped the pages to the next free space, I noticed my mini-to-do-lists in the margins and the doodles I made on some entries. I had no compulsion to write. But I tried to journal twice a week to appease my need to fulfill my promise to Mark.

We went home yesterday. It was weird to be home again. I said it over and over again that it wasn't home but it will always be home. It's like they say, you can take the girl out of the place but you can't take the place out of the girl.

It came up again. No one believes you exist. I know you exist. I lived and breathed the air around you. You were my better half. None of them met you. They only know you now and they think you're only a fragment of my imagination. You exist to me.

I don't want to think about the possibility of why they think like they do. No one is on my side. Is this why Mark and I don't talk about you? But then again, we don't talk about my therapy either. I love that man. I do. I said those words didn't I. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it. Right?

Therapy leaves me with too many questions. I have more questions than before and no answers for anything. Therapy has taught me to evaluate and analysis.

I mock this . . . whatever this is. But it has helpt me. I don't know if it really is for the better at times. I feel guilty because sometimes I think you don't exist like they do. This isn't true, but everyone tries to convince me and I'm only one person.

Therapy has shown me my bad habits of dissociation. When you went away, I fell apart. I fell apart so bad that I started repressing memories of you. It started with you and then it spread to anything that made me unhappy or upset. Mark love, wanted to help me. The only way he knew how to help me. I might be bit paranoid but I think he did many of the things prior to my breakdown at work to irate and aggravate me. He pushed me over the edge. Did he do this on purpose? I think this unanswered question leads me to wonder his loyalty to me.

Maybe I'm just being paranoid. I know he loves me, but is it enough? I loved you and it wasn't enough.

Therapy has taught me to know the signs and cues of my body and mind reacting in destructive ways. I can tell when I'm trying to or about to suppress a memory now. This knowledge has helped me stop living like a mummy. For many months, I walked through the house like the living dead, not reacting to anything because I had taught myself to shut out the world. I know I can't do this. I can't survive like this. Was this what happened to you?

I also now know when I have suppressed memories. I can tell the barriers are in my mind safeguarding something from myself. I don't always know how to scale the walls, but I at least know that they are there. Even suppressed memories still exist in my head. I don't know that they are there. I have no proof. I only have the words of others. This is how I view you sometimes. I worry that you don't exist, but my conviction says you do. How else would I have these memories of growing up with? Mark didn't believe in you. Dad didn't believe in you either. But please forgive him. He has amnesia. After mom dad, he was never the same. I don't think I realized how perfect they completed each other until one of them was missing. That's sort of how I feel about you – like we completed each other, but you are missing now.

Nobody in my life remembers you, and they don't believe my testimony. I don't understand why no one believes me. After you left me, I was so mad I destroyed all the evidence of your existence. The only person that would have known you would be Dad, but he can't even remember me anymore. ☹ I'm regretting my rash actions, but I went into such a blind rage when I got the news. I don't hold myself responsible for my actions.

I sighed and gave up writing. All the black lines turned to squiggles and danced around on the page. A headache was coming on, and I didn't want to deal with it. I lifted the cover to close the journal and tugged my body out of the warmth of my bed. Dodger followed at my heels to the bathroom. I popped a few pills and counted the minutes until they started having an effect.

I didn't have a therapy session today. I didn't have work to go to. Mark had left for work already. I had the place to myself. I had nothing to do but think. Today could possibly be worse than therapy.

It was an Edgar-Allen-Poe day and the raven was knocking at my door. I spent the day lounging around the house trying to avoid depressing thoughts like this. I was dressed and flipping through a magazine in the living room. I glanced at the clock on the wall; it read 9:57 a.m. I checked our pantry and decided to make a grocery list.

Milk, eggs, bread, potatoes, tomatoes, . . .

I couldn't concentrate on any task. I could tell my mind wanted to drift, but I feared

where it might take me as its unwilling witness. Dodger whined as he laid his head on my lap.

“I know pup. I’m sick, aren’t I?” Something in what I said triggered a memory.

I was young again and lying in bed.

I didn't want to have this conversation.

"Sissy am I sick?"

"No."

"Bennett! Dinner is ready!" yelled Mom from the kitchen. The aroma of dinner was delectable, but I didn't move. Then I heard footsteps climbing the stairs to come and get me. I jumped up and ran to meet Dad by the top of the stairs.

"Hey! Slow down! Don't run on the stairs!" Dad shouted as he swung his arm out to sweep me up in a bear hug and stop me from running. I laughed at his paternal instincts, always thinking I knew best. "I heard you talking up there. You've got a boy I don't know about?"

"No, Daddy! Boys are gross and have cooties!"

"That's right! That's my girl, but Daddies are immune to cooties."

I laughed and said, "Of course you! It was only sissy."

"Who's that?" he asked as he released me from his bear hug.

"Sissy, duh!" I said as walked into the kitchen to grab my plate of food.

I must have looked stunned as I sat there unmoving and remembering. Dodger jumped up and knocked me off the barstool. I fell backwards onto the kitchen tile. I heard a smack as the back of my head made contact and the world grew dim. Dodger's wet nose rubbed against my face and I could fill his weight pushing me awake, but the darkness was soft and inviting. I'm sorry Dodger for leaving you alone; try and hold your pee until Mark gets home were my last words? Thoughts? Then I was gone – taken to another world where fields of daisies laid waiting to be picked.

Chapter 5

Reconnecting

To hug is to feel human again.

"Babe, are you okay?" Mark was leaning over me and I was back in bed. "You're lucky I decided to come home for lunch. What happened?"

"My head hurts," I said. I pressed my fingers against my temple to try and stop the throbbing, but all the pain was internal. "I was in the kitchen making the grocery list and I was in a daze or something. I'm not sure. But Dodger, you know how protective Dodger is, got really concerned and tried to wake me from my daze. He must have knocked me over and I smacked my head against the floor and must have blacked out."

"Do you want me to call in and make it a half day at work? You feel okay now?" Mark handed me a glass of water and some Tylenol, which I graciously accepted.

"I'm fine. I'll be okay. Your kids will miss you in class; besides, you know no one will be able to cover your classes this late in the day. I'm fine."

"Well, I left my lunch here so why don't you go ahead and eat that for lunch. I'll pick up something on my way back to class. Just take it easy today. I know that the last therapy session was pretty rough."

"Thanks, honey," I said giving a small smile and pulling myself up into a sitting position.

"If you don't mind me asking, why were you in a daze?" I could tell Mark was hesitant to ask me.

I took his hands in mine and looked him in the eyes. I wanted this marriage to work. "I was remembering a memory that I had told my therapist. But when I was remembering it again in the kitchen, the memory was different and, I honestly don't know why."

Mark's blue eyes were inviting. This was the first time I had shared something like this to him in a long time. I had kept him in the dark since our last falling out.

"Strangely, I feel very clear headed, despite my headache." I said. "It doesn't make any sense. It was the same memory, but different because . . ." I looked up into Mark's eyes and it was the first time my conviction wavered. "Don't worry about it. I'll talk to you

when you get home tonight. I think I'm going to go visit my Dad."

"Are you sure? I don't know if it would be a good idea for you to. I know that these visits can be difficult on you. Well, call me if you need anything. Tell your Dad I said hi, and be careful."

Mark quietly left me lying in bed holding my head gently. Dodger joined me on the bed and his wet nose nuzzled my hand. I reached over and hugged him letting his wet tongue lick my shirt in pleasure. I've often thought that I would like to be a dog; living the simple life of a dog. I gave Dodger another squeeze that made him wiggle out of my grasp and I pulled myself together.

I had put Dad in a nursing home, a decision that weighed me with a guilt I couldn't understand. Why should it matter, if I took care of him or someone else, as long as he was looked after in the best manner? I pulled up into Fairbanks Nursing Care Center with a hesitation. I sat staring at my reflection in the mirror, trying to tug hair into a manageable shape. I hadn't noticed the changes over the years. They had been so gradual and slow. Aging for me had been a slow walk into the water; not an immediate immersion. I never smoked, abused drugs, or a heavy drinker, and I mostly resembled my younger self. Yet, nothing I did really helped Dad remember me.

It was mid-afternoon when I arrived. Dad was with many other patients in the sunroom. All the walls were glass and the plethora of fauna gave the room a tropical feel. An overhead fan hummed like a bee as it cooled the room. He was sitting by himself on a bench in the far corner. A water fountain flowed next to him making a mini-waterfall. It was very scenic, but his stone face didn't register anything in his surroundings. I walked over and sat down next to him. His eyes followed me, but they conveyed no the paternal warmth I remembered from my childhood.

That house I had visited yesterday isn't my home and this isn't my father. They were just shells of a forgotten memory. I still made an effort though and said, "Hello Dad. Do you remember me? I'm your daughter."

"I'm not sure. Everyday I wake up and they tell me that I have amnesia and have forgotten much of my life. This is suppose to make me accept everything anyone says to me as true and my own convictions as wrong," he said looking at me like anyone else in the world would, but not your Dad.

"They are right. You do have amnesia. It's a degenerative brain disease that deteriorates your memory functions. I am your daughter."

He seemed uneasy at this news, but he didn't try to leave. A nurse in a fuchsia scrub with little fairies dancing on them walked over to us and said, "Honey, he's having a bad day. Maybe you should come back tomorrow."

I knew not what to say but to agree. Sometimes he welcomed me with hugs, and

sometimes he could not recognize me. It is unnerving to see a man you've known all your life reject you. It makes you question your own memories of your past. Does my past really exist as I remember it?

The nurse walked away. She went over to another man sitting by himself and led him out of the room. There was something strangely tragic about this entire room. Some people knew their visitors; some had my Dad's blank face; some sat alone with no one. There was hope oozing out of the pores from those that did not belong. Some stared at poker faces hoping to get a reaction. Others were treasuring there remaining good moments.

I turned around to squarely face my father. "You're right. What right do we have to tell you what to believe? I don't blame you. I'm not sure if you know, but I'm in therapy. I have an older sister and you had a second daughter. I have all these memories of us together. Mom and you and us. But no one believes me, and you do not remember me, so how could you remember her. You are my only hope in convincing everyone else that she exists. She exists. Why else would my brain hold all these memories of us. They tell me what to believe as well."

Somehow it was easier talking to a stranger than my Dad. His face remained placid at the news of having two daughters, but he saw the anguish in my face and reached out a sympathetic hand. "I don't know you, but I'm sorry for your loss," he said. "You might be my daughter, and everything you remember could be correct. I only wish I had any memories past today."

We nodded in understanding.

"If you don't mind, I'm gonna sit here a little bit longer with you. We don't have to talk," I said.

"That sounds alright to me. I like this seat. You have to get here early because it is the best one in the sunroom. The sun doesn't directly hit you because of the Fikias they have in the corner."

"It is pretty close to perfect." We sat like stones on the bench until visitation was over. We didn't speak again, and when it was time for me to leave he gave a smile and a nod and walked away. I didn't expect anymore, but I had hoped for more.

I swung by a grocery store on the way home and grabbed things to make dinner for Mark and I. I only had 30 minutes before Mark would come home so I ran into the kitchen as soon as I got back. I needed some pat of my world to be normal. I'm a wife. I'm supposed to make dinner for my husband. This is normal. But as I chopped and stirred the minutes until Mark arrived, I knew this was all a façade. There is no normal, and everyday I move further away from what is socially acceptable. I was falling apart and I knew it, but I didn't know how to stop it.

The door opened and Mark came home. I smiled and we had a normal evening. I talked

about visiting my Dad. He had even surprised me with a dessert pie he had picked up on the way home.

It was a wonderful evening, but I crawled into bed and once the light was off, my body shook with tears and a grief for what I knew was ahead. I didn't know exactly what was in store. But it was a dark tunnel and no sound entered and no sound escaped. I was a blind walking through the valley of death. That night I dreamt again. I dreamt something that was more real than all the days I've lived in this past year.

In the morning, Mark had already left by the time I woke up. I wasn't scheduled for another session, but I immediately called the office to set one up for that afternoon. My morning was spent living the moments until I could go see my therapist. I was a convert. I believed in the power of therapy. It wasn't a miracle worker. I am not a better person now because of therapy. What it did was give me an outlet that I never had before. Yes, I am paying for the attention of a best friend – someone to listen to all my worries and voice their opinions. But as humans, we are divinely designed to be social creatures. Therapy existed for those of us who are too abnormal to establish these social bonds on our own. But I justified it to myself because therapy is a lot like joining a sorority, and since I never participated in this cult ritual of college girls, I needed the therapy.

The hours prior to my session were agony as I tried to waste away my day until I could go in to the office. I missed work. Work kept my hands busy and my mind off unpleasant things. I should start a hobby or something.

Even Dodger was excited for me to go. My anxiety made him whine in sympathy all morning, which only gave me a headache instead of lessening my pain. I let him out in the backyard and showed up thirty minutes early to our session, but I was let in immediately.

"Hi, I need to talk."

"I know. Why don't you have a seat?"

"Okay. Thanks." I sat down and my mind went momentarily blank as I sat there wondering what to say next. I had spent all morning rehearsing what I would say and how I would say it, but the moment was here and all the mental notes to myself went flying out the window.

"Not sure where to begin?" I nodded. "Something today triggered your need for this session. How about starting with today or yesterday? What happened?"

"I had a hallucination or something. I'm not sure what you'd call it. Delirium?" I was remembering my childhood but . . . it was different. I was running down the stairs and Dad asked who I was talking to. It was like he didn't know about Sissy. How could he not know about his other daughter? This was before his amnesia set in. I fell over in my chair because of Dodger and blacked out on the kitchen floor. Mark found me when he

came home for lunch yesterday. After I came to, I just felt this urge to go see my Dad. So I did. He didn't recognize me and we sat like strangers on the bench together for the two-hour visitation time. He said something to me though, he said that everybody told him what to believe and told him he shouldn't believe in what his mind told him. He said that he didn't understand why he couldn't trust his own mind. Why did he have to accept everything everyone else said, and he's right! I mean, not everyone is truthful and honest and-"

"Bennett, the people that you are daily surrounded by isn't these types of lowlifes. They are your husband and your friends and they love and care about you. They aren't trying to deceive you in a big mastermind scheme."

"I know. I know. Last night I went to bed crying. I had an amazing dinner with my loving husband and I cried myself to sleep. When I closed my eyes, I kept seeing the ground rushing toward my face. I was falling."

"Hmm . . . What do you believe this means?"

"I don't know. It's just a dream. I constantly feel like my life is falling apart. For God's Sake, I'm in therapy after all! Maybe the dream is a metaphor for this feeling."

"Bennett, could it be possible you suffered a massive brain injury in your childhood? There is no Margo. There is only Bennett living two lives. Could it be possible that the memory of Margo falling in the forest that one evening was you trying to get back home before the storm breaks?"

"She exists! Why do I have these memories!?" I couldn't contain myself anymore. I started pacing in front of the couch. "What about that telegram I got at work. Lets be honest, that's the real reason why I'm here. Let me see that telegram." I extended my hand to receive it. I still remember getting the news that she had passed away. It was a post-it-note letter that said in less than 50 words her entire life.

We regret to inform you of your sister's death. She has lived a full and long life, and we send you many sympathies. She died of natural causes last night. Please inform us of any special instructions for her burial.

It wasn't a cold-hearted letter. It was just a cold letter. What are sympathies? Is it something warm and consoling? Will it cheer me up? Do they mean anything when coming from complete strangers?

I don't recall what exactly happened. I remember running late to work. I hadn't gone through the mail the evening before since I had worked late so I brought the bundle of envelopes with me to the office. I was listening to my voicemails and going through the endless stack of bills since it was the first of the month. Then a postcard-like-letter from Lilly Valley Institute laid wedged between a General Electric bill and a bank statement. I

remember reading it over and over again. Everything after that is a blur. My secretary found me in my office after she heard a loud crashing sound. I was told they gave the telegram to my therapist.

It never dawned on me to ask for it back. That note, short and concise as it was, belonged to me. It was childish for me to think like this, but I couldn't help it. Now that I realized my biggest mistake was forgetting the exact reason why I'm here in therapy. That note was evidence that she existed.

"Bennett, there is no telegram, postcard, or letter. The only things in your file are my notes and observations of your progress during our sessions."

"No, you are lying. You and everybody else are lying to me." I grabbed my things and left. I didn't want to go home. I didn't have anyplace to be. I pulled out of the parking lot and just drove and drove. There was so much tension in my body and my mind. I felt like something would break inside of me. I was a camel with a load of straw walking toward its death. I ended up back at the nursing home. I walked into the sunroom and he was sitting in the same position as yesterday. I smiled and waved and he nodded hello.

"Do you remember me?"

"You came and sat with me yesterday didn't you?"

"Yes. Do you remember why?"

"No, I'm afraid I can't recall. I do remember enjoying your company. Would you like to sit down with an old fart?"

I laughed and sat my stuff down next to me on the bench. It really was the best seat in the entire sunroom. It was warm and cool at the same time.

"I want to tell you a story. Would you mind?"

"I like stories, and I have all the time in the world. At least all the time until I die. This place is just a waiting cell, you know. But, I'm sorry young lady that is probably more than you need to know. Please tell me your story."

"Oh, I understand. I had a father that I had to put in one these type of places and I was torn up inside about it. I feel the same way you do about this place. It feels like my entire life is a waiting cell, really."

"Did you put him in here?"

"Oh, not to this one, but one similar. They are all the same – faceless institutions. It was hard, but my husband and I can't be home to help him all the time and the nurses could. If he stayed at home with us, I'd be neglectful. If he goes to an institution, I'll still feel

guilty, but at least I know he'll be better taken cared of. I love him. You know. I hope he knows that."

"I think he does, even if he doesn't like his nursing home. Most of us are not happy about being here. We'd all like to be with our families for whatever time we have remaining on this planet, but we all know that life is complicated. We all know our family loves us, as well. I mean, with the price tag on this place, they would have to care a lot about us or have a lot of money and care nothing about us. The truth is, most of us feel bad for being here partly because we know our families are scrimping and saving every last penny so we can live in the lap of luxury for our remaining days. Isn't that ironic? They think we need this, but it's their company that we need more than the comfort this place can offer with its hefty price." He gave a shrug of acceptance at the cruelty of the situation.

"Thank you. I've been in therapy for like two months now and I think you're words are the first ones to actually make me feel better. Thank you."

He took my hand in his and said, "I think if I had a daughter, she would be a lot like you. My wife was always having these great internal struggles when we were growing up together. She would always struggle over the tiniest of issues. I would take her for an ice cream date after dinner with the parents and she'd sit there staring at the menu for minutes and minutes because she could never make a quick decision. I always thought it was charming though. I thought it meant every decision she made was purposeful and meaningful and everything she wanted she needed. If we had kids, I sort of always wanted them to have that part of her. You remind me of her a lot."

"Thank you." I wiped away a tear that left a streak on my face. "Thank you." I felt marked with that tearstain. He reached over and touched my cheek lightly.

"You would be the right age for a daughter. Let's pretend you are." He patted my hand gently and turned around again to face the room. I couldn't help myself and the tears rolled down like rain on a windowpane.

"I like that idea. I could use a Dad right now." He wrapped his arms around like he used to.

"Poor thing. Why are you in therapy? You seem fine to me. Why don't you tell me what's going on young lady."

"Okay. It's really been going on for a while. It's a long story."

"When you reach my age and in my stage of health, time becomes the only thing I can trade with others."

"I like that line. I might use that one day," I laughed lightly.

"You can laugh and smile. Isn't that always amazing to find out. I have suffered a lot in my years. It is true, I can't remember so well these days, but the memories from my youth are still there. I hold onto them so tightly and most days I just sit here thinking about them to make sure I haven't lost them. After I recall something, I always can't help but smile and it's good to know that one can suffer so much and still smile. Humans are very adaptable creatures. Now, I'm sorry young lady. I get off on tangents sometime. Tell me your story."

"It's okay, I like your tangents. I think people often forget that people with dementia can retain some of their earliest memories. Instead, we usually focus on what they can't remember. I think it's good that you try to hold onto the memories you have left. It reminds me a lot of what my therapist wants me to do. But every time I think I've remembered something, I'm told I'm not remembering it correctly.

You see - I have a sister. She fell down on her head hard when she was younger and is mentally retarded. I was the younger sister, but I had to become the big sister after her accident. I took up for in school and when we were out in public. She was such a burden to me growing up. I just wanted to be normal, but I always had to worry about how she was handling any new situation or if others were treating her right. Maybe I spoiled her, but she was defenseless. Who else would stand up for her if I didn't? These memories are so clear and crisp in my mind. They have all the flavor and distinction as my memories of my Mom's home baked pot pies."

"Ooohh, those sound good. I think that's what I really miss since I've lived here. I miss home cooked meals."

I nodded in acquiescence. "Maybe I could bring you some next time I come visit."

"I would like that very much young lady. I cannot say if I'll remember you or not. Everyday gets a little harder, but I'm starting to care less and less. There is less to live for when you live in one of these places. These visitation hours, rather I have a visitor or not, I always come and sit out here. We all do. It helps to remind us of the outside world, outside of this place, a world that is worth living in. Everything in here is too cushiony. Without life's natural hardships to make us enjoy the moments of triumph, how will one moment in life feel any different than any other moment? Plus, we all come because we can't remember if we get visitors or not. This way, we hedge all bets by showing up even if no one else does. What else would we do with our time?"

"Oh, Dad!" I wrapped my arms around him, taking in his old spice cologne and spearmint shampoo.

"Now, now. The nurses say if we are having a bad day, our families will often pretend to be someone else while talking with us. It makes it easier on them so they aren't so hurt by our forgetfulness, and it's easier for us because we don't have to deal with the shock of realizing we don't remember our own children, grandchildren, and spouse. I thought you might look familiar when you sat down. Are you my daughter?"

"Yes." I said. I shook with the tears that were now flowing freely and unwillingly. I didn't know I still had tears left inside me. I felt like a shell after the therapy session that morning.

"Honey, please bring some home cooked food next time you come. I'd like that very much. Now tell me about this other daughter. I don't remember her."

"It's okay. No one else does either. They say I'm making her up like she's some imaginary friend from my childhood that metamorphosed into a habitual hallucination for me. I can't accept this. I don't accept this. I have these memories of us. Of you and Mom and me and her. I don't understand how I could remember something so big so wrong. Who says they are right and I am wrong. They've never met her. I put her in a similar institution like this years ago. After I got married and moved away from Staffordshire, taking care of her and working fulltime became too much of a burden. I worried about her incessantly since I'd have to leave her at home. When I wasn't worried, I'd feel neglectful."

"Sounds like a similar struggle to put me in here."

"It was. They both happened about the same time. Mark and I couldn't guarantee either of your care properly and the best we could do was find the best nursing home and institution for you guys. I tried looking at in-home care assistance, but for a fulltime employment, it was too expensive."

"It's alright. I already told you. I don't blame you. I am getting better care in here, but I would like some home cooked food."

"Consider it done, but Dad, are you sure you don't remember Margo? At all?"

"Not even a little bit, but don't get discouraged, I don't really remember you either. But the longer I sit here and talk with you, the more you remind me of my wife. It's not so farfetched for you to be my daughter. I can believe it. But most days, I can't trust anything my mind tells me. Soon even this level of cognition will begin to recede. The doctors tell me I am in good health, otherwise."

"It seems like everything in life is ironic with its cruel duplicity. I mean, Dad, you are perfectly healthy for your age except you have Alzheimer's and I'm perfectly healthy for my age except for my mental instability. I think I'm certifiable too. Mark loves me, but sometimes I can see the suggestion of it in his eyes, just whenever he thinks I don't realize he's watching me."

"You're not in an institution. I am. If anyone is certifiable, it would be me."

"Dad, thank you. I have been 100 percent convinced that I am right, but lately, I'm not sure. I don't know why, but I've been having these dreams and, maybe their

hallucinations, but they don't have Margo in them. These same memories that I've retold and retold to my therapist, insisting that Margo is there, are the same memories I'm dreaming of, but this time, Margo really isn't there. Am I dreaming the truth or remembering the truth? I don't know what to believe anymore. Am I only dreaming these dreams because my therapist has implanted this idea that she doesn't exist into my mind?"

"You know, that last thing you said is highly possible. The nurses here have a file of our personal information. Before visitation hours, they go around to each patient and refresh their memories. We are so suppose to believe whatever they tell us from their two-minute glance over a few sheets that have compressed our entire life story. I'm never sure what to believe, but I also know that these nurses are here to help me. They are my prison guards, but I like them. They are just doing their jobs the best they can."

"Are you trying to subtly tell me that maybe Mark and my therapist and everyone else maybe right?"

"They could be. They could be wrong as well, but their intentions are good."

"I know. But when you're going through this process, it becomes a battle and there are no gray areas in warfare. You're either alive or dead, the enemy or an ally."

"What does that make me?"

"You're my Dad, so you're always right." We laughed and the tension broke.

"Sweetheart, our time is up. But I will always be here for you. Come back again soon."

"I will. I'll bring your favorite meal tomorrow."

"I look forward to it. What is my favorite meal?"

"Steak, potatoes, and broccoli."

"That sounds delicious. I can't wait! But don't get offended if I don't remember you. I'm getting worse everyday. I remember les and less every time I try to relive my memories. I'm fighting a losing battle with this parasite. Mind over matter only works if your mind works."

We hugged and I left. I drove home and made dinner for Mark. We talked about his students and how somewhere one way and some another way. We had yet to have children and Mark always unconsciously picked out a few in his class every year as his favorites. He'd tell me if they are struggling in some areas or excelling in others. He usually chose the least educated and the ones to struggle the most as his favorites. I'm not sure if he was aware that he did this, but I think he's naturally attracted to the underdog, the ones suffering. I figured that's how he ended up with someone like me as

a wife.

I didn't cry myself to sleep, but I lied awake for hours thinking about my conversation with my Dad. I dozed off at some point in the early morning sunrise, but Mark's alarm went off at 6:00 a.m. and I blinked awake. I threw my arm across Mark's chest and gave him a squeeze. My head was still buried in the pillow and his laugh came muffled to my ears.

"Babe, I heard you turning last night. Go back to sleep. I'll bring home dinner tonight, so don't worry about cooking."

I grunted in thanks and felt his body moving around the house, as he got ready to go. Isn't it strange how connected you could be with someone else who has no relation to you.

Chapter 6

Just an Ordinary Book

A child's mind is more truthful and honest than an adult's.

My alarm woke me up several hours later. I had therapy today, but this time, I was in no rush to show up. I dragged my feet around the house, as I got ready.

"This is a change a pace from yesterday." I was few minutes late.

"Well, what do you expect when you tell me my sister doesn't exist?"

"I wondered if you could tell me about yesterday. Where did you go after you rushed out of here?"

"I went to see my Dad."

"How is he?"

"Good. He doesn't really remember me, but he tries. I can't be here forever today. I promised him I would bring him his favorite meal today. He misses home cooking."

"Okay. I'll keep a close eye on the time. Any luck finding Alicia?"

"Sorry I haven't really been thinking about it."

"It's quite alright. I've been doing some digging for you. I hired a private eye to look into her whereabouts. He said he might have found a promising lead. He should be sending you a packet of information when he's confirmed his finding. You might even get it as soon as a week from now. Whenever you do, please try and contact her and see if she wouldn't be willing to meet up and talk with you."

"Okay."

"You're very lethargic today."

"Yes."

"This process will only work if you don't give up."

"I don't know where to go from here."

"There is only one direction in life as my Dad used to tell me when I was unsure of the next phase in my life. He said that I could only move forward, and he's right. It is very normal to go through chapters, stages, in one's lifetime. I've gone through several and they led me to be a therapist. This is just one phase in your life. You are young, and you have more time to experience new things."

"Thank you, but it's easier said than done."

"This is true. You remind me a lot of myself at your age. Your response used to be my response growing up."

"Why do you want me to meet up with Alicia so badly?"

"Well, I think you'll learn more about yourself. She is one of the remaining few people that belong to your life before now and could affirm of Margo's existence or not. She is your age and a more credible source than someone who has only known you for the couple of months you've been in therapy."

"You think she'll agree with you."

"Yes, I do. Let me clear this allegation out of the way before you even suggest it. I have never met Alicia. I don't know anything about her except what you've told me of her as your childhood friend. She has not been coached. This isn't some mastermind plan that I've concocted. What Alicia will tell you is what she believes to be true. They will be her memories from her childhood."

"I didn't think you would. Don't you guys have to take some equivalent to the hippocampus oath?"

"Yes, it is very easy for the ethical line to be blurred in psychology."

"Listen, I just don't know what to believe these days."

"Then you are in the same boat as everyone else in the world. Being confused and not having answers is normal, Bennett. What all these sessions are trying to do is to make you more comfortable with what is uncertain and unknown. Regardless if you are remembering things incorrectly or not, you need to learn how to cope with the way your mind thinks. We all have built in defense mechanisms. I am no less different than anyone else. When I get confused, I make a pro's and con's list and it helps to clear my mind. Other people eat tubs of ice cream. I want to find a way for you to deal with the way your mind works. I believe you sustained a brain injury from your childhood that you don't remember. When this happened you suffered some minor brain damage that interferes with your brain's ability to cope."

"I don't remember this."

"I know. I think you are starting to though. Sometimes latent memories reappear later in life. The usual way are through dreams. The thing about the human mind is that it is one of the most amazing computers ever created. Everything we need to survive is locked inside of us, but we need to learn to tap into all of our resources. Your mind still holds onto your memories rather you can remember them or not. It's all in there. It's just a matter of being able to get access to them. Sometimes we are not able to, and when this happens, when we are unable to perform to the best of our abilities, we learn to cope. This is something your mind has not allowed you to do. We need to manually teach it how."

"I know how to cope."

"Really? How do you cope then?"

"Like everyone else. Large tubs of ice cream."

We laughed, but the question left me wondering how I do cope. Was that really my only problem?

"That's such a simple answer to all of my questions. I just don't see how it could be . . . so simple."

"It's not. Coping is a lot harder to manually learn than you think, and obviously there's more to your story."

"Figures."

"Bennett, don't give up. Therapy is a process. It can't all be done in one day. There are a lot of issues we need to work through. We never created any goals at the start of your sessions, maybe it's time we do."

"Well, generically, I would just like to be sane and have my job back before I can't make the payments on my Dad's nursing home."

"That's a start. But lets focus that a little more."

"I guess what I'd really like to get to the bottom of us is if I have a sister or not. I'm convinced I have a sister. I know you, along with everyone else, believe I'm crazy and that she doesn't exist. I just wish there was someway to show you to prove her existence. I guess that's why you want me to seek out Alicia."

"Yes, it is. What else?"

"I want to know what happened in my childhood. I want the truth to come out. Is my

brain deceiving me? Who is right? You or me? And I want to know why my brain does what it does if it is deceiving me. I want to know how to live with it."

"And on the off chance you are right and we are wrong?"

"I guess you'd need to be in therapy, not me."

"This could be true, but if you were right . . . what do you think would happen?"

"I feel like this is a trick question."

"There are never right or wrong answers to my questions or any questions. The point is to make us think."

"Well, if I was right, I'd feel like you all would owe me an apology for making me feel like a lunatic. I'd feel vindicated and . . ."

"And?"

"If I'm going to be honest, if I was right, a part of me would still question if I was wrong."

"Like there is no right or wrong side, only the opposite of what you believe and you'll always second-guess your beliefs?"

"Yes. I guess. Isn't that insane? I mean, is there anything in my life that I can be 100 percent certain of? I can't honestly think of anything that is bullet proof, that I don't question."

"How about your name? Are you positive that your name is Bennett."

"Well, yes, but that's obvious. Everyone is certain of that."

"No, not everyone. At some point, your Dad's Alzheimer will get so bad that he won't be able to recall his name. I am not using your Dad as an example out of cruelty. I'm trying to make a point. A lot of times, my patients believe they are abnormal for having common fears that everyone shares. In this instance, your worries and fears are no different than anyone else. Sometimes, when one is in therapy, it is easy to start becoming a hypochondriac. You believe you're in here because you are crazy and therefore all these things are wrong with you, when really your main areas of concern are concentrated to a handful of actual problems."

"Ya, that makes sense. I am certain of some things in my life – my name, my dog, my work. There are a lot of things I'm sure of, but the one thing that I'm not sure of is who I am. I guess there is a normal level of self-confusion that most people have, but my level is astronomically off the charts. I used to be so positive about my sister, but lately, with

these memories and dreams, I'm starting to second-guess myself. I wonder if maybe you are right. Maybe I am wrong. If you are right, that would change everything. Everything would change."

"Can you define everything for me?"

"It means I can't trust my mind. I can't trust the one person that you can always depend on – yourself. If she doesn't exist, that means I would owe an apology to everyone. It would mean everything that I know about myself, of my childhood, all of it would be wrong. I would need to know the truth. I would need to learn about my own past because my own recollections are false and incorrect. I wouldn't be surprised if I had a mental or psychotic break if I became 100 percent certain that she didn't exist."

"Why do you think you'd experience another mental break? Let's say you do have one, hypothetically. Can you compare your first mental break to this one?"

"I honestly don't remember the actual event. It was like an outer body experience; even talking about it after the fact is very surreal. I felt like my heart had stopped, but I could feel it and hear its rapid pulsing at the same time. I would say I lost control of my faculties, but honestly, I didn't have the will to do anything. Can you say you have no control when you don't want to do anything so your body shuts down? I had no motivation, but I'm not sure if that is the right word for how I felt. I just shut down completely. It was like the pain of knowing I would never see her again and the knowledge that it was my fault was overwhelming. Looking back, I know I am not to blame for her death, but I thought putting her in the institution would be the best for everyone, especially for her. I spent all my life protecting her, but I failed. I failed her, my parents, and myself."

"A lifetime of servitude and all for not."

"Exactly! But, I mean, I wouldn't call it servitude. I was a willing participant. She's my sister; I am going to take care of her. It's my duty. Even if she weren't special, I would still have to do right by her because she's my sister. But given the situation, I was obligated."

"That must be hard to have a love that is bound by burden and responsibility far beyond those of the baby sister."

"It is. It was. I've always felt like it was a burden, but the truth is I wouldn't have wanted it any other way. She made me the person that I am. She was like my report card. She kept me accountable for my actions. I knew if she was doing okay, then I was doing okay. If she wasn't doing okay, then I wasn't doing okay."

"She was your barometer? This can be a common attribute of twins or siblings very close in age and have lived together in a two-parent household. Since we are being very candid today, what would it mean if your sister didn't exist? Would you still be the person you

see as your core self?"

"No. Definitely not. Even if you took someone who you didn't know well in your life out of the equation, you would be a different person."

"That's a fair argument. What about this scenario: your sister doesn't exist, but she has existed for you all these years, would you still be the same person as you are today?"

"I'm confused by this question. If my sister does exist, but only as a figment of my imagination, like an imaginary friend that I have had all these years so my experience with her, all through are wrong, seem real to me; therefore, I hypothetically had a sister and a childhood full of memories with my sister without having a sister . . . I guess I could see how I could still be the same person as I am today."

"Do you like who you are? Just look at who you are at your core. What are the characteristics that define you as a person?"

"I mean . . . yes, I think. I consider myself to be a decent individual. I try to live with integrity and honesty. I try to help others as much as possible. I try to make the best decisions - my Dad says I am very deliberate in my choosing like my mom. I don't try and hurt anyone. I have had my share of sins, but who doesn't have them. I wouldn't consider myself a bad person."

"Good. I wouldn't either. Now, if you sister didn't exist, and you aren't the same person as you are today, do you think you would be an equivalent person to who you are today?"

"I don't know. I wouldn't even begin to know what type of person I am without my sister. Who says I would be good or bad. In the battle of nature versus nurture, it is often a case of nurture shaping the nature. We all have the tendencies to cheat and lie. We are all capable of doing monstrous things, but nurture can have a greater impact on who we are ultimately as individuals."
"That debate has had a long historical timeline. Not everyone would agree with you, but I think there is probably more truth in your words than the endless hours of research done on the subject. There is no qualitative way to measure something that is what one feels."

"You would agree with nurture; after all, isn't your entire career based on the concept that nurture can change people?"

"That is a good point. Touché."

"Why are we talking like this? I feel like I'm a book club meeting for Oprah's book of the month."

The therapist head shook with a slight laughter and handed me a book lying on the desk.

"What is this?" The title read: How to Go Where Your Mind Goes. "Are you being

serious? This is a self help book isn't it?"

"Correct and incorrect. It's a fiction novel, but its message is similar to other self help books. It's just a lot easier to digest when it comes in this format." We shared a smile as I flipped the book to the back cover to read the excerpt:

> Readers beware as Lucinda travels through the pathways of her mind to find her darkest secrets, worse nightmares, and seventh heaven all trapped in the same neuron synapses. She has tried hard all her life to forget and forgive, but the time has come for her to face the reasons why she is the way she is. Can she come to love herself again in time to save her marriage, her friendships, and her family?

"Sounds perfectly enthralling."

"Well, it might, but you don't make it sound so."

"It's not my type of book."

"It usually isn't, but if you can get over the super-cheesy back cover and manage to make it through, you'll find a lot of parallels between Lucinda and yourself. I read this book on whim many years ago when I was going through something of an identity crisis and I found it very helpful. This isn't homework, but a suggestion from a friend. Sometimes all therapy is, is letting the patient know that they are not alone and are not the only ones experiencing what they are experiencing."

"I know I'm not alone. I have Mark."

"Yes, but do you treat him like your equal? When was the last time you talked to him about our sessions? Do you let him in when you're stress and more vulnerable? Have you discussed your worries about your psychotic break and possibly having another? Do you tell him about Margo?"

"I didn't realize a therapist lectured."

"Touché again, but the point is you have worked very hard at keeping everyone at bay. You've done this for years – and I think you don't even realize it. People who have these anxiety issues, like you, will find themselves lonely after therapy and they've realized they've pushed everyone away. This is a concern for me, because you can fix your relationships with everyone around you. You haven't told me a lot about your relationship with Mark, but my guess is your lack of conversation about him means things are a little rockier than you'd like them to be. I think you're a very likely candidate for depression. Depression can trigger psychotic breaks and vice versa – it's really a vicious cycle of egg, chicken, egg, chicken."

"I've never been depressed before in my life. I'm fine."

“Maybe not clinically depressed, but everyone has been depressed. I was depressed when I lost my parents in car accident. Being depressed is not something you should be ashamed of, it’s very common.”

“Okay, well, I’ll keep your words in mind.”

“Thank you, but you did not sound convincing enough when you said that, would you like to try that again?”

I laughed and said, “All right. I’ll keep your words in mind.” We ended the session with an exchange of smiles and small chitchat about nothing. I felt better. I realized I hadn’t laughed like that in awhile.

Although I realized I was being cajoled to read it, instead of being a willing participant, but I did go home and started reading the book. It was an easy read and the chapters came and went with ease. I like Lucinda, she reminded me a lot of myself, it was like reading my own dairy. Dodger was whining for a walk so I set the book down and we strolled through the neighborhood a couple of times. As we rounded the corner, I saw Mark’s car in the driveway and Dodger took off for the front door.

“Honey, you're home early.”

“I’m finally off bus duty, and my last class is my planning period so I thought I’d come home early and cook you dinner.”

As I watched him cut and stir while humming to himself, I knew that it was my own fault that our relationship had become so shallow and filled with meaningless conversations.

Chapter 7

Alicia

To be alive is to be scared.

It's been a while since I wrote last. I've visited my Dad more, lately. He seems to like it a lot, and I think it helps me too. For a while, after I put him in there, I was so ashamed of doing it that I only could face him once every two weeks. Now I go almost twice a week (and I always bring some home cooking for him). I'm feeling better these days. I haven't had any more hallucinations or funky dreams. The therapist says I'm looking and sounding better these days.

I've been trying really hard to open up to Mark more. It's helping, and he's being so understanding. Maybe that's why I'm feeling better these days. I'm still confused on so many issues and I don't have any answers, but the therapist is right, I don't feel so alone inside my head anymore.

I still have these memories of Margo, but they seem so far away now. I'm not sure who to believe these days – myself or everyone else. Therapy has helped me discuss my issues instead of avoiding them, which had become a detrimental habit for me formed from years of denial.

I still have suppressed memories resurfacing from time to time. I don't know why this is all happening now – is this my version of a mid-life crisis? For some reason, I never thought to ask my therapist, but I did in the last session. Apparently I have a long history of being clumsy and had another head injury a few months prior to when I received that telegram. Things are becoming blurry to me. I've requested for my medical history from the hospital. They said a copy of the file would be mailed to me in a few days. I could have gone to the hospital in person and received within five minutes, but I'm scared to look.

I'm not sure why this idea had never occurred to me before now – well, if I'm being completely honest, it was the therapist idea. Also, the private eye that has been searching for Alicia had a false lead. My childhood friend seems to want to remain a history. I've looked through all my old stuff in the attic and garage and I have no pictures of her. Then again, I have no pictures of Margo, but I burned all of these shortly after I received the telegram about her death. I didn't want any reminders of my failure.

The private eye called me the other day. His name is Stan, which seems fitting for a male detective. I feel like I'm in a Nancy Drew book talking to him. He says he's found a new lead and hopes to have some updated information soon. I should be receiving that in the mail any day now, as well.

I bet my therapist would have something to say about me using the U.S. post office a.k.a

snail mail as my first choice of receiving messages. I can't deny it, I have a huge problem with avoidance, but everything is so nice right now. I feel like I'm standing in the eye of my hurricane and I'll soon be picked up and blown around like a piece of useless debris.

I set down the journal to walk Dodger who was beginning to beg. I was starting to miss work. I don't know how retired people handle not having a job. I was reaching the closure of my therapy sessions and three-month leave. It was almost time to get back to work and I was antsy to return. Of course, everything depended upon the professional evaluation given by my therapist. It was like being back in school and hoping that your report card would be good enough that your parents would let you go to that slumber party on the weekend. I even contemplated bringing a symbolic apple gift to my next session, but figured that the bribe would be blatantly obvious to a person whose career is based on reading context clues and observing.

However, I didn't show up empty-handed to the next session, I returned the book. It was an easy read and I had it finished within a week, but there were passages that kept pulling me back. These passages joined the ranks of literature that stuck with me - It was the best of times, it was the worse of times; frankly my dear, I don't give a damn; and many miles to go before I sleep. Now Pam Greer's words became a mantra that repeated inside my head. I didn't want to return the book immediately after finishing it because I needed time to digest and her words.

"I would really like to talk to the author one day," I said as I handed the book over.

"Really? How come?"

"I wonder what her inspiration for writing the book, and there were several passages that kept pulling me back into the story."

"Let me guess, I used to be able to recite it, but I do remember my favorite passage was when Lucinda was poised at the stairway to heaven and she had only one thought left to think – now what was it?"

"I remember that line. I liked it a lot. I think it went something like this: I have only one thought left that time has lost all meaning for me; I do not fear death; I do not fear life because the path I walk is paved in hope."

"Yes. That sounds right. I take it you really liked it then?"

"Yes. I'm glad you asked me to read it. I probably would have never read it if I had found it on the shelf and read the back cover."

"I know what you mean. Someone suggested the book to me, as well. I guess there is some truth to not judging a book by its cover. Were there other passages you wanted to share with me?"

"Yes and no. I found the book to be more personal than I expected, and I came in today

with the thought that I would share the passages that I liked the most, but for some reason, I've changed my mind."

"Why do you think you changed your mind?"

"I guess because it might reveal to much about my current mindset and I really want you to write a good evaluation so I can return to work. I desperately need to return to work – partly for my own sanity."

"I can understand that feeling. I broke my arm in a skiing accident one winter and I took a month off from work to heal, but by the time I had enough range in my arm to return to work – at that time I was a server at a restaurant – I immediately went back to work. Isn't it funny how we all complain so much about our jobs that keep us preoccupied every weekday from 9 to 5, but without it, we are lost and have no means to fill that time slot."

"Well, we are no longer living in the Middle Ages. We don't have to spend all day foraging for food. I take about an hour at the grocery store and I have a week's supply of food."

"Yes, but I think it's more intriguing to see how we fight so hard against a system we perceive to be against us, but once we escape, we lost and immediately return to the mundane cycle of our routine with our tail between our legs."
"This time it's my turn to ask why you think so."

"In many ways, we are all programmed alike. We need structure whether we admit it or not. We need social interactions whether we push others away. We need so many things that we don't even realize, including a routine to give us security and comfort. Very few of us will leave a permanent mark on the world, but we can all contribute to society by working even the most demeaning of jobs. Our work is usually the only way for us to feel like we have an influence on others. I think work is a very basic human need."

"I'm starting to see your point. I guess you probably get a lot of people complaining about hating their jobs and stuff, right?"

"Occasionally, my point though, is that it's a good sign that you are feeling antsy and want to go back to work."

"Hmmm, so you are giving me a good evaluation?"

"I haven't written it yet, but I don't see any reason for you not to go back to work. Have you received any new information about Alicia?"

"No, Stan is mailing me some information soon, but I'm just enjoying my remaining days of freedom before returning back to work."

“Sounds like you're avoiding it.”

“Yes. I can’t lie about it, now that you’ve pointed out my tendencies to myself. It’s become blatantly obvious that I avoid a lot of things. I’m waiting on a copy of medical records to be mailed to me too. But I think that the extra time I get to mull over the possible information might help me cope with it better.”

“Possibly. Have you tried some of the techniques we’ve talked about yet?”

“Not really. I still remember them, and I wrote them all down so I’ll remember them later. I think I’ll know better if a method works for me when I start living my life again.”

“Why do you think you’re not living your life now?”

“I am. Gosh, I need to be more careful about my words around you. I guess I feel like I’m in limbo. I’m not working and busy like I am normally. I have no plans or to do lists to accomplish every day. It’s like I wake up every day with no agenda. It’s a very odd feeling and sort of disconcerting. I’ll be glad for work to give me some structure to my life. Not working these past few months made me realize how meaningless life can be. I go to work; I come home; I go back to work. Even while I was at work, life was meaningless, but I just didn’t notice it as much. Without a job, I definitely notice that my life seems pointless. I’ve been getting an itch to do something wild. I don’t know. Mark’s job allows him to shape the minds of the next generation. He is contributing to society. I . . .”

“I don’t think you’re giving yourself enough credit. You don’t have to be a missionary or Mother Theresa to be contributing to society.”

“I know, but sometimes life seems a little futile. If you're not a doctor or a president, what difference does it make what you do? Don’t give me a bad evaluation because of this – I’ve had this thought before. I realize that not everybody can be the president, but I . . . if she doesn’t exist, I don’t see the point in my life. When it came to her, I was the ultimate caregiver.”

“Do you really believe your life is futile without your sister?”

“I haven’t wanted to admit it to myself but yes. I never did much volunteering – there was once when I helped cleanup a park as part of my high school ecology class. Truth is, I never really got involved in a lot of extra curricular activities. When I went to college, it was hard. She stayed at home with my parents and I would e-mail her daily, but at that point, she really couldn’t function very well. I think she was alive for the first few years of her life and spent the remaining time in an agonizing decline.”

“But wouldn’t you consider that everyone spends their entire life dying? As human beings, what is there more to life?”

"Technically, yes." I said reluctantly. I was feeling waned and it was starting to show.

"Let's end it here for today, but I would like for you to journal about what we've discussed today. Maybe through writing it down you'll get a better idea of how you really feel on the subject. Also, I would like for you to write your own evaluation for yourself. Do you think you could have it ready for our meeting tomorrow?"

"Yes, I think so, but do you want the evaluation from your perspective or from mine?"

"This isn't for a grade and will not reflect in my own evaluation for you. I would just like to know how well you feel therapy has helped you or hindered you, even. Do you think you're ready to return to work? Why?"

"Okay. I'll work on it."

"Thank you. I'll give Stan a call and see if we can't hurry up the process in finding Alicia soon."

I left a little apprehensive. I knew there would be something waiting for me in the mailbox. I hadn't checked it before I left for the appointment. I wasn't sure if I was ready for it. I thought of going to see my Dad or taking Dodger to the dog park, but I knew I couldn't avoid the news forever so I drove home.

It came in a brown manila envelope, very discrete with a professional printed label. There were bills and junk mail that I opened first, read through, and paid before reaching for the packet. It was about three inches thick from the Hospital. Staffordshire was a tiny little town so my parents always went to the big hospital inside the city limits of Hartford, which made it convenient for me since Mark and I when we moved into the city limits. I've been going to this hospital for my entire life.

They did a good bookkeeping job. I flipped through the table of contents they included. My mother was a stickler for doctor visits. She made sure everyone went to his or her annual checkups, and as a child in public school, I got the flu or cold at least once every winter. Dad was probably the healthiest man I've ever known. I don't ever remember mom making him go to see the doctor. That was one reason why when he became forgetful, no one understood what was happening to him. Of all of my family, I was always the sickly one. I regularly got my fingers jammed into doors. I've broken a couple fingers, a toe, my elbow, and my nose. Luckily I was never on crutches because I would not have the patience for it. As a child, my mother wanted to put me into a padded cell with only rounded toys so I wouldn't hurt myself. I built up a high tolerance for pain because of my frequent accidents.

My health report card lay in front of me in stacks. I separated it out chronologically. I grouped all my visits from birth to 10 years old, 11 to 20 years old and 21 to present. I was the fattest little baby. My baby file showed a colic baby with the fattest cheeks I'd ever seen. It's been a long time since I reminisced like this. The hospital kept a baby

picture with every pediatrics file, but apparently once you move out of the chubby cheeks and no hair stage, they didn't bother with pictures. I wonder if they kept a baby picture to safeguard against accidently switching babies, after all, we all basically start out the same, looking the same.

It was 1988 and I was 7 years old. There were MRI's of my brain ordered on March 15. The charts showed I had a minor concussion for a few days but was still socially functional. I had several checkups in varying interim post accident but nothing revealed major damages. A psychological examination was scheduled later that year upon doctor's recommendations. There a few chicken scratched comments of perplexing speech incoherency and a possible personality change.

I didn't remember going to the psychiatrist when I was younger. I sat there with Dodger's head in my lap at the kitchen table, but I could nothing came to my mind. Was this a suppressed memory or just a part of the common forgotten memories of childhood? The usual feeling of pressing against a rubber band wall that wouldn't budge, but gave enough resistance for me to know that something was there never came. This was different. This wasn't good.

Dodger started whining as he detected my stress. I flipped through the rest of my medical history quickly but my psychiatric examination wasn't included in my medical history. Was it possible that I had no correct memories? It is normal to forget some memories from one's childhood but going to see a psychiatrist is a big one, how could I forget that one?

"What is wrong with my mind? Dodger, will you still love me if I'm crazy?" His ears perked as I talked to him, but his head remained heavy on my lap, keeping me grounded. "You are my most favorite purchase ever." I scratched behind his ears and he closed his eyes and so life continued.

I didn't get a chance to review anymore of the material as dinner had to be made and the house cleaned. By the time the evening ended and I crawled into bed, my mind floated back to the stack of neat papers still on my kitchen table. Mark wrapped his arms around me and I allowed myself to forget the fact that I was one messed up individual and could not trust my mind.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, my conscious worries came back to haunt me.

I was laughing so hard that I doubled over and was literally rolling on the ground. It was summer and I was in my room alone. I could see my 8-year-old self-clutching my stomach with laughing spasms. It was I, but my 29-year-old self's conscious floated above the scene. I was a voyeur watching over my younger self. No one else was in the room but something had to be funny. My room looked exactly like I remembered it from my childhood. The walls were a baby pink from when my Dad had painted it for my baby room and never bothered to change it.

“Bennett, its lunch time!” I pulled myself together and walked down stairs trying to suppress my giggles.

“What’s so funny Bennett Bear? I hear you laughing up a storm up there.”

“Sissy made a funny. She farted so loud,” I said between spurts of laughter. Mom handed me a pate with a grilled cheese sandwich and Cheeto's.

“What do you want to drink?” asked Mom. I sat down at the table as Mom and Dad moved around the kitchen picking up things and setting them back down.

“Lemonade!”

“Who’s Sissy?”

“Dad, don’t play dumb. My older sister, duh!”

“You don’t have an older sister. You’re our one and only special child,” Dad said as he came in and gave me a squeeze. I left red smears on his cheeks from my Cheeto-fingers and he laughed. “We would like to give you a sister, but it’ll have to be a little sister.”

Mom and Dad exchanged looks of concern over my head as we ate lunch, but I was too busy burying my face into my lunch to notice.

The alarm went off and Mark’s body jerked awake.

“Awww, morning we meet again.”

“Mark! Turn off the alarm!”

My night had been so restless and the memory of my dream had already faded by the time I woke up. I vaguely remembered it being disturbing but I quickly fell back to sleep as Mark got up for the day.

Her body lied motionless, dulled by the power of sleep. Dodger jumped up to lay where my body had been. I had morning car rider duty and it was 4:00 a.m. I had to be at the middle school by 6:00 a.m. I went down to start the coffee brewing while I tried to wake up underneath the hot water. I turned the handle to the blue line and as the cold water hit my chest, I gasped for air from the shock. I stepped out and shook my hair like a Dodger does after a bath.

I headed back downstairs to grab some coffee and saw her journal on the nightstand. I don’t think I know why I did it, but we have been dancing around her issues for years.

She just refused to let me in. I picked it up, not knowing I would sit down and read it with my morning coffee. My gym bag lied untouched by my briefcase as I sat downstairs reading her private thoughts. I finished it before school and returned it to the nightstand. I pulled on a striped tie and left the house. My head felt full and bloated. I wasn't sure what to think, but her words spun around my head in a whirlwind all day.

It started years ago. When I first met her, she had told me about her sister and her family. Everything seemed normal. We dated for years and I never knew the difference. I just thought that her sister was the black sheep that they never discussed. By the time I realized that it was all in her head, we'd been married almost a year.

Soon after I learned the situation from her Dad, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. She maintained her beliefs vehemently and I began questioning if I should trust her Dad, but the evidence and proof wasn't on her side. Sometimes, she even has me convinced that Margo existed. We've had her brain scanned, but they did not find any chemical imbalances or abnormal brain activity. In lieu of any scientific reasoning for her memories, I came up with my own theory.

I've kept the library books I've checked out on memory and personality disorders secret from her, but a stack of them always sit in my desk drawer at work. I've been reading them for years trying to find an answer to her problems. Theories abound, but the most likely answer is she severely damaged her frontal temporal lobe as a child; and as a result, Margo was born to help her mind cope with a concussion. I've always thought that Margo did exist for Bennett. The way she talks about her and describes her – how could this person not be real? In recent months, I've formed a new theory – could she have multiple personalities? She doesn't fit enough of the DMV criteria to be diagnosable, but who's to say she didn't partition her mind as a child and has never been able to escape her other half? No one knows the truth, not even Bennett. The answers are locked in the maze of her mind. Her diary didn't give me any more answers, but a stronger conviction that something wasn't completely right and she knew it. The question of if our marriage would withstand this test was not only a question that plagued me but her also.

A rush of children walked into the room as the bell rang to start class and helped pull me out of my reverie. The day flowed by in the usual monotony with little interest. My body moved around the room and my hand motioned at various things, but my thoughts were trapped in another world. I couldn't get it out of my mind. Did I do the right thing or not?

I blamed my own stupidity for not trying to seek out all the answers to the usual questions before our wedding. My thirtieth birthday was looming near and the need to settle down became an overpowering urge. I found a beautiful woman who was laid back and comfortable in staying in the area so our children could live close to my family in Connecticut.

Everything seemed to naturally fall in place, but it all quickly fell apart as I started

questioning her about all the reasons why she didn't want children. That was when her worries about passing on any genetic defects, money to support her sister's placement in a mental hospital, and her father's nursing home were revealed. From here, one excuse came after another until I started suspecting that she was making things up to not have children. I started asking her family about the mysterious sister that I'd never met and suddenly I realized the real issue. Her extreme vulnerability and need for care kept me locked in our marriage with an obligation and obsessive need to cure her for years. I knew I was running out of time on our meter.

The drive home was too short after work. I needed more time before I went home to face her, so I made a U-turn as I reached the subdivision and headed towards the city. I drove around in circles and ended up at a greyhound station. I sat on the bench waiting for the bus to come, still trying to digest the situation.

I had become obsessed with her ailment. I needed to know why she was the way she was. I knew I had a weakness for vulnerable people, the underdog, and the weakling. I wanted to take care of people, and maybe that's why I married Bennett because subconsciously I knew she needed me in a way another could not? I always chose the student struggling the most at the start of the semester and made him or her my project for the school year. I would try my best to find his or her weakest areas of learning and strengthen them. I could not find a cure for Bennett. I've read a library's worth of books on different mental disorders, and although I could easily write a dissertation upon the end of my research, I still could not explain her situation.

It became my private hobby to try and find a cure for her. I needed to fix her, but I didn't know how. Therapy took years and would be a costly venture for someone living off a teacher's salary. Although teaching the next generation all the skills they need to survive, should be a more lucrative career, it made my means of curing her less brazen.

I formed new theories everyday, keeping my thoughts to myself as she did hers. I had tried about a year ago to fulfill a theory that I had believed to be her answer and it ended up with her no longer trusting me. I knew that part of her problem was suppressed memories, which are caused by trauma or abuse as a child. Then I read somewhere that some children kept imaginary friends from their childhood into adulthood to help cope with abuse that happened to them as a child. I started digging around in her past for possible signs of abuse. I couldn't find any, but I had cemented this idea in my mind so much that I somehow justified a small past detail into what I wanted and needed to make this theory true. I tried confronting her with a sort of intervention in hope of getting her to open up about her abusive past.

This failure ended in disaster as we both walked around in a cold, sullen stubbornness as we realized how far apart we've drifted. It surprised me that neither of us asked for a divorce after my well meaning but wrongful hypothesis led us to weeks of awkwardness. It quickly became a fulltime hobby after that point, but I tried to keep her close by acting as nothing had happened and she slowly forgot the uncomfortable situation. We no longer discussed her sister, but I switched gears from her personal history to empirical

research on various disorders.

A greyhound bus pulled up with squeaking breaks that broke my concentration. A flood of body odor wafted out of the door as it released its contents in a spew of colors and motion. I couldn't pull a face out of the crowd; they all blended together as they pulled their bags out of the cargo space and moved around. I felt like a small person being swallowed up by the swarm of people that came rushing toward the bench situated in front of the entrance of the greyhound station.

I was starting to drown in the situation. I couldn't last anymore without a lifejacket to keep my head above the water. Somewhere between the greyhound arrival and departure, I buried my face in my hands in shame and regret. I didn't feel out of place as greyhound stations where cesspools for misery and a quick transaction between fate and faith. I picked up my emotional baggage, got into my car, and drove home.

After my first failure, I knew my next attempt needed to be more direct and powerful. I started looking into therapy techniques when I stumbled upon an experimental method of pretending the patient's illusions and delusions are true. After several weeks of supporting their belief, send something stating the end of the key element of their delusion.

I remember sitting in my planning period trying to choose the wording. I printed it out on cardstock paper and stuck the sticker with the institution's sender address on the front of the postcard. I walked into the post office and mailed it to my home address. I went home and slept well that night. I counted the days until it arrived back to its origin to poison the mind that was already filled with poison.

I was teaching my second class of the day when I got the call. I was calm and composed when I heard the news of her psychotic break. I left a large reading assignment as busy work for the students and left them with a threat of a reading quiz tomorrow. I was efficient like a machine. I had spent hours going over this in my mind in various scenarios depending upon where I was when she got the news. I knew what I needed to do, but I did not know how to feel.

I got to her office before the paramedics showed up and I picked up the postcard that had fallen underneath her desk. I slipped into my pocket without anyone suspecting as I comforted my wife. I was the perfect image of a caring, concern husband. I played my part and felt absolute disgust at myself. I had become a trained dog that didn't know how to act any other way except for how they are trained.

I had expected a mental collapse that had occurred. I was prepared for almost anything, but I had not banked on her strong beliefs in Margo being foundationally shaken and validated to further entrench these false memories. My plan had backfired, but the she did go to therapy, which she needed and on the company's tab.

I destroyed any evidence of my contraband quickly and efficiently and no on expected

anything. I crossed my finger that the therapy would have some effect on her. I couldn't tell if I had done more harm than good and I spent most nights struggling with myself. I blamed myself for every time she seemed to relapse into her old ways or seemed like she was falling apart.

I was starting to worry that my problems were rooted in some psychological disorder like her's; after all, what type of person would frame their own wife instead of trying to find her the professional care she needs?

By the time I came home, it was late and I knew that saying I was on bus duty or car duty wouldn't fly. When I walked into the house, I could smell the dinner I had missed still lingering in the air. She sat on the couch with her journal when I saw her.

"Hey! I tried calling you! I was worried. Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Of course. I'm sorry for being so late. Every teacher has to help out with at least one extra curricular activity so I am the faculty sponsor for the debate team. We had our first meeting today after school and I forgot to tell you. I ended up staying extra late to work on my lesson plan because I was tutoring a student during my planning period. And then of course it got so late so I knew I would miss dinner so I stopped at the El Charro – you know that Mexican restaurant – for dinner. I saw the Peters there! Mrs. Peters says she's missed you at the book club meetings. Maybe it would be a good idea for you to start that back up again?"

"Oh, well, I wished you'd had called me to just let me know where you were. I was worried. It's not like you."

"I know, I'm sorry." I bent down to kiss her and sat down on the couch next to her. Lying had become second nature to me somewhere between me finding out the truth about her and present day. I was getting better at it everyday, and it only made me more disgusted to myself.

Therapy had brought back a resemblance of our former selves and who we were when we got married. My conscious grew a conscious as I remembered how life was before I found out and how good it could be again if this worked. I never thought I'd have the audacity to follow through with my theories. I felt a consuming pressure of guilt on my chest, but the glimmer of hope that this could work kept my tongue still.

Mark's face was pale and exhausted in a way I had never seen before. It looked like he had ran a mile through the valley of death, but his silly smile hung limp on his face – a little out of place.

I had spent the evening alone and used my time to go through more of my medical file. Most of my accidents occurred around puberty as my brain learned to catch up with my body growth. Then I stumbled upon the doctor's visits when I was 16 years old. I

laughed as I read the funny doctor's notes. My parents didn't know how to break the bird and bees to me and they ended up making a doctor's appointment so the professional can bore me for an hour on the intricacies of human mating and the necessity for abstinence. The doctor showed me very graphic pictures, which I always suspected were planted by my mother to scare me into abstinence.

I found the recent MRI scans after my freak accident earlier this year that caused no damage that they could find to my brain. Scans had shown a hyperactive brain after my incident, but it eventually returned to normal again. The doctor's speculated that I lost blood flow to certain areas of my brain post accident, but by the time the paramedics showed up, my blood was circulating again.

I didn't remember that day, but the file showed a testimony from Mark about leaving on a camping trip with his college friends and I was home alone. They think I might have had a seizure of some sort that toppled me down the stairs. Mark found my body crumpled in a heap at the bottom of the stairs on the Sunday afternoon he got back. They think it happened earlier Sunday and my body had laid their motionless for several hours before Mark came home and found it.

I've never had a history of seizures before. The doctor's notes on my file came from multiple doctors and even extra medical caregivers as they speculated on the causes. Nothing was ever confirmed and that day is still a mystery. I had a concussion from my fall and didn't remember that day or even the brain injury until I was told what happened after the fact. I never put my clumsiness, which has landed me in the hospital more times than not in my life, as anything related to my psychological problems. I never even thought I had issues until I realize that no one believed me about my sister. I always thought I was normal, just a little more mature for my age since I've had to take care of my sister. I stopped talking about my sister many years ago to my friends and coworkers. It was easier to not explain the situation about her and listen to them deny everything I was saying after they talk to my family.

Later I realize this to be a mistake because no one was on my side when everything became public after my mental break at work. I was finding more and more evidence to support my therapist's theories, but it still didn't explain the postcard. I remember the way it felt and the typed words. It didn't make sense. I was slowly starting to question myself about everything, but that postcard about my sister's death was real. It kept me hoping that I wasn't insane.

I laid awake staring at the bedroom ceiling as I made a pros and cons list for evidence for and against Margo. I was consumed with the struggle to keep her alive that I never even mourned her loss. Mark gave a snort in his sleep that drew my attention away from my swirling thoughts. I slept next to him every night and lived in the same house with him, but sometimes it felt like I was living alone.

The next morning, I woke up and he had already left for school. I took Dodger for a walk and made an attempt to journal. I cleaned the house, went grocery shopping, and started

weeding out back. The sun beat down on me relentlessly as I didn't think about the time of day before grabbing my gardening gloves and going out back at 2 p.m. I kept working until my I couldn't take the sticky bitterness of the sweat dripping down my face and back and I headed in for a shower. The mailman had come by at 11:21 a.m. I noticed him coming with lots of mail, but I had let the household go by the wayside of late so I spent the day concentrating on being a good wife.

I could be a stay at home wife with ease. I was more domesticated than a dog that's gone through obedience school. Mark came home carrying the mail with a more genuine smile today than last night. I knew something had happened to him last night that he wasn't willing or not ready to share. I left the topic alone, because I knew he had done the same for me many a times when I returned from therapy or visiting my Dad, who was getting worse every time I visited. The doctor's say the lifespan of someone with his level of Alzheimer's is low. I started wondering if I should pull him out of the nursing home to live with me. I wasn't working so I could be at home with him. I didn't know how much time he had left. I couldn't keep him here for much longer if my therapist gave me a good enough evaluation that I could return back to work. But if I couldn't return to work, then I would have to look for another job. I sighed, giving up on the idea of bringing him home.

"There's a lot of mail today, huh? I think a lot of it is junk though. This is for you," he said as he handed me a brown manila envelope. His head stayed bent over the stack of mail as he pulled out any bills or coupons from the flyers and advertisements. "What is that?"

"It's from Stan the private eye that my therapist used to hunt down Alicia, a childhood friend of mine."

"Oh? That sounds interesting. Why?"

"My therapist thinks it would be good for me to reunite with Alicia and catch up. Mostly she wants me to hear Alicia's point of view of our childhood."

"That sounds like a good idea. So what do you do now? Like call her and set up a time to meet?"

"Ya I guess," I said without any enthusiasm. I left the package on the table and went into the kitchen to start dinner. "I'm thinking of making spaghetti, does that sound alright to you?"

"Ya. Aren't you going to open it?"

"Ya, but later. I'm starving for some reason, how about you?"

We made dinner together and laughed as we reminisced about his first attempt to make me dinner. It was the first time that the butterflies of a relationship fluttered in my

stomach. The moment was sweet and salty. I held it in my mind for hours afterwards as I drifted off to sleep. It was like reliving the first date moment with your significant other and it clicks after a lot of awkward conversation – it's when you know it'll all work out well.

I forgot about the thin sliver of brown paper enclosing Alicia's current whereabouts from me. It floated in my dream, but I didn't stir in my sleep. When the alarm went off my eyes opened wide as if I'd just lied down instead of sleeping for the past eight hours. Alicia was the first thing on my mind as my eyes flicked open and I lied motionless in a pool of sheets and blanket. Dodger had replaced Mark's form. We lied nose to nose on the bed staring down the other. Dodger thought about dog food and I wondered what I would do with the information. When I went downstairs, Mark had opened the envelope and pulled out its content. Some photographs and a file of paper detailing Alicia's current address and contact information lied on the table. I picked up the file and flipped through the pages.

Alicia had become a financial broker for a JP Morgan's bank branch in Belborn, New Jersey. She was a single mom of an eight-year-old boy. She graduated with a degree in finance from the University of Connecticut. She was a member of her son's school's PTA and was dating another child's father, who's also on the PTA board.

Stan had included her address and the distance between my home and hers via car, plane, and train. He left little to the imagination. There was a picture of her son swinging on a playground with Alicia's back turned to the camera. I pulled out the snapshots of her that were at the bottom of the file. Her hair was a dark brown that laid straight down her back. It is said that friends often have friends that look alike, but our similarities were uncanny. Her eyes were a hazel-green and her smile was crooked with one side not reaching as high as her other side of her lip.

I wasn't sure who I was looking at. This couldn't be Alicia. This must be a mistake. I pulled out all the photos in the file and laid them side-by-side across the table so there wasn't any surface area left. Stan had taken several shots of Alicia in different settings and some with her son and some alone.

Everywhere I looked I saw her face and her smile and her eyes. There were nine photos of that same face that has haunted me for so long. My vision went out of focus as I stood there with disbelief. The images swirled into a kaleidoscope of colors and my body went rigid. I didn't realize where the ringing came from until Stan's voice spoke into my ear.

For a moment my voice was stuck in my throat as I stood their confused and bewildered about what to do, or what I had just done. I wasn't sure if I had any control over myself anymore. I started crying as Stan said, "Stan Penne – private eye. Can I help you?"

"Stan?"

"Yes, can I help you?"

"This is, this is Bennett, my therapist asked you to find my childhood friend Alicia. I got your packet of information on her in the mail and, and I noticed the pictures you have included are . . . They can't be the correct photos."

"Ma'am, everything in the packet is 100 percent correct. It is my job to find accurate information for my clients. I cannot be held liable for any information that dissatisfies you, but it is correct."

"Oh. I just wanted to be sure."

"Yes, ma'am. Goodbye."

The phone line went dead and silence filled my ears. I could hear the blood pounding through my veins as if my senses had become hypersensitive. Nothing made sense. Nothing. I felt empty and lost with no sense of direction. My world went dark and quiet as everything around me faded away from my vision. The world came rushing at me like looking through your windshield during a terrible rainstorm and you can't see even an inch ahead.

Chapter 8

To Believe or Not To Believe?

It was Margo's smile. It was Margo's eyes. This wasn't Alicia. An endless cycle of words floated in my head as I stared at the hospital's ceiling. I heard the beep of a heart monitor and footsteps of people walking down the corridor outside of the swinging door. I was trapped inside my head again on an endless loop of questions.

People were standing in the room with me, but my head remained frozen and I didn't see them.

"Is she going to be okay?" asked Mark.

"Listen, it's pretty bad. She's suffered a severe stroke and this probably won't be the last. Patients with a mental disturbance history are at a higher risk of strokes and seizures. I'm surprised this is her first. She probably has had them before but they weren't correctly diagnosed since strokes are extremely rare to occur in a young person."

"Okay," Mark said. "Thank you."

"I'm sorry. My sympathies." The doctor left the room.

"Mark, she was making great strides in therapy. I suggest she continues with therapy after she is released from the hospital. I want to put her on some antidepressants, just to be safe," said my therapist.

"Listen – I need to be honest with you, and I also need to have this off my chest. I sent Bennett a fake postcard telling her about the death of her sister. I thought maybe she would accept it as true and then be able to move on with her life. I realize now that I probably only worsened the situation, but I thought, I thought I could have her back – the Bennett I fell in love with," Mark said.

"This does change a lot of things, but Bennett's issues would still have been despite your actions. This might explain why she has become recently more rigid to the idea that her sister is only a partitioned personality of herself that she created to cope after a brain injury sustained in her childhood."

"Is that what you think it is?" Mark asked.

"Yes. I do. I also think that she had Margo with her through her childhood and modeled

it after Alicia, her childhood friend. After people repeatedly told her that Margo didn't exist, she started closeting herself away from others and not talking about Margo. In this way, Margo didn't exist except inside her own head. As long as Bennett didn't talk about Margo to anyone, no one would have known that he had a problem."

"Wow. I, I don't even know what to believe anymore." Mark sat down as he just stared at Bennett's still body lying in the hospital bed.

The therapist left and a nurse came in. The nurse checked Bennett's pulse and vitals and left a brown package in the seat next to Mark.

"Some old man brought this into the front desk for Bennett. I'm not sure if you know him, but he was very feeble and apparently had escapade from a nursing home. The attendants from the nursing home came after him, but they think his escape caused his death. He had this box for her. I'm really sorry. If you need anything, please let me know. We will take care of her father's body and when you're ready; someone will come in and help you sort out all the paperwork.

The brown box was old and ragged as if it had been stored in some open space like an attic or garage. Weather and time had made the box musty and yellow. The box opened with ease and inside was a Folgers tin. Mark pried off the lid and curled to the side of the tin were pictures. He pulled them out in handfuls until the tin was empty and laid them on the floor in a semicircle around his seat. They were pictures of Bennett as a child with another girl that looked like she could be Bennett's sister. The last picture he pulled out was a family portrait taken when Bennett was only five years old. She sat in her Dad's lap while her Mom held another baby with long, dark brown hair.

Mark stared in disbelief at the pictures and remembered something Bennett had told him years ago.

"When am I going to meet your sister? Honey, I don't care what she's like. I love you so I'll love her," Mark said. "You don't even have pictures of her, do you? I've never seen them."

"Mark, I don't think you'll ever meet her. She's not well and she's better off in the institution I've put her in. When I put her in there, she said to burn all of her belongings and anything that proved her existence, so I did. She wanted me to have a chance at a normal life. It was a hard decision, but I agreed."