

The Dichotomy of Mom

I stepped over the cat food spilled on the tattered welcome mat. The white panel siding was cracked and chipped at the bottom where it met the concrete of the front porch. I stomped a few times, attempting to shake the snow off my boots before I knocked on the front door.

“Hello?” I called as I opened the door.

The TV glowed blue in the living room, the sounds of a car chase filled the entranceway where I was standing. I took off my boots and coat and stepped into the living room.

“Hey guys!” I said.

My mom looked up from where she was sitting on the arm of the faded red sofa, her fingers playing with her husband Andrew’s hair.

“Jared!” She got up from the couch, her long brown braid swinging behind her back. “I didn’t know you were coming.” She looked exactly the same as she had eight months ago at Easter, her eyes filled around the edges with dark makeup. She put her slender arms around me and patted my back twice quickly like the affection someone would give a dog when they didn’t have time to spend with it.

“I have a meeting in Toronto on Monday, so I flew in from Calgary for the weekend,” I said.

“Your dad’s away?”

“No, he’s around, but I wanted to bring you your birthday present.”

I looked past Mom at my step-dad, “How’s it going, Andrew?” I had to stop myself from calling him Keith; Dad and I used to joke about how he looked like a less wrinkled, long-haired version of the Rolling Stones’ rock star. Mom had once said that he used to be the lead guitarist

for a band in the States before he moved to Canada. Now he had a home-based computer job. Andrew nodded his head at me and turned his attention back to the screen.

“I was just going to have a smoke. Want to come outside with me?” Mom asked.

“Sure.”

She pulled one of Andrew’s coats over her tiny frame; the bottom of the coat almost reached her knees. We walked out onto the porch, our breath appearing in clouds around us.

“You won’t get to see Jack this weekend.” She lit her cigarette and then held out the pack to me. “Want one?”

“I’ve never smoked, Mom.”

“Oh yeah,” she shrugged and slipped the pack into one of the large pockets on the coat.

“Where’s Jack?” I asked.

“He went to the city for the day with his new girlfriend Sarah.”

“I didn’t know Jack had a car.” I didn’t know he had a new girlfriend either, but that wasn’t a surprise. I didn’t know a lot about my younger brother anymore. After Mom left Dad for Andrew twelve years ago, Jack lived with her and I lived with Dad. Mom had no rules and Jack liked that. I had goals and Dad encouraged them.

“He took Andrew’s.”

Mom lived at the end of a dead-end street in a small town. A bunch of kids were playing road hockey on the icy pavement, taking advantage of the Saturday afternoon. I watched a boy without a hat make a move; his face and ears were red from the frigid touch of the air.

“Has he seen Sam much lately?” I asked, referring to the little son he had with a high school crush.

“Sam comes here to play every Tuesday.” Mom blew smoke out of her pursed lips. “He’s almost two, you know. He’s a real cutie. I’m a lucky grandma.” Mom followed the hockey game with her eyes. “Andrew is renting an apartment for Jack and Sarah on the main street; they’ll be moving at the end of the month.” Her eyes trailed over the roofs of the houses across the street. “I think Andrew wants the privacy and quiet for us. Jack is always bringing friends home.”

“Isn’t Jack renting his own apartment?”

“He can’t afford it,” she said.

“Oh.”

“He’s still young, Jared,” she said defensively, as if I had said something judgemental.

“Yeah,” I said. “Two years younger than me.”

“Some people don’t have life handed to them on a silver platter,” she threw the butt of her cigarette into the snow and ground it into the cement with her boot.

“No, they don’t,” I paused and watched one of Mom’s cats jump onto the railing surrounding the porch. “I don’t know many who do.”

Mom was silent as she leaned back against the cracked white panelling on the house.

“How’s Jack’s job going?” I asked, attempting to defuse the tension.

“It’s not,” she kicked at the snow. “He’s handing out résumés though. I’m sure he’ll get something. Poor guy has had bad luck with past employers.”

I looked at her to see if she was serious in her sympathy even though I knew that she was. Jack had never been able to hold down a job because he didn’t show up for work unless he felt like it.

Mom continued without looking at me, “He’s such a charmer,” she smiled. “When he and Sarah were making his résumés the other day, I heard him tell her that she had a great eye for designing a nice-looking résumé.”

“Yeah, I remember Jack’s charm,” I said without smiling. In high school, he was the popular jock who had no end of girls available and I was the studious one with a few close friends. I don’t want to believe that Mom loved the drama he caused, but I have to admit that she always was a heroic mother to kids in crisis.

“Sam’s going to be just like his father I’ll bet,” she folded her arms across her chest, trying to stay warm.

I was silent as I watched the kids carry the hockey nets off the street and file into the house across from my mom’s, giving high-fives with their gloves and laughing.

“Mom,” I cleared my throat, “I was going to tell you I was just ranked by my company for being the best rookie salesman in my region.”

She was still smiling from her thoughts about Sam and Jack. “Oh yeah?” she raised an eyebrow at me. “Good for you. Did you tell your grandmother?”

“Not yet,” I said. “I got a raise too. Pretty good for my first full year with the company.”

“You should tell your grandma that. You know how she always boasts about you and Jack.”

“Yeah,” I rubbed my cold fingers together. “Wanted to tell you first though.”

She shivered, “Want some tea to warm up?”

I followed her back into the house and sat on one of the chairs at the kitchen table while she put the kettle on the stove.

“You should open your birthday gift,” I said, pulling a little blue box from the inside pocket of my jacket and handing it to her.

“Oh, what is it?” She grabbed scissors and cut the white ribbon tied around the box. Opening it, she pulled out a fine gold bracelet and held it up to look at it.

I searched her face. “Do you like it?” I remembered agonizing over choosing a piece of jewelry for her. The jeweller had asked me if it was for someone special. I had replied, “Yeah, it’s for my mom and I really want her to like it.” I didn’t tell him I *needed* her to like it. I needed her approval.

“It’s lovely,” she said. “Thank you. I really like it.” She put it back in the box and got up to remove the screaming kettle.

As she poured the boiling water into two mugs, I noticed the back of a photograph on the kitchen table among the other papers. I picked it up and flipped it over. It was a photograph of Mom, Jack, and me when Jack and I were children. It was autumn and we were standing in front of a massive pile of leaves we had just raked. Mom had her arms thrown around us and Jack was giving a thumbs up to the camera while I had a huge grin plastered on my face. That was before the divorce, before we had to choose parents. “Where’d you get this?”

Mom set my mug of tea on the table, “I found that the other day. I think it fell out of one of my old photo albums. You can have it if you want.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Later that evening, I said goodbye to Mom and Andrew and stepped onto the front porch, avoiding the cat food. After every visit, I always felt as if I had lost something, someone. Loss gives a person a reason to grieve. While I waited for the windshield of my rental car to defrost, I

turned on the interior lights and pulled the picture out of my pocket again. They were different people in that photograph. I flicked off the interior lights and pulled away from Mom's house. The winter sky was pristine, blemished only by stars. I had not lost my mother. I simply had two mothers: the one of my childhood and the one after that.