

*Mystery was all the world seemed to hold for me when I was eight. There was only one thing in my life that wasn't a mystery: Sullivan Miller would be mine forever and he would never leave me. We lay in the open field at the park of our childhood play. We had been lying silently for a long time enjoying the feeling of the sun on our skin. Eventually I dared to let him help me with one of the mysteries I was struggling with. "Sullivan, what do you think love means?"*

*He rolled over on his side and looked right at me. "That you would give everything in you to protect the good in someone else."*



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A moment is never that moment. Each moment is the culmination of experience before that moment and the culmination of experience for every player contributing to that moment. We are all beautiful, clipped-winged players of The Butterfly Effect. There's serenity in knowing that we're never really alone. Inhale. My lungs filled with air. My chest enlarged like a balloon. Ineffective. All the breathing in the world wouldn't make me happy to go into that house. Exhale. Agony. Inside that house is agony. There's so much hate, but it is not the hate that is agony. Hate is simple. The agony is how much I hate her mixed with how much I love her.

Conflicting emotions resonated through every pore of me as I sat in the driveway of my former home in my new Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Rubicon X that was the fifth Jeep I have owned since I craved the feeling of my hair blowing freely - the one part of myself I could release without any consequences. I considered getting out of my Jeep and running right into the arms of my mother to release all of my love for her, but our relationship is too intertwined with mellifluous bristles. Entering that house wasn't always so conflicting, but Christmas Eve had maligned the Annesleys for twenty-five years. I wasn't eager to see the surprises in store for today. I decided to wait in my Jeep until Jocelyn arrives because with Mom and Jocelyn's constant enflamed relationship I don't have to feel so guilty that I'm causing the pain on Mom's face. Mom and Jocelyn are like a match to gasoline and have been since the Christmas Eve that I was 6 when they were in the kitchen screaming about life's cruelties that I didn't understand, that I wish I never learned to understand. They were throwing dishes at each other, but always carefully missing each other's pretty faces. Jocelyn was 21, and despite that I didn't understand the specifics of what they were yelling at each other, I understood that years of tension had finally met its pressure point. Eventually they ran out of dishes and anger and held each other on the floor professing a million apologies. I guess they tried to mend for a few years, but by the time I was 10 accepted that wasn't possible. I didn't get to see Jocelyn at all for three years.

Scorched. The only word to describe the lasting effects of those years. I'm scorched. Jocelyn is scorched, but God blessed her with an exterior made of steel and an interior made of impulse. She doesn't visually seem to drop ashes everywhere she walks like I do. Mom would be scorched too, but God filled Mom's interior with love, only love, her exterior with ethereal beauty then matched her with Pop and Susan to ensure a fortress around his most majestic creation.

I was easy prey during those years for someone to drag me down a rabbit hole then throw dirt and worms on top of me. Instead of killing me, someone drilled a small hole for a straw so that I could keep breathing and reliving every day. So I could stand inside my own life in a glass enclosure helplessly watching pieces of me being taken away, and even five years ago my Sullivan was taken away too. I would have preferred someone kill me than to lose the love of my life who'd been holding my hand since we were a year old, literally the love of my life. At twenty-six years old we had already shared a lifetime together. I never thought I would be able to catch a breath again after he got as far away from me as possible. I couldn't grasp onto an identity for myself without Sullivan. Those days were so dark, desperate, haunting, and if I wasn't scorched before, I certainly was then. Somehow I woke each day still breathing, still expected to function. Despite how awful it was, it was the one loss that finally initiated a fighting spirit and forced me to start digging out of that damn rabbit hole. A sluggishly arduous process for sure, but I'm getting closer to the surface. I feel right now I'm taking on clumps of dirt at rapid speed. I would eat those worms to get out. Anything to get out. Yet I know I don't have all the pieces to solidify restoration. God blessed me with patience. Sometimes too much patience, I believe.

Healing has consumed me for the past five years, and although I'm not completely whole yet, I am more in control, more powerful over those years that daunted me. Two years I went through torment, and it has incapacitated my soul so far nine times longer than the time I was tortured. *If I linger there, I'm giving those years power when I was doing so well taking some of it back.* I turned on a Snow Patrol CD to keep me company until Jocelyn arrived. *Ache.* I didn't really want to think of her either. I was running out of options to occupy my thoughts as I sat in my parents' driveway. *Well, I am home.* My eyes shot determinably across Penny Lane to my childhood place of wonderment mixed with the four divinely made pieces that my soul mate was split into to enhance every experience of my life. Susan Miller is my soul mate. Most people think of a soul mate in terms of romantic fulfillment. God, help those people. When those people get to the end of all their magnanimous lust for each other, they will burn each other to the ground and dance on the ashes. A true soul mate always demands the best of someone, and that's who Susan has always been to me. Even when I was being dragged into the rabbit hole, she wouldn't allow me one minute I betrayed the essence of who I am by delivering my hurt with cursed blows onto anyone else - especially the woman she loved who I was indomitable in my mission to release my cursed blows to. Someone dragged Susan down a rabbit hole too, but Susan learned to hold steady and to constantly fight until she met Mom and Pop and learned to love. She couldn't be Mom's soul mate; she loved Mom too much, and sometimes couldn't help herself from letting Mom

sweetly take advantage of her. The glow on both of their faces when this happened was undeniable and beautiful. This is why Sullivan wasn't my soul mate; he loved me too much, and allowed me to trample all over him. There was no glow when this happened.

Sullivan is one of the four pieces Susan split herself into who make up who I am. Sullivan got all of Susan's purity and ability to offer entirety to the person he loves. He is her youngest, same age as me, and I am the person he loves since we were a year old. Sean is a year older than Sullivan, and Susan gave him her ability to weather the storm. He is the person who holds my hand when I cry and gives me fortitude without demanding explanation. Sarah and Sadie are her twins, three years older than me and Sullivan. Sarah has been endowed with Susan's sweet demeanor, and the kindness she has always shown me is riveting (the kindness she shows everyone except one person is riveting). Sadie. My Sadie. I believe Sadie is the other half of me. She got all of Susan's wild and fierce gorgeous looks complete with the wild side Susan keeps hidden, and along with that she also received Susan's fierce commitment to me. Sadie doesn't feel the need to keep her wild side hidden, and her disdain for conformity and rules has brought such sweet ardor to my life. Sadie is my 'Good morning, Baby Doll' text every morning and my 'Sweet dreams, Baby Doll' text every night, and every day it is enough to make me wake up and take on another day. Thank you, Sadie. Sullivan is the love of my life, and Sadie, I don't have words for. She's My Sadie. I've always had them both. I've always had all four of them. Loving as a union of five is how we learned to see the world. If it couldn't be had at Millerland, we didn't need it.

As long as we had the five of us, we had everything we ever needed.

As I looked across Penny Lane, I couldn't help but hear *that house is just an extension of me* echo inside of me. I spent most of my childhood and adolescence crossing Penny Lane going from my house to Millerland, and back again. I noticed, like every Christmas for the past five years – we had watched our parents wade through a few Millannesey fractures, but we had not experienced one of the five of us until five years ago – that I was the last to arrive as I looked at all of the cars spilling out of the Miller driveway and pouring down the street. Susan's four divinely made pieces are now accompanied by three spouses and six grandsons. Are we really old enough to have kids, to be parents? Wasn't it just yesterday we rolled out the red carpet for Imagination to lead us around the yard with Mom and Susan watching from Susan's steps to ensure our protection from tripping on too much joy which was the worst of misfortune to befall us in those days? I guess my concept of yesterday and Father Time's concept of yesterday aren't

quite as continuous as they used to be when minutes seemed to stretch for days, when I was 8 for ten years, and 10 for a hundred. And 12... for twenty excruciating minutes.

Eight is the age that strikes me compellingly when I think of The Best of the Millanneseys. Mom and Susan were so happy which made all five of us secure, happy, thriving. Mom and Pop had found peace which was so beautiful. Mom, Pop, and Susan seemed unbreakable, and we counted ourselves lucky to have three strong, vibrant, and a little crazy (in the best way) parents. These days seemed to unify the three of them too, and it wasn't a union of the five of us and the three of them; this time was a union of eight. Of course their youngest were at an age that we were becoming self-sufficient, and the oldest had yet to become the dreaded teenagers (although that would never be how our three amazing parents viewed us; they seemed to revel in every stage of our lives and enjoy having five other souls to share in and witness their unique union). We would have other stages that were the best of the Millanneseys, but those would always be tainted a little by harm and hurt that found its way to us. Again.

Susan and Pop are uncharacteristically athletic, and their obsession with sports had given us a preview that all winning streaks meet that one team who has their number. That one team for Millanneseys was Jocelyn; sometimes Mom calls her Unstoppable – I understand why. Ten seemed infinitely long because of all the waiting. Waiting to be kissed. Waiting for Jocelyn to come home. Waiting for Mom to stop crying. Waiting for just once that she would call and Pop wouldn't have to yank the phone from Mom to hang up on Jocelyn. Waiting for him to come home from Wherever, USA because I wasn't as skilled as Pop with the wink and grin that provided the reprieve and made Haddy reemerge. Waiting for Susan to be free, safe, to be Susan again. And twelve felt short because I only got to be twelve from May to September.

Mom grieved so intensely over whatever Jocelyn was going through during those years. I honestly believe little of what Mom was grieving for was anything Jocelyn did to her; it was all what Jocelyn was doing to herself, and Mom's loving spirit isn't equipped to watch one of her babies self-destruct. That poor, amazing woman has had to watch both of her daughters self-destruct. I watched her during these years propel her heartache into a positive outlet: Creativity. Mom is one of the most talented artists I've ever seen. Her drawings engender deep connections like you know her loved ones yourself or you want to be a part of a world where people love and understand each other so intimately, so completely. Her designs are so intricate and detailed you can only stand mesmerized. Mom loved Susan, loved Susan, but I always had a feeling that our house wasn't the best of Mom. During the most turbulent of the years with Jocelyn, because they

may see each other now but it is still turbulent, Mom wouldn't allow herself to deconstruct. She started with the first remodel, the first of making this house, that she would never leave with Susan across the street, officially Haddy's. Designing and remodeling this house has been one continuous project since then. Our neighbors may find this pretentious. They weren't privy to existing in close quarters with the exuding creativity constantly stirring in Haddy Annesley needing a release that I was privy to. They also weren't privy to seeing a shining example of how not to self-destruct during turbulent times. I couldn't draw or design like Mom, but I could write.

I screamed. A tap on my window scared me. I turned down the volume and let down the window to find Sullivan smiling at me. Every morsel of me ached for him. I ached to be eight again, and for the days when he looked at me and his eyes only reflected love. Now his eyes reflected love mixed with that feeling of touching a hot stove. Somehow even with black marks all over his fingertips (and his heart) that poor man inhabited purity in his love for me. He clasped his hands around the void left by my window, and I almost caught on fire looking at those piercing blue eyes. He parted his lips to give me his burnt smile then flicked his head a little to toss his delicious waves of black hair out of his eyes just to ignite me even more. Then he shifted his tall, muscular body with the sole intention of wafting his Drakkar cologne onto me and almost making me get out to fuck him on my mother's snow covered lawn in broad daylight with all of our neighbors, his family, and God watching. I bought him the damn Drakkar; he had no choice but to use it against me. *All's fair in love and war*, and Sullivan and I were enraptured in both. "Merry Christmas, Bilson," Sullivan delivered in his strong, rasping voice.

He had rendered me speechless, breathless. I searched deep within myself to find the ability to breathe and return his smile then said, "Merry Christmas, Sullivan." *I love you more than is possible. I'm doing all I can to have us again.* "I bet you're excited to be home."

He reached in and grabbed my hand. I let him. He had been holding my hand since we were babies, and it was one constant I always treasured. Holding his hand made me feel, for a brief moment, his goodness soaking into me, removing some of the blackness, making me beautiful. "Maybe not as excited as I am about getting to see you, Bilson."

My heart melted. "Me too, Sullivan," I said with a smile. I was excited to see him. I was elated to see him. I was searching the parts of me to give him my entirety like he gave me, but I couldn't quite solidify it yet. I gave him a safe subject for us. "The whole Miller Clan in?" I said still holding his hand that was so strong like all the facets of the interior of Sullivan Miller.

I looked from his hand to his handsome face that held all my girlhood secrets that, as he had promised, he never shared with anyone and never once used any of those against me.

He recognized, understood, and was consistently patient with my frailties and inabilities. “Yeah. Mom said to invite you over for cider. She put something in it this year that is so tasty. You will love it, Bilson.” He wanted to say something else. I could tell. I knew everything about him. Every smile, every raise of the eyebrow, every flick of his hair, every look. I had a lifetime of experience with Sullivan Miller. I knew him better than I knew myself. He wanted to say something else, but he was a gentleman. He would wait until the time was right.

“Susan Miller is the best cook on Earth, but I don’t think I should see your parents before I even see mine. Please tell her thank you, and I will see her in the morning for breakfast.” The pleasantries. The cover-up. I could imagine Mom and Susan had been texting each other as long as I had been sitting in the driveway, balancing the load of their concern for me. Mom probably told her to invite me in because Mom was never jealous when I would allow Susan to love me instead of her. She was always glad I had one mother I would allow to love on me.

“How’s life treating you lately, Sullivan?” We had seen each other at Thanksgiving, but that time included everyone. We hadn’t shared exclusive time as a couple since the last weekend in September when we spent the weekend hiking and kayaking in The Poconos like we had spent the last weekend in September for the past eleven years. The first year we were looking for something there - Something from when we were four years old. The true, solid, beginning of Millanneseys. Love. Family. The one time I saw *him*. Only for a second. Mom yanked me to her. Sullivan didn’t see him - Then it became tradition for us because the last weekend in September in The Poconos became the place we could always return to find each other. This year when we returned to find something there, we may have found more than we bargained for. After we expelled our adventurous side, we drank down a bottle of tequila before we expelled our passions for each other. At the precise moment I felt all of the pieces of me and us fit for one moment that I could grab onto, Sullivan asked me to marry him. The issue of marriage was our war. When I finally fit, he brought it up again, he didn’t give me time I could hold onto my pieces of tranquility between us. We went back to the battle lines to start anew. Regrettably, I gave him the same refusal I always gave him. He fled back to Syracuse, NY to lick his wounds. I trudged back to my solitary existence in Storrs, CT. Could we get any further away after we got so close?

Storrs is another place that feels like home, not home like Penny Lane but home in a different way, and it is only an hour from my three pillars. The five of us all went to The University of Connecticut, UCONN. We shared one magical year we were all in college at the same time, all at the same college. Once I left to go to college there, I haven't lived anywhere else. I stayed in school until I received my PhD, and now I spend two afternoons a week teaching and all of my nights writing novels. Sometimes I walk the campus and think of our college days that we shared at UCONN, and try to find a part of myself I lost during that time. I've walked every inch of that campus, and still can't erase the night that took Sullivan away from me. But the walking isn't avoidance. The walking is insurance that if he is ever mine completely again, I'll possess certitude that I'm whole enough to never hurt either one of us again.

The war continues. "Mostly good, Bilson, except this girl next door I grew up with who will not marry me," Sullivan said with pouty lips and puppy dog eyes. When he wasn't so fucking hot I could barely keep my body off of him, he was so cute, I could barely keep my lips off of him.

"Maybe she doesn't want to taint your happy life with all of her blackness."

He nodded toward my house saying, "This isn't everything you are." He was quoting from a different Snow Patrol song than was playing softly in my Jeep. I smiled that he would say that to me. Snow Patrol had practically written the soundtrack of our lives since we left for college. We took our first college spring break together to Scotland and felt we had discovered them long before they were famous in America. At the time Snow Patrol felt like our own little secret. I have a vase that Sullivan gave me filled with stargazer lilies that is now filled with Snow Patrol concert tickets where we saw America following them around. We often communicated by using Snow Patrol lyrics making them our own little secret even now. Sullivan smiled then he sang for a moment with the one playing in my Jeep, "This is your life. This is your time." He leaned in and kissed me before saying, "One day, Bills. One day, you're going to say yes."

He ran across the street. My heart ran with him.

One day, if I couldn't solidify healing soon, I was going to read about him getting married to some pretty girl from a good family, and I would never be able to get out of bed again. For now, he was sort of mine. I laid claim on him when we were five, and I had no choice but to pray that claim held through these trying years. We had a fake wedding although to five year olds, it seemed very real, and there will forever be a part of me that boastfully glows thinking *I am Sullivan Miller's wife*. Jocelyn came home from Dartmouth to be my maid of honor. In a rare



moment from Jocelyn, she cried about how fast I was growing up, she was missing all of it, and all too soon I would be getting married for real. Guess that was one thing she'd been dead wrong about. I couldn't get married for real; I was already married to Sullivan Miller who I loved too much to bring all my blackness into his life. "The Weight of Love" had been playing, but I had been lost in thought until I heard, "A new empire beckons, a new kingdom in the distance." I aggressively punched the on/off button to shut that off. I considered going inside. Having Mom to myself before Impulse barreled in. Jocelyn couldn't have that.

Jocelyn's dark blue Hummer pulled into the driveway beside my Jeep. *Her presence was always larger than mine.* She looked over at me through our windows and smiled then winked. I couldn't help but leave hesitation behind and go to my sister with love and excitement. We met in front our vehicles. Blonde hair fell around blonde hair as we hugged and swayed. "Hi, Baby Girl. I missed you," Jocelyn said into my ear then she placed playful kisses on my cheek. I think she had called me Baby Girl since May 2, 1983, the day I was born, her 15th birthday. I had always loved her calling me Baby Girl as much as I loved that we shared our birthday.

"I missed you," I enthused as I drew her in tighter. We had seen each other at Thanksgiving, but there was always something special about seeing each other where we grew up, or where I grew up and Jocelyn bid two years until she escaped to Dartmouth. Penny Lane on the outskirts of Wallingford, Connecticut became our home when I was one, and Jocelyn was 16. Pop became the girls' swim coach at Yale bringing us to Penny Lane which is apparently where their lives began because they have never told me anything about who they were before we moved here. Mom and Pop are so accessible and give all of themselves to me, unless I want to know about before I was born then they become tight, tight clams with tremendous aching looks on their faces then I can't pursue with my questioning. These agonizing looks on their faces left me spending much of my daydreaming time making up stories about who they were before I was born. These stories have helped me to have a big imagination which I find to be quite an asset as a writer, but I would trade in all of my writing talent to know them for real.

Jocelyn came out of the hug to touch my face and look at me. "Been waiting here long, Cowardly Lion?"

I relented a smile accepting how transparent I was sometimes. "Guilty," I admitted as Jocelyn placed her arm around my back as we started walking toward the front door together. I was pleased to recognize, like usual, we were both dressed alike in dark fitting jeans and blue

designer tops that brought out the blue in our eyes. Although both blue, very different variations of blue until it almost seemed we didn't have the same eye color. Jocelyn had dark blue eyes like Mom and Pop; I was the odd one in our family with piercing blue eyes that reflected a scope of blues and violets and seemed to cause an ache for Jocelyn at times. The ache for her was visible, but never audible. While our eye color may have its deafening differences, our sense of style was undisputed replicas of Mom's unquestionable fashion sense. We both wanted so badly to be that woman, but Jocelyn could only attain a resemblance to Mom through playing dress up. No matter how often Jocelyn and I unconsciously dressed alike, there was always one difference: Jocelyn's locket featuring a swimmer that Jocelyn's neck would have seemed incomplete without. Jocelyn wasn't the sentimental type at all, but this locket meant the world to her.

Before we went in, I really looked at her. There was something different about her. Impulse didn't seem to be coursing through every pore of her. She seemed... at Peace. I wasn't sure that was a color I had ever seen on my sister. I had to admit it only enhanced her beauty. Jocelyn always looked beautiful. I had always thought my big sister was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen; of course with the age difference between us, she had been a woman for almost all of my life. Well, she was the most beautiful except Mom, of course. Mom was elevated to a class all to herself, and I was grateful that except for my eyes I looked exactly like Mom. Something else about me that seemed to cause an ache for Jocelyn, for Mom sometimes, for Pop sometimes.

"My Beautiful Girls," Pop called as soon as we walked in, and charm and a presence larger than life swirled all around me. There aren't words for how much I loved that man. Sullivan had grown up seeing the man he would have to be to be worthy of me. Paul Annesley was tall, good looking, built muscular and kept muscular by swimming, but as good looking as he was, he was loved because he was a vessel of a gentleman complete with a charming presence that I adored to the core of me. I'd never seen a man who absolutely treasured women like Pop did, and how he juggled all three of the women in his house and the three across the street had been mesmerizing. But today my mesmerized look at My Pop felt soiled. He walked over to us at a slower pace than ever existed for our active role model of health and vitality. He looked so much older than last Christmas like ten years instead of one had passed. *Thanks, Christmas Eve, surprise of 2014: my man pillar is sick.* Pop made it to us, and enveloped his girls in a loving hug. In one instant we weren't 31 and 46 anymore. We were five, simultaneously somehow in my mind. Pop was swinging us around and calling us his little blonde airplanes, and we were giggling.

We were happy and safe and loved by Pop.

“My babies,” Mom said from the doorway of the kitchen. I turned immediately to look at her. She looked so beautiful. I wanted to run to her and fall into her loving arms and never let her go. I stayed planted looking at her.

Pop was always gracious in giving us time with Mom. He started back toward his recliner, and I started to have a heart attack. Jocelyn walked over to Mom and threw her arms around her. Mom beamed and affectionately said, “Merry Christmas, My Pain in the Ass.”

Previous holidays, Jocelyn went to Mom, quickly kissed her cheek like she thought acid was residing there then traversed into the kitchen looking like she couldn’t wait to lacerate the soul out of that woman. Now Jocelyn flung her arms around Mom. They were both smiling, and Jocelyn, as affectionately as Mom had spoken to her, teased, “Merry Christmas, Hard Core Bitch.” I had always been fascinated by their nicknames for each other, but that was another part of who they were that originated long before I did, so I was uninformed. I only knew they had always called each other this, and the onetime Jocelyn flung ‘You Fucking Hard Core Bitch’ at Mom in a derogatory, vicious manner, Mom almost clawed her eyes out. “I’ve missed you, Mom.” That seemed to hold deeper meaning than from not seeing her since Thanksgiving.

“Oh, Baby, I’ve missed you,” Mom said as they pulled out of their hug and kissed on the lips before Jocelyn happily sailed into the kitchen. Did I bang my head getting out my Jeep?

I shook off their abnormal greeting as Mom supplied all of her loving spirit in my direction. She looked so hopeful this would be the year I would come over and fling myself excitedly into her arms like I used to. Finally I walked over. I didn’t fling myself into her arms. I grabbed some of her long, blonde hair like when I was a child and twirled it around my finger as our eyes locked and we shared an inaudible conversation. *I missed you. I missed you too, Mom. I never feel complete without you. Bilson, I’ve never denied you access to any part of me. Take all of me, please. Let me help you to be whole. I’d walk through fire for you, Baby. And I would walk through fire to protect you, Mom. That’s why I can’t let you in to help me. I’m so sorry, Mom. Please try again next year. Please.* Mom put her hand on my face. She accepted my silence, but she wouldn’t accept not giving me some of her love. I closed my eyes and leaned into the touch of her hand on my face. For one moment I felt at peace too. *I love you, Mom.*

I walked into the kitchen to sit across from Jocelyn at the table. Jocelyn didn’t take her eyes from Mom standing at the doorway. I couldn’t turn around. I couldn’t see the pain on Mom’s face. Agony wanting me to talk to her, to be whole, to be the Bilson I used to be who couldn’t

fathom limitations between me and Mom. Eventually I heard Mom release her disappointment in a loud exhale. I didn't turn around, but that didn't keep the exhale from ensuring I pictured her batting her eyes putting away her tears that she would allow in her bedroom later.

"Dinner will be ready in an hour. Please fill me in on your lives," Mom entreated in a quasi-happy tone as she took a seat at the table between me and Jocelyn. I can assure you Mom did not make this dinner. I was certain Susan had done it for her and Mom was terrified to leave the kitchen and burn a Susan Miller meal. I wasn't confident in Mom's ability to boil water, but she'd always had Susan and Pop to compensate for her lack of culinary skills. For some reason, that none of us could figure out, she tried so hard for us at Christmas time. Or at least tried to look like she was trying. She was giving Pop a break. He sat back and let her stir. Some Christmases he had to swoop in. If it was completely unsalvageable, Susan was across the street.

"Not much to report, Mom," Jocelyn said knowing I wasn't going to say anything. She started talking and my mind started slipping away glancing around at the brand new countertops, appliances, and cabinets trying to mask ancient disappointments that still held a leading role in our family no matter how many times she remodeled. The broken dishes and the screaming insults held a starring role in here. *Can you please just once leave me alone? Fuck, Mom, please stop throwing dishes at me! There's a breaking point, Jocelyn. That's just not a pain you can ever heal from. I'm sorry, Mom. I'm so sorry.* I didn't know what any of these disappointments and hurts were. They had personified and left their mark on our family long before I was born. Despite my innocence in their creation, my life had been marred by those disappointments all the same. Throughout the years I had imagined several scenarios as *the pain you can never heal from*, but imagination was my only tool in examining the reality of who my family is and what they've been through. Although the house I had lived in left plenty of room to imagine that something, at some point, swallowed all of them whole and spit them out in fragments, trapped together, trying to heal, and injuring each other immensely as they set about that process.

*I existed in a state of observation and pretend oblivion.* I had learned it was easier than seeing the pained look on her face when I asked questions. Like: Mommy, why do you come in with two gifts on April 22 every year then lock yourself in that room I can't go into? Pain. Agony. I caused that pain on her face with my question. I'm sorry, Mommy. I didn't mean to hurt you. Then I ran across the street. I didn't mean to hurt her feelings, Susan. Will you see about her?

*Jocelyn and Mom hugged when they saw each other.* I looked from imaginary shards of glass over to my sister and tuned into what she was saying. "...Then I fired her. She made a scene, but I tapped into my inner Haddy and she left immediately," Jocelyn said with a smile and a wink, a wink identical to a Pop wink, as she compared herself to Mom. Someone dispensed some superglue in this kitchen. I made sure not to slip away again.

"An inner Haddy can be quite an asset sometimes, Jocelyn," Mom said with a smile making it impossible to take my eyes from her. She never looked her age. 72 seemed to be something Haddy Annesley was laughing at, just like every other convention.

I had slipped away looking at Mom, but I slipped back in as Jocelyn said, "In my line of work, I am grateful for an inner Haddy. Of course, the nature versus nurture freaks would have a crazy field day with my chosen profession."

"What came first the chicken or the egg? What came first Jocelyn's disappointed mother or the need to be a successful CEO who takes no prisoners? You mean that kind of go crazy?" Mom said as she laughed a little. Gave Jocelyn the sexy wink that always made Jocelyn glow.

"Yep, that would be the one," Jocelyn said as Mom placed her hand, for just a moment, onto Jocelyn's, and, for just a moment, there was harmony in the Annesley home. *Wow, Christmas, you do still have some miracles up your sleeve.* Jocelyn's face lit up as she smiled at Mom, and I was so happy for Jocelyn to feel happy even if it was fleeting. "Well," Mom stammered, embarrassed. She pulled her hand from Jocelyn and went to the stove pretending to check on dinner. It takes a long time, and many pieces that fall into the water, to build a bridge.

"Bilson, why don't you go watch the game with Pop. I'm going to help Mom with dinner," Jocelyn said excusing me from something that was about to go down between them. I did as Jocelyn told me. If the knife throwing competition was about to start, I was better off with Pop in the recliner, a place I had retreated to on numerous occasions avoiding their fights.

After dinner I was in my room sitting in my chair reading, sort of reading. My bedroom embodied the essence of all of me, Mom had designed it that way, and I couldn't help but soak it in. When I started high school, when I was fourteen, I requested Mom get me new furniture (except my beloved chair that was also Mom's beloved chair that she would never part with) and redo my room. I was requesting a new start for Bilson now that someone was leaving me alone. I was stupid enough to believe a new room would make the reliving disappear. It didn't disappear, but being in my room surrounded by Mom in every crevice helped immensely. Thank you, Mom.

Every day while I was at school Mom was painting my new room, my new start. I believe this painting was as healing for Mom at the time as it was for me. I didn't know much, but I knew at that time she had not painted for a very long time. Possibly fifteen years.

Haddy Annesley doesn't do anything in a conventional way. She donated all of my furniture, and I slept in Jocelyn's room until Thanksgiving as Mom poured herself into giving me a new room. She started with black paint covering every wall then each day she set about making one of my favorite books come to life on a small surface of the wall, or a beloved part of who I was come to life. There was one spot with me and Jocelyn ice skating at Rockefeller Center when I was three, there was me curled up sleeping with Pop in his recliner, there was a spot where I looked about eight and me, Sullivan, Sean, Sadie, and Sarah were all playing in the Miller yard. There was me and Susan reading a book – I was small in this representation of me and Susan, but Susan looked like she did when I was fourteen, like Mom intentionally immortalized the healthy Susan. Her Love. Susan even wore a ring in this painting.

In all of these it was mesmerizing to see how we all looked through Mom's eyes, and seeing how much she loved all of us which shined through every intricate detail she painted.

My eyes left one mother to go to another. My absolute favorite spot in this room was me and Mom feeding the ducks. As I stared at me and Mom feeding the ducks, I couldn't help but think about another time when I was 12 that Mom drew me and her feeding the ducks.

I could still feel the loathing in both of our eyes as I yelled, "I'm becoming a woman, and you haven't even noticed!" She was trying to recover from a phone call where Jocelyn had set about lacerating the soul out of her, and as much as my heart broke for her, some broken, irrational part of me couldn't stop yelling at Mom. She was barely functional after all Jocelyn said to her, but she tried to remain calm and filter through to some semblance of rationality in all I was screaming. She endured as long as she could then out of sheer desperation begged me to

please stop and walk away. She even offered assurance that we could talk the next day. I didn't need her the next day. I needed her then, right then, my need for her was as desperate as her need for me to walk away, and if I had to scream to have her, so be it. The screaming went on for a while before I got in her face and yelled, "I hate you!" She slapped me so hard I felt my teeth rattle and every good thing in me rattle with them. Then there was no more screaming. No more sounds. No more life in our house. I stood there holding my cheek. She stood there staring at me.

Tears started down her face, and I knew she would have given every part of herself to take it back. I couldn't bear her tears and my burning cheek at the same time. I turned away and walked out the front door. I was careful to control myself and close it gently. I heard her collapse on the floor with a loud thump that shook the foundation of all me and Mom were and the mother Haddy Annesley wanted to be. I sat on the other side of the door for an hour listening to her wails, knowing I should go in and stroke her hair. I should apologize. I should tell her what was happening to me. I knew if I went back in, I wouldn't be able to give her veiled screams, I would see how broken she was and give her the truth. If I told the truth, then someone was going to hurt My Mom; that was a clear threat that I knew wouldn't just be a threat if I talked.

I forced myself off of that door then climbed into Sullivan's window for the first time seeking solace and his need to protect the good in me. I hoped there was still some good in me left to protect. I camped out at Millerland for three days before Mom called to tell Susan to send me home. When I walked back into Annesleyland, we locked eyes. She got up from the couch to come to me. I bolted up the stairs to my room and slammed the door. I pulled out construction paper and crayons that I had previously used to write her sweet cards of love when I was little and she deserved my love. I wrote, "Bilson Hates You". I taped it to her bedroom door. She left it there.

A week later I came into my room to find my bed covered with stuff. There were new bras that were lacy and colorful, new jeans, and new dresses. There was Midol, tampons, and pads. I hadn't started yet, but she was definitely trying to listen. There was chocolate. There were three DVDs in a rubber band with a Post-It that read, "These are my favorites." I became obsessed with Bette Davis after I watched *All About Eve*. With the elevated use of language and witty repartee I could see why this was one of Mom's favorites. I loved *If a Man Answers, Hang Up*. I watched it over and over. I invited Sadie over to watch *Steel Magnolias*. With all of that on my bed, my favorite item was a card with a mommy and little girl on the front that looked just like me and Mommy. They were sitting by a pond feeding ducks which had been a treasured past time for us

when I was small. I knew she had drawn it herself. Inside was a note in Mom's handwriting that said, "I'm so sorry, Bilson. Mommy loves you." I walked to her door and removed my message.

My thoughts of that day and scanning the paintings on my wall were interrupted by a knock on my door. Mom came in with a loving smile on her face saying, "Hi, Baby." I waved at her. I couldn't often talk to her since the slap. As much as it hurt her, she was as understanding as she could be, but she had her ways of getting me to talk. "What are you reading?"

"*Gone With the Wind*." I couldn't help myself but talk about books with her. Since I was twelve, she's read every book I was reading with me to facilitate a way I would communicate with her. Sometimes I highlighted lines in her copy of the book we were reading. Hints. Love letters. Sometimes just lines I knew would make her smile that radiant Haddy smile that Pop and I would walk to the ends of the earth to produce. This new form of communication that started when I was twelve wasn't the initiation of Mom's love of books. Mom loved books almost as much as I did, but she had been excited that around that time I started selecting real books instead of the boring obligations she had to read to me when I was younger. She did it, hated it, and as often as possible she pushed that off to Susan who'd dedicated her life to the literature that engendered imagination and possibility in children. I never felt slighted. Susan read with all the voices and passion, and I loved having Susan all to myself. My Soul Mate. However, since the summer I was fourteen, I shared Susan in the reading arena with Mom and Sadie. We started a secret book club, and we still email incessantly about books, and they all read every book I'm reading and, without fail, every book I write. *God, I miss our summer days. Please find a way to give those back to all four of us. The moms would love it as much as me and Sadie.*

Mom interrupted my prayer by saying, "Is this your first reading of it?"

"More like my twentieth."

"You must really like Ms. Scarlett."

"I enjoy petulance without apology." Mom smiled at me. I smiled at her. One moment we truly found each other until I said, "So what brings you by my neck of the house?"

The quick back and forth discussing a book vacated the room, and staggering words filled with staggering awkwardness took over. There was a long time of her staring at me before she finally said, "I wanted to tell you that I am really glad you are home." In the charred fragments that had become mine and Mom's relationship since that slap, moments like these were longed



for, but as much as I had longed for something like this, I had no idea how to respond. Written communication was my strong suit, not verbal. Finally, Mom decided to fill the silence. "Bilson?" I continued to look at her. She was having a battle inside of her as to whether or not she could get the words out. Then she released, "Could I please give you a hug?"

It broke my heart that she had to ask. I slid my bookmark into my book and got out of my chair. I walked slowly toward her, and when I got there, she put her arms around me. At first we were both stiff, awkward, embracing but not really. Then she seemed to relax a little, wrap her arms around me a little more. Moments passed as we slightly continued to increase the tightness and sentiment filling us through the embrace. There are not words for how complete it felt to be in my mother's arms. Tears stung my eyes. I heard her whimper then she released, "Merry Christmas, Bilson," as she pulled away and retreated quickly from my room closing my door.

I stared at the door for a few moments feeling the wetness in my hair left from her tears before I whispered through my own tears, "Merry Christmas, Mom."

*January 22, 1996*

*"Bilson?" I was standing at the foot of her bed with tears streaming down my face. I was battling everything in me but making sure not to cry out loud so I didn't wake her. She must have felt me there. "Bilson, come here." I stayed where I was tears still streaming. "Bilson, come here, Baby." I stayed where I was tears still streaming. She started to get out of bed. Tank top and underwear. "Don't come near me!" I screamed. She sat back in the bed looking terrified. "Will you let Susan hug you?" I nodded. She picked up the phone. "Susan, Bilson is really upset, and she will not let me hug her. Could you please come hug her? We're in my room."*

*Susan pulled me into her arms. "What's wrong, Darling Girl?" I couldn't answer. I fell into her completely though and let Susan's goodness soak into me. She held me for a while. Eventually Mom started to get up to come to us. "I told you not to come near me!" I screamed. Susan picked me up and carried me to my room and slammed the door. She got right in my face. "Don't you ever yell at her like that again! Do you hear me?" I stared at her. "Yes. I'm sorry." She stared back. "I'm not the one you need to say that to. Slap me." I was so shocked. "What?" "Slap me, Bilson. I've been slapped before. I can take it. Slap me." "I don't want to slap you, Susan." "Do you want to slap Haddy?" I stood there crying before I finally said, "No." "I understand how degrading it feels for someone to hit you. You were just given your chance to do to someone what was done to you. You didn't want it. I've never done to anyone what was done to me. You're a*

*strong person, Bilson. I admire that, but you're not going to pay her back little by little yelling at her. I will not allow that. You either go in there and slap her and get it out of your system, or you make peace with it. You will not torture her little by little. She regrets it, you know that, don't you? She'd give every part of herself to take it back which is why she has allowed you to yell at her. Well, she can allow it out of her guilt, but I will not. Do you understand me? Haddy told me about the slap, not you. Says something about her character, doesn't it? She begged you to stop yelling, and you wouldn't. You told her you hate her, and still when she told me about it, she took full responsibility for all of it. If you hate her because everything that is going on with Jocelyn right now, then that is valid. Everyone in this house is miserable, and despite that Jocelyn doesn't physically live here right now, she still lives large here, and she's miserable too. I get that, but you know you were wrong that night. You knew she had been through hell with Jocelyn that night; that is not your responsibility, but when someone asks you to please stop and walk away, that is your responsibility. I understand how upset you are about not getting to see Jocelyn. I understand that you are hurting and don't understand any of it, and your hurt is valid. Your confusion is valid. Your desire to see Jocelyn is valid. But your actions lately have not been. The moment you can't walk away when someone asks you to, you've become a bully. Every bully thinks their actions are valid because they need to feel big or heard. No bully is ever valid. Is that who you want to be, Bilson?" That was NOT who I wanted to be. She was right; I needed to find a way to make peace with everything so I didn't bully the person I loved most. Susan had been so honest with me telling me things that Mom usually would have but had been walking on eggshells around me because of her guilt. Susan even validated my feelings and showed me the difference in feelings and actions. I could make peace. Susan would always demand the best out of me. "No, Susan. I don't want to be a bully." I made sure to stop yelling at her, and talking, which ensured there would be no slips of the truth and putting My Mom in jeopardy. I compartmentalized. Sealed all that was happening to me in a vault. Other than not talking, I seemed like a normal teenage girl, well, as normal as Bilson Annesley ever could be.*

I walked to my closet and pulled out a piece of green construction paper and a red crayon.

*Dear Mom,*

*I felt so complete in your arms. Thank you for the hug and for never giving up on me. I know I've told you before all the problems are something in me and nothing to do with you, but I know that doesn't make it easier on you. I'm so sorry, Mom. Merry Christmas. Bilson loves you.*

Unlike previous times when I've written Mom notes like this, I didn't stash it in a box hidden in my closet. I left my room and walked into Mom's room. She was on the bed crying. I handed her the note and sank down on the floor with my back resting against her bed while she read. Mom finished reading and sank down beside me. I laid my head on her shoulder. She laid her head on my head. I drifted into a peaceful sleep, so peaceful, the kind of sleep I never got to enjoy without drugs, and even that wasn't a peaceful sleep. It was a forced shut down of the brain with my eyes closed, but it wasn't like the peaceful sleep of being on Mom.

*September 25, 1995*

*Bilson came in from school as I was coming down the stairs and gave me a big smile. "Hi, Mom. You look nice."*

*"Hi, Bilson," I said as I was coming down the stairs putting on earrings. "Susan and I are going to the movies and to dinner. I'll be home about 8:30, but I need to talk to you about something."*

*She put down her bookbag and said, "Ok."*

*"I don't think we have ever encountered a time you were over there that Susan wasn't so I just want to tell you that I don't want you over there if Susan isn't there. I don't just mean tonight. I mean anytime. I'm not saying anything bad about any of you kids, I'm just saying..."*

*Bilson smiled, "I get what you're saying, Mom. I'm reading To Kill A Mockingbird in my advanced readers class. I really like it. I was looking forward to reading tonight anyway. I'm really glad to see you go out and do something, Mom. You've seemed so sad lately."*

*"I'm sorry that I have, Bilson. I appreciate you understanding about me going out and not going over to the Millers. Susan sent you some lasagna, and I'm sure we have some vegetables for a salad. We can discuss To Kill A Mockingbird when I get home if you like." Whenever I was capable, I tried to give her the best of me. Bilson always seemed to adapt to whatever place I seemed to be in. I loved her dearly for it. These past few years have been rough on all of us.*

*"I would like, thank you, Mom. Have fun."*

*When I came in, Bilson's door was closed so I decided to shower then have our book discussion. I was standing in the shower with my eyes closed enjoying the water on me when Bilson scared me by stepping into the shower with me. She was completely naked, as was I since I*

*was already in the shower. I was extremely uncomfortable, but I didn't want to overreact. "Bilson, what are you doing in here?"*

*"I need you to see me, Mommy." She had not called me Mommy in years.*

*"Honey, I'm uncomfortable with you being in here."*

*She closed her eyes really tight. "I won't look at you, Mommy. I just need you to see me."*

*"You want me to see you naked? Is there something changing about your body that you have questions about?"*

*"No, Mommy, I don't need you to see me naked. I need you to see me." Tears ran down her face as she slowly made her clarification.*

*She was really upset. I felt completely lost on what to do with and for Bilson which was not an experience I ever had before. "Bilson, can you keep your eyes closed for me to kneel down so we are face to face?" She nodded through her tears. "Ok, Baby. We are face to face. Do you want to look at Mommy's face?"*

*She opened her eyes as her tears continued to run down. "Do you still love me, Mommy?"*

*"Oh, Baby, I know things around here have been rough for a few years, but, yes, Bilson, I love you. I love you so much, Baby. Mommy will always love you, Baby."*

*"No matter what?" Her tears poured down.*

*She was so upset. "Bilson, there is nothing that would ever make me stop loving you."*

*"Mommy, will you kiss me, please?"*

*"What, Baby?" She had asked for hugs a lot in the past years. It always broke my heart that she had to ask. I wasn't sure what to do about a kiss while we were naked.*

*"I just need you to kiss me, Mommy. Please, just kiss me. Like you kissed me when I was little. Please, Mommy, please kiss me." Her tears were streaming down her face. I didn't know what to do. I pressed my lips to hers, and she pressed hers to mine. When I pulled away, her tears turned into uncontrollable wails. I shut off the water, grabbed my robe, wrapped her in a towel, and scooped her into my arms. She wrapped her arms around my neck and wailed the whole way as I carried her to my bed. She wailed in my arms for a long time. Nothing I did calmed her,*

*until finally she completely passed out. Even passed out anytime I tried to get up, she clung to me. Eventually I covered her up and went to sleep with her.*

*When we woke, Bilson seemed calm. "Good morning, Baby. Are you ok?"*

*"Yes, Mom. I don't feel well though. Could I stay home and watch movies with you? Please."*

*I wasn't sure I wanted to establish a precedent that Bilson could stay home from school every time she had PMS, but she had been so upset last night, I may have kept her home even if she hadn't asked. I wasn't sure we were dealing with PMS. "Of course, Baby. Why don't you go in your room and get some pajamas though."*

*"Would you get those for me, Mommy?" And we were back to Mommy. "I just want to stay in your bed, please."*

*"Ok, Baby." I grabbed some clothes and changed in Bilson's room then grabbed her favorite pajama bottoms. Before I went back into my room, I slipped into Pauly's room to grab her one of his big, comfy t-shirts (Pauly's t-shirts were comfort t-shirts. I had wrapped myself in his t-shirts many a nights in the past couple of years). When I laid those on the bed for her, I asked, "Bilson, would you mind if I invite Susan over for coffee before she goes to work?"*

*"Of course not, Mom."*

*I handed her the remote then kissed her on the lips. "I love you, Baby. I'll be in the kitchen, ok?"*

*I called Susan and started my coffee. We sat at the table as I explained everything to her.*

*"Haddy, Sarah asked to take a bath with me recently. I think girls just go through stages where they need intimacy from their mothers and are very confused about the boundaries especially since there were no boundaries when they were little."*

*"I'm sure you're right. I was trying not to overreact, but I hadn't washed off yet and someone left a lipstick trail from my belly button down to a hickey on my inner thigh. Not exactly something I wanted to discuss with my twelve year old daughter." Susan covered her face and laughed. When our blissful blushing faded, I embarrassingly admitted, "Susan, I got so paranoid that when she was passed out, I checked her for bruises."*

*"Haddy, you don't think she and Sullivan..."*

*"No, I think I just got paranoid. She wasn't even red. I can't believe I did that."*

*Susan took my hand. "Baby, I may have done the same thing. Bilson isn't the wailing type. I'm going to have a talk with Sullivan, and ask Paul to talk to him too."*

*"Susan, don't let my paranoia get to you. He's so sweet to her."*

*"Yes, he is sweet to her, but he's still a twelve year old boy. He needs to know how to be respectful of Bilson in the next few years."*

*"I guess that's not a bad idea." I took a deep breath and knew I needed to discuss something else with Susan that I had been scared to bring up for a couple of years, but Susan was the only one who could help me with this. "Susan, I need to talk to you about something. Bilson has been so upset about Jocelyn. Please don't get upset with me, but a year ago I went to Manhattan to try to talk things out with her. See if she was stable enough to see Bilson because Bilson was asking a lot to see her. Jocelyn opened the door half naked. She looked an absolute mess. There were four naked guys passed out in her living room. I didn't see any other girls, but I did see an abundance of empty liquor bottles and drug paraphernalia. I just walked away."*

*Susan could rarely get upset with me. She loved me too much. She immediately launched into comforting me about Jocelyn. "Haddy. God, that must have been devastating to see her like that. I know how much you love her, and want her to be stable. I'm sorry you felt you couldn't share that with me."*

*"If I had felt she was stable and I was going to bring her back into our lives, I promise I would have told you, Susan."*

*Susan put her hand on my face and gave me a loving kiss to remove my guilt and fill me with her love. "Haddy, she's your daughter. You don't have to explain to me, but I want you to always know you can talk to me about anything, Baby. Anything."*

*"Thank you, Susan. God I love you, Baby. What would I do without you?"*

*"You'll never have to find out, Baby. Never."*

*Moments passed where only love settled in the look between us. I knew she would have to leave for work soon, and I needed to finish telling her about Jocelyn and Bilson. "A few weeks*

*after that I sent her an email and offered to pay to send her to therapy. She sent back, 'Fuck you.' I think she is keeping it together enough to work, but it destroys me to see Jocelyn like this. I have to accept all of it is her own undoing, and until she is ready to get help, there's nothing I can do. Bilson asked recently if I would take her to Manhattan and the three of us could have lunch. I'm sure to her it seems like a good plan. I guess if I am going to let her see Jocelyn, that would be the best plan so that I am there. Of course I don't know that I could look at Jocelyn through an entire meal without strangling her. I told Bilson that I would think about it. I think she is starting to get mad at me that I am keeping her from Jocelyn, but I could never tell her what Jocelyn is like right now. A part of me worries that's what she was screaming about last night, and she doesn't know how to tell me. She asked several times if I still love her like she's scared I've stopped loving Jocelyn and will stop loving her. I don't know what to do, Susan."*

*"See how today goes, Haddy. Cuddle with her and love on her, and let her feel safe in case there's things she needs to talk to you about. Bilson takes a long time to talk about things, if she talks about them at all."*

*"Maybe you should stay home with her, and I'll go teach your students."*

*Susan smiled. We heard Bilson coming down the stairs. "Mom, could I see Susan before she leaves?" was called from the living room.*

*"Of course, Baby. Come on in."*

*Susan backed her chair away from the table and Bilson went immediately to sit in her lap. Susan wrapped her arms around Bilson. "Oh, My Darling Girl. Did you have a bad night?" Bilson didn't answer. She sank into Susan. I was almost scared she was going to pass out on Susan. Susan cradled her, kissed her forehead until she had no choice but to leave for work. "Baby, I gotta go to work. I'll come over this afternoon when I get home, ok?"*

*Bilson sat up and looked right at her. She put her hand on Susan's face. "I'm sorry, Susan."*

*"Sorry for what, Honey?"*

*Bilson was quiet for a minute like she was struggling with something then said, "If I made you late for work. I just wanted to see you."*

*"I'm always happy to see you, Darling Girl. I won't be late. The kids can have Pop-tarts as we drive to school. They will be fine, but I do need to go, Baby."*

*Bilson got off of her lap. Susan gave her a hug and kiss then squeezed my hand and kissed my cheek as she walked out. As soon as Susan was out of the kitchen, Bilson came to me. She moved my chair back. I thought she was going to sit in my lap like she had sat in Susan's, but she straddled me. I tried to remind myself what Susan said about girls needing intimacy with their mothers, and I remembered Bilson had always taken naps on me like this when she was little. She put her hands in my hair and started these gentle strokes. I wondered if she had seen me giving this to Susan then I couldn't wonder about anything. The sensation was so loving and comforting that I laid my head back and closed my eyes. I went somewhere between sleep and awake and saw her doing this when I was depressed in my room for nine months when she was four. She would lay on the bed, stroke my hair, and talk to me. I couldn't believe that came back to me as I felt that entire time in my life was like a lost gap that I couldn't remember any of it. Then we were on the swings together. We were feeding the ducks. Each gentle stroke she gave me brought me to a beautiful moment with Bilson. I'm not even sure how long she gave that to me. Eventually I felt her arms fall to the side of me and her head fall on my shoulder. Then she said, "You're so beautiful" before she passed out. I rolled my head on hers and passed out too.*

Mom seemed torn when she woke me. "I'm sorry to wake you, Baby, but it's time for me to leave." I laid my head in her lap. "Please don't go this year, Mom." She started stroking my hair. "I'll skip my Christmas Eve tradition if you skip yours." Sometimes Mom didn't play fair. She knew I would never miss my Christmas Eve tradition. "You win, but could I have one more minute?" She gave me five more minutes of me laying on her and Mom stroking my hair.

*Get Well Soon. Mommy loves you.*