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“Agony. Inside that house is agony. There’s so much hate, but it’s not the hate that is agony. Hate is simple. The agony is how much I hate her mixed with how much I love her.” Two years since no escape path in accepting she was the one who gave me life, and that statement still holds true. I thought truth would set me free. Maybe in some ways it has, but what no one warns you about is with truth comes new agonies. New hurts. Teaching your brain new thought processes. And for me truth came with a lot of transitions all at once; like my soul mate, Susan, eventually I have a breakdown about too many transitions at once. The breakdown is happening now. Subtle. Smoke consuming me now. Not a full blaze fire yet, but I feel embers igniting. No one - not any birth mother, adopted mother, soul mate, husband, My Sadie - not anyone seems to have taken notice. Although I’ve noticed. I’ve noticed Jocelyn is about to hit one too. Maybe we’ll both hit a Haddy style breakdown at the same time. That would be poetic. That would be ... truth.

We entered the house. I no longer enter houses alone. There’s a husband and two babies. Happiness. Things I wanted, but I spent five years in isolation, self-inflicted isolation, but it was still five years of solitude. Five years of habits. Writing whenever I wanted. Writing out the pain. Now there’s not much writing. Ember igniting. It’s not just a release of pain for me. It’s who I am, and it might be a husband I’ve always loved and children I truly wanted, they’re still taking away from who I am. Somedays I hold onto too much pride that I’m better than my mother, you know the birth mother, because I haven’t abandoned them, but that’s just a formality. She didn’t abandon me at this age either. She waited until I was three. Took off to Dartmouth. Are my daughters holding their breaths for when they turn three and I force that fate on them too?

Suddenly someone is taking Maddie from me. That’s always happening. Those girls are so loved that immediately when I enter Mom and Susan’s house, I lose whatever daughter I’m holding. Sarah. I make recognition of who took her from me. I make recognition Sarah is cueing in her face. Then kisses and swinging her around. Maddie giggles and giggles. Wild hair flying.

They’ll be fine without me.

I feel the envelop. For a moment all the embers settle. Peace. Love. I wrap myself into her completely. Mom. Love. It’s all she knows. Even more so now since she married the real love of her life, Susan, designed them a house, and every day walks in the real her. I hold her so tightly.

Christmas Eve Tradition has shifted for Mom. She truly had closure the day she took me to the cemetery to “meet” all of them. She visits them sometimes still. The days she needs to, and Susan goes with her. But her Christmas NEED has dissipated. Her only Christmas need now is our family. The one she waited thirty years for no distinct separations. No torn. In ways she waited for no husbands. I’m not disrespecting Pop. I think he even knew she’d be the happiest when there was no torn anymore for Haddy. When there was a home she designed for Her Wife.

That’s it! I’m just like Mom. I hate being torn. I can’t live in it. There she is looking at me. Any moment I cling to Mom, she finds compartments in herself where she accepts it, accepts how young she was, the choices she made, but she still resents our relationship. She’s torn.

Because you love her more. It was her truth. It was the start of a new torment. *I was sixteen. I thought it was perfect for both of us, and on paper it was. But in my heart I wanted to be your mom.* And in my heart I had never felt so validated. So glad. She wanted to be my mom.

I pulled away from Mom. I went to her. She smiled. She moved like she was going to hug me. I grabbed her outstretched hand and yanked her up the stairs. This wasn't our house. Wasn't one either of us had any claim to ... except it was designed by Our Mom. We knew it by our heart.

Sometimes it was one heart we shared.

Mom's studio. We were so happy she had made sure to design herself a studio. Something she hadn't had for thirty years living in Wallingford. The thirty year gap to The Real Haddy.

We stared for a moment at a painting she had made that had all four of us. Not a four you would think I would mean, the four in the gap. No. Her four daughters. She had innate powers to all of us. Known how Max and Maddie would have aged and molded with ... Us.

This was a new painting – like maybe this morning. Like a new Christmas Eve for Mom.

That would be the best present she could ever have. All four of her daughters. Together.

So we stared. Somewhere in the staring our hands met. And this was easier not looking.

“I need to ask you for something.”

“Anything, Baby Girl. Anything.”

Deep breathing ensued. Until it finally rushed out. “Please don't have another baby.”

Unlike the Jocelyn I always knew, she didn't react immediately. She no longer allowed Impulse to rule her every move or word. She let my words thrash against her. Several times. Like I could see the words whipping her. Bouncing back to me. Then back to beat on her again. The old Jocelyn never would have resonated in a moment. Wouldn't have selected words.

She released my hand. “Don't move.” So I didn't. Interesting warning she had to give like now I'm the impulsive one among us. I would have been. She moved behind me. Wrapped her arms around me from behind. She was taller than I was as height was never anything I acquired much of, but in ways I fit so perfectly ... here ... in her embrace. She felt so good. I surrendered.

This was the moment she had probably waited forty-eight years for. The moment she got it right outside of the water. It was truly a battle for her. I used to watch her swim and thought if swimming were a language, she'd be able to speak for herself better than Shakespeare, Chaucer, any of them. Swimming was her home, and now she had it again. A new home. That was **HERS**.

Oddly she was no longer walking in a Pauly shadow either. Her own swim club.

She nuzzled into my neck, this thing she'd always done with me. Only me.

She moved up. Placed the sweetest kisses on my cheek like I think she had always done. Like I could see us on the day I was born. Mom walked out to give her time alone with me. Kisses on my cheek. Then laid me on her. *I just couldn't let you go, Baby Girl. I don't know if I'll be any good at this. I'm sorry to both of us for that. But I just can't let you go. I love you already.*

Her 15th Birthday. *I already know, no matter how young I am, you'll be what I love most.*

Thirty-three years in our gap since then. Somehow she did something I never thought Jocelyn was capable of. The old Jocelyn would never have been capable. But the Jocelyn who was no longer Paul Jr who ruined his empire but Jocelyn Annesley who'd built an empire of her own, well, she seemed damn near invincible at times. Like now. Completely able to bridge our gap.

"Every person gets this one perfect thing in their lives, and no matter how many ways I failed us both, you were mine, Bilson. You were my one perfect thing." Tears poured from me. She held tighter. Nuzzled into my neck more soothingly. My soothing spot she owned. "I love him, Bilson. I've always loved him. Loved him so much I gave you his name so I could always have him with me. And I'm so glad we found our way back to each other. I feel so complete now. But nothing, no Carter, no swim club, no new relationship with Mom, is as treasured to me as My One Perfect Thing." She raised her head. Kissed my tear-stained cheek. "I would never, as much for my sake as for yours, attempt to replicate that. You only get one, and you're mine, Baby."

Silence. The most beautiful silence as words surrounded us. Her words didn't beat or whip. It truly was the one time she'd gotten it right. Said exactly the right thing the moment she wanted to say it. And even more amazing – she didn't pressure me to respond. So silence. Love.

Hold. We stayed there holding. And staring at Mom's four daughters. Seeing ourselves.

After a long time. Eventually the strangest thing that ever happened to me happened.

Jocelyn moved us. To the floor. Rummaged through Mom's sacred space. Found a sketch pad that hadn't been invaded. Well, two pages had, but she ripped those out. I briefly noticed a naked Susan on both as Jocelyn was tearing those out and respectfully laying those drawings face down on Mom's desk where there was a half-design. She had designed two houses, and she just kept on designing. Jocelyn smiled touching the design. Turned sweetly. Winked at me. Signature sexy Jocelyn wink she'd been perfecting since she was three as Mom had told me. The ways Mom had always been so captivated by Jocelyn. The ways you could always see in the drawings and paintings she did of Jocelyn that that Spunky Thing had always been her One Perfect Thing.

Jocelyn handed me the sketch pad, "Rip me out three pages, would ya?" I started following the command as Jocelyn kept rummaging. Eventually tossed me two charcoal pencils. "Those will have to do. I don't see any pens." I thought she'd come join me, but she kept rummaging. Several minutes until finally, "Yes!" She had moved to where I couldn't see her but had still heard her rummaging through Mom's large studio. She emerged into my sight looking victorious holding a wine bottle. "I knew she'd have one somewhere." We both laughed. As Jocelyn went to her desk to retrieve a corkscrew, I couldn't help but see us when I was six years old (the first time she came home after all their pain crashed in on us for what I would later refer to as The Big Broken –

the one Mom finally admitted to Pop – It’s Just Broken, Pauly! The one that was too hard for Jocelyn so she let *him* back in. The one she could be destructive together with. *Him*.) But before he became that to me, there was this one perfect Annesley weekend, and I saw her. *Jocelyn handed me her glass. ‘One sip.’ I stared. They all stared at me. ‘I don’t think I’m ready.’*

She plopped down beside me. Two very full wine glasses in her hand. We clinked glasses. Smiling. And both took a sip. Big sips. Identical big sips. I was definitely ready now. For her.

She’d never said this to me before, but it didn’t feel strange she was the one making me. Sometimes we did that to each other. Like when I made her take Carter back at my wedding.

“Write, Baby Girl. Those dark haired babies are being spoiled and fattened, I’m sure. Sullivan is hanging out with his brother. Don’t think about anyone but you. Write. Write, Baby.”

She grabbed one of the charcoal pencils. The three pages she’d asked me to rip out.

And she wrote too. *My mama’s a writer too?* I couldn’t help but wonder as we sat.

As we wrote. And drank wine. And were surrounded by Mom. And Max and Maddie.

And Celeste. She was definitely real here. You could feel her everywhere. And someone else. Someone I only knew in paintings. She wasn’t real to me, but she was to Jocelyn. *Who’s that? The smile. That’s my CiCi. Mom’s mom.* I had been fifteen. Stayed the night with Jocelyn and came out of my room to her on the couch looking at a picture. Someone who looked exactly like Mom, but so clearly wasn’t Mom. I snuggled into Jocelyn who had never been a coffee drinker, but when I visited her, she always went to get me coffee. Jocelyn was always an early riser. Even when I stayed with her, she woke early and got in laps, swam, had herself, then on her way back always stopped at Starbucks for two Venti coffees for me to enjoy. I reached for one on the coffee table – didn’t bother with thank you – it would have seemed insulting. It would have been too much at that time to realize there were a lot of things Jocelyn did just for me. I hadn’t been ready then. No matter what envelopes Mom had left for me of pictures of Josie and Carter, of my beginnings. Mom, Pop, and Susan were my parents. It was all I held onto, so I couldn’t possibly acknowledge all the ways Jocelyn did work to pour out motherly love for me.

Somehow now I could accept it. I could sit with her on a floor. And pour out me.

On every page. I poured out. I drank wine. Until thirty-three pages later – I was me.

And she was still there. Had ended her three pages ages ago. Folded those. Tucked those under her butt. Still sat. Looked at art. Probably had moments she mentally was in a pool. But she never disturbed me at all. She was still. Something Jocelyn had never accomplished. But she had then ... For me. She sat still. I laid my head on her shoulder. “What were you writing?”

“A letter to Max. It’s still where I find myself. It always takes three pages, like a symbolism of me, her, and Maddie will always live in me. Like I live for all three of us.”

I smiled. "That's so beautiful, Josh. Thank you for letting me be a part of you with them now. I feel like I really know you now. Like they're such a big part of you."

"They always were, and always will be." She kissed my forehead. "They've always known you. Even if you didn't know them. I'm very convinced they sent you to me. Made you for me. Baked you to perfect Annesley perfection inside of me."

I giggled. The Bilson Giggle. Thirty-three years old, but it was still a part of me.

She moved. Put her hand on my face. Made us look at each other. Her dark blue eyes. My piercing blue eyes from my daddy. She kissed my lips. "And what were you writing?"

I had no ability to lie in that moment. "A love/hate letter to you."

"Thank you for your honesty. As amazing as Mom is, I hate her a lot too. Not for the reasons you think. She abandoned me three times. When I was one, the other four hit the terrible twos, and she sent me to The Club with Daddy every day. She emotionally had nothing to give me. Aunt Celeste became my mom then. I'm sure I don't actually remember it, but I've always known the lasting effects of that time weighed on me and Mom. She abandoned me when they all died. There's a logical part in me that can understand how much she was grieving, but there is a reality that I hate her for how she abandoned me then. She abandoned me when she finally surrendered to all the blackness coursing through her. Another time I logically accept, but have no ability to accept emotionally. It took me a long time to be able to be honest with her about how much I hated her instead of causing so many crazy turbulent fights between us. Mom always rose up and fought with me because she always knew me. You and I have never had any fights. I'm not sure I think that's healthy, but I know you take a long time to talk about how you feel, sometimes you never do, you put it into writing. So no matter how you need to release it, I do always need you to know I will never deny you the right to hate me for how many, many ways I abandoned you."

Those dark blue eyes had never been more honest. Had never given me so much. She had been so honest about emotions she had had. Jocelyn had just shared her emotions ... with me. Jocelyn who just didn't do emotions, had given me the deep of her. And affirmed the deep of me.

"It's like you said logically I know you were fifteen, but I still hate it. I hate that Carter left us. I hate that there was an us from the beginning. Because he did leave us. I hate how worthless you felt. I hate I cost you your spot on The Olympic National Team. I hate that you gave me up for adoption, even if it was to Mom so you could always have me too, and I love that you loved me enough to give me to Mom. I hate that you went to Dartmouth instead of Yale. I love that you went to Dartmouth. You truly found yourself again there, and you, Pop, and Mom would have seriously killed each other if you had stayed." She laughed so hard. "I would have been an orphan because you three really would have been dead. Three way homicide/suicide."

She laughed harder. "So true, but you wouldn't have been an orphan. You were Susan's."

I smiled. My soul mate. That was true. I had always belonged to her. Another mother.

"You don't hate that anymore?"

“I’ll always hate how much you belong to Mom and Susan, and that I only own tiny shreds of you. But I’ll always, always accept that is my responsibility. Not yours, Baby.”

“I always hated how it seemed you made our relationship my responsibility. I always had to come to you.”

“I know I did that to you. I can recognize how Broken I was. I can apologize. I can never erase it, completely fix it. I can only do what I have done. Build a swim club in your town and come to you over and over. Even times you’ve told me to go away. I did, but I always came back.”

“I love that. I do. I love no matter how much in the past two years I’ve pushed away, you did always come back. I think I really needed that, Josh. That you wouldn’t abandon me again.”

“I know, Baby. I haven’t always done a good job of it, but I have always known you.”

I smiled. I admitted. “I do know that. You always wanted me to marry Sullivan.”

She smiled. “Yeah. He’s your lobster.”

“Are you getting married to yours? I know he asked you. He asked me to help him pick out a ring. But I haven’t heard you mention it.” Then I worried I ruined it. He hadn’t asked yet.

“He did ask, Bilson. And you did a wonderful job on that ring. But you did a wonderful job on that ring. I knew it as soon as I saw it. I knew it was your ring.” She pulled out something hidden in her shirt. Her locket from Mom now with a longer chain and a ring beside it. “So it stays close to my heart, but not on my finger. It’s my Bilson ring. Not my Carter ring. I told him no. It’s too soon, Bilson. Yes, he’s been here for two years not expecting anything in return, but in all honesty, we just got back together at your wedding, what a beautiful way for us to reunite, at our daughter’s wedding, but it’s too soon, Bilson. He wants to make it permanent. He wants to erase when he left me, but like your broken portions are a part of you and Sullivan, my many many many years of loneliness are a part of me. I don’t know if marriage is a goal of mine anymore, and not for you, for Carter, for how much I always loved Mom and Dad’s marriage will I ever apologize for that. The only goal for me right now is to let Josie play in her big, nice swim club Mom designed for me, let the business woman Jocelyn run that club successfully, and love on you. That’s all I need in life. Even if you can’t love me back. I still need to love on you.”

“You don’t need Carter?”

She took a deep breath. Moved back to the wall so she wasn’t looking at his eyes anymore. Released her truth. “No. I don’t need him. I did for a long time, but I don’t anymore. I love him. I’m glad he’s here. A swim club was his dream too. I’m glad we get to do this together, but I don’t need him, Baby. If he left today, I’d be a little upset, but I’d still be me. Still Josie/Jocelyn.”

I smiled like I recognized, she hadn’t needed to be a twin, she had two sides living in her.

And so I gave us both a gift, but true to Bilson not until after we sat in silence awhile.

“I love you, Mama.” She kissed my forehead then said, “Oh, God, I really needed that.”