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Period 2 English 10

Ms. Vasquez

April 19, 2017

Shut Up And Stop Apologizing

Everyone has there hardships. Losses you have to face and changes to struggle through. Everyone has a sob story to share, the one that gains you sympathy and pity. I've got my own, one that some wouldn't flinch at and others would break down listening to. My story, it's long and boring, hazy at points too. But it's another story to be told; its shapes who I am today. And the only way to understand it is to start at the beginning.

I was born June 30, 2001, 1 hour and 15 minutes before my twin brother, Sean. Seems pretty far back, but bear with me. At 7 months old my father was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer and very little chance to live. Fortunately for myself, he pulled through. However the ordeal changed my parent's relationship, along with the whole dynamic of my family. My mother had feared for his life, as well as her children's future. Skipping the boring details of another story, it all eventually lead to my parents divorce when I was 19 months old. Sean and I stayed with our dad while my mother kept her son, and my half-brother, Jacob. It was hard at first; my brother would constantly cry himself to sleep and I vaguely remember being lost and confused and utterly lonely. However, things turned out well in the end and we started our routine that became "normal life". Our parents stayed friends and did everything within their power to put us first. We got to see our mom and Jacob regularly. To me, life was perfect.

She was precious and dear, my mom I mean. She meant the world to me; I would have given up absolutely everything for her. Sure we argued, and by no means was she perfect. She kept a terrible sleep schedule that changed nightly, smoked too many cigarettes of which everything she owned smelled of, and drank sugared sodas like you drink water. The worst of all her habits, the harmful one I watched her suffer in agony from, was the amount of prescription drugs and painkillers she took. Perhaps if I had fully understood the consequences of it, then things would have turned out different. But even so, despite all of her faults and flaws, mom was everything I could have wanted.

I don't remember a lot from my childhood; I chalk it up to my shit memory. These days, I get flashes, brief replays of myself in another life when I seemed so much brighter. Where the world was full of innocence and color. Where my mother and I spent hours upon hours together without tire. Whether it was shopping, cleaning, or hiking, I was right there with her. She was my idol. Kindness flowed from her in waves that made you immediately made your mood brighten; her beauty knew no bounds and made itself known whenever her lips tugged into a smile and her voice tingled with laughter. When her mood dropped, you'd do anything to make her smile again; the tears from her eyes would wrench at your heart. Mom was my safety who I made so many memories with, memories of my sanctuary at her condo where nothing mattered. Memories can hurt in the most beautiful way.

As time continued and I grew older, her situation became clearer. She wasn't working due to her disabilities, and her husband was a lazy bum. She had trouble moving and bad back pain that kept her in blinding spasms for hours and days at a time. I began to notice how strained her smiles were and how tired she always looked. Her movements had become sluggish and dark circles permanently ringed her eyes. I was worried for sure, but too young to really understand what was happening to her. A 9 to 10 year old isn't the right person to put someone's life on track and fix all their problems.

Things only got worse after her accident. One day in 2011, when Sean and I were at dad's house, mom had accidently locked herself out and had to climb across the neighbors balcony to get in to her second floor condo. The ledge was thin, precarious, and she wasn't the most graceful person. Her foot slipped and she fell, barely missing the wooden fence at the bottom. She broke her ankle, wrist, ribs, fractured her skull and injured her back. The blood stain at the bottom haunted my nightmares for months afterwards. It blared at me every time I closed my eyes. She was confined to her bed after that, her damaged body littered with bruises and lacerations. It terrified me, traumatized me in a way I had never known and can hardly remember. Months later, she moved back to her mother's in Oklahoma with my older brother. She couldn't take care of herself and her 15 year old son after the fall and divorcing her current husband, a man I selectively choose to forget. I remember dropping her off at the airport,

breaking down as I watched her plane disappear from my sight. My heart was crushed and my head felt heavy, the world appearing on my shoulders. It didn't get any better.

Dad, Sean and I had been on a trip when it finally happened. We were driving our way back home from Hamcon when our dad got a phone call. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, but whatever was said on the phone left him shocked, mouth agape and emotions I couldn't decipher flickering across his face. What had happened to make my dad, so strong and invincible, to become so broken? We pestered him for details, but he only shook his head suddenly subdued. The next day when we got home, I found out what the phone call was about. Grandma Judy, from Oklahoma, had called. Mom was dead. The doctors were giving her blood thinners and other medication to help with what they believed to be a blood clot, but it was actually spinal bleeding. She had overdosed on fentanyl, a prescription painkiller. A shudder racked my body as shaking consumed my hands. Words couldn't describe the disbelief, desperation, and devastating grief that rampaged me in that very moment. I was numb with everything; I think I cried.

We had to drive to Oklahoma for her funeral. I read about 1000 pages on the way there and another on the way back. A coping method, I realize now. A way to black out the grief. The drive was long and tense, passing state after state until, with relief, we reached Grandma Judy's house in Oklahoma city. I flew out of the car and tackled my older brother, suddenly all giggles and smiles. As if we didn't all know why we were there. It was muggy and hot, swatting mosquitoes left and right, but it couldn't put a damper on my sudden good mood seeing him after so long. I met up with the rest of my mom's family at the funeral home. The place looked plain, like any normal office really. Cream walls, carpeted floors. Bland with a looming melancholy, mixed with the smell of disinfectant. Everything considered, I felt pretty okay, or at least I think I did. I don't think I felt sad. Jacob had sat to the side of us, attempting to comfort his girlfriend, a pretty girl who was much shorter than him. Sean just sat and stared blankly at the wall, limp and unresponsive. Strangers claiming to be family, came and went, continuously offering condolences and pitying smiles. I wished they would just cut it out. What a nuisance.

Before the service, I was waiting in the hall. Staring at the floor, scuffing my shoes against it idly while trying to stay out of the way of the bustling people. For a place supposedly

depressing and gloomy, it was thriving with activity and life. I was frozen in time, just observing as everyone continued to live. Broken out of my reverie, I was approached by yet another stranger who smiled teary-eyed at me.

“Oh Ashley, I'm so sorry,” she lamented. Sorry? Why was this stranger sorry? She must have seen my confusion as her smile grew faintly amused. “Of course you wouldn't remember me, you were so little when we met,” she clarified. What a relief, I felt bad having not remembered her when she remembered me. “I'm your mother's cousin, Angie.” She came in for a hug and I practically suffocated in whatever perfume she was doused in. She finally pulled back and again pinned me with those piercing sympathetic eyes. “Oh you poor thing, you look so much like her.”

Something inside me just snapped. My blood wanted to boil, my hands started to shake at my sides as tears burned from behind my eyes. I let them fall, mockingly they dripped a trail from my cheeks and down my chin as I let my head limp forward. Anger surged towards this lady, this stranger, for such words. But it hurt. The pain prickled straight through my heart, filling my lungs, pounding up my head and zapping all the way to my toes. And numbness was left in its wake. Belatedly, coming back down to myself, I nodded at her words; Angie had walked away many minutes ago.

“I look nothing like her,” I broke, still stood in the middle of the bustling hall silently crying until it was time for the service to start.

The worst part by far was seeing *her*. I questioned the sanity of whoever invented open-coffin services; it traumatized me more than gave me closure. Her skin, once rosy and freckled and filled with her comforting warmth, was tinged a skin crawling gray-blue and icy to the touch. It wasn't my mom, the mommy who I had laughed and cried with. Who I had shared everything with. The room smelled sickeningly like a hospital with flowers failing to mask it. I wanted to hurl so badly. I wanted to leave, to run away and never look back. I sat upfront with my grandfather, fruitlessly trying to find dad. The mortician gave his practiced speech, showing a slideshow of pictures with music. They played “Blackbird” by The Beatles and my throat instantly closed up. Various people went up and made their own speeches about her. I was scared that I would have to do the same thing, being her daughter and all. I was strangely disappointed

when I didn't. The service seemed to drag on for hours before finally it ended and I was herded outside with the rest of the crowd. Someone far too cheerful handed me a balloon and told me to release it into the sky with everyone else. I think it was supposed to symbolize letting go our grief or something, but either way I didn't want to do it. Finally Jacob forced me to and I started tearing up and sniffing, staring after the damned balloon as it floated away. For lunch we went to a rustic kind of diner that sold mediocre food and heavenly pie. Laughter rang too loudly and it sounded like a stupid celebration. I just wanted to leave and escape the pitying stares and false comfort that stalked me no matter who I talked to. I was grateful to return home.

Then life continued. The whole school year became a blur of mist that never seemed to stop clouding my vision. Teachers were informed, a fact I didn't know until everyone was giving me group cards with "I'm sorry"s. I didn't understand why were they sorry when they hardly knew or cared about me. Some teachers gave me 'special treatment' while others treated me like normal. Many kept pushing me to go to therapy to which I adamantly refused. Pining me as emotionally unstable and treating me like a piece of fragile china was not the correct way to handle my emotional state. However, it was true that I wasn't in the best state of mind, no one expected me to be. I don't really remember being sad, but many others do. My dad says it was like a black cloud hung over my head: some days it was cloudy while others it was storming with thunder and lightning. Friends say I was quiet and isolated myself more than was healthy. But I honestly don't remember being sad. I don't remember much of anything really. Not even band class, my favorite thing in the world. Sean took things better, more stoic and straight forward. Me? My life with and without my mom felt like two different lives, and myself as two different people. I just wasn't the same

Out of all the stages of grief, depression was a huge part of my life, and it was definitely more prominent to me a year or two after she died. I thought about her everyday, memories invading my mind. They weren't often bad memories, but they still hurt so much and brought me down lower. It was unfair that it had to be my mom. I just wanted her to hold and comfort me. To smell her unique scent of cigarettes and rose petals that somehow intertwined beautifully. To hear her voice again. I isolated myself more, being present with friends but not really there. I drifted away from those I trusted, sometimes snapping at them and eventually just refusing to

talk. I questioned the meaning of everything in a harmful way: the meaning of my existence, for living. I turned to bad copings that only worsened the anxiousness and depression I was already feeling. I felt it just wasn't worth it to love, to feel, or to live. I drove myself deeper into a hole that I wasn't sure I would ever get out of. I convinced myself that I didn't want to get out of that hole; that it would be better to just lie on the bottom and simply not exist. But I broke free, I clawed my way up towards the light while facing every mental and physical obstacle that threatened to make me fall. I slowly realized mom was somewhere better where she wasn't feeling her pain and her own crippling desolation. I started to smile without guilt again, and the colors of the world faded back into my vision. Like I opened my eyes after many years of being blind. It was a painstakingly sluggish process, one I'm still treading through along with all my other battles. But I'm getting there, especially with help from my friends. Even in this last year I've received help from my best friend.

Although not as often, I still get glances of recollections that shoot a spike in my heart. That day happened to be one. My friend walked up in the morning just as always, smile stupidly plastered to his face. I tried to smile back, really I did, but instead my lip quivered and the corners shook.

He didn't miss a breath in asking "What's wrong."

I shook my head, lump suffocating my throat and lungs already struggling to pull in air. Finally the tears tracked from underneath my sunglasses and left glossy trails that glistened in the early sunrise. I was starting to trip into that hole all over again, like I had some many other times before. I hung my head in shame, trembling. I tried to curl in on myself. "I miss her," I finally whimpered out. "I-I'll never get to really know her. It so unfair. Its so..."

Immediately he gently wrapped me in a hug, giving me a brief show of his soft side to offer me some sort of comfort. "I'm sorry it had to be this way."

Those words made fall worse, not tripping or stumbling but full out free falling. They lit that fire in my core that scorched through my veins and boiled my blood once more before extinguishing just as quickly, leaving me feeling colder than before. But he continued, surprising me from my dive.

“I can't relate, and I can't do much to help,” he admitted with a sigh. “But I'll always be here for you. So just let go for a little.”

Tears flowed faster, grief and relief lacing their delicate pathways. I needed to hear that, not pity but that someone would always be there. Just to know I didn't have to be alone. The world disappeared as I ran my tears dry and cried my throat raw, trusting my best friend. And when I resurfaced from my breakdown, he gave me one last fleeting, genuine smile before the day continued as normal. I continued feeling a little lighter and at ease, knowing it was okay to just let go for a little while. That others cared enough to not just say “I'm sorry”.

Loosing a loved one will always hurt, no matter how many years pass, what age you are, or how many therapy sessions you go through. I still get recollections that make me doubt myself. I constantly ask myself questions, like what would she think of me now? Would she be disappointed with how I turned out, about my choices and thoughts? But those are all questions never to be answered, and speculations for another time. I'll never forget when I hit my rock bottom or every time I slipped and fell again, I'm still tripping and falling today, but I'll always reach for the light as I get closer and closer to being what one might call *happy*.