

The Knot Undone

Morgan Bartlett

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Absence

I do a lot of things because my mother did. I inherited her need and mild enjoyment for cleaning my living space—except dishes. I still hate dishes. I learned to be careful because she said so. For a long time, I wanted to get married young because she did. I learned to be nicer to my sensitive brother because my mother warned me that I might be the one who turns him mean. I picked up a love of crafts because she became a fantastic scrap-booker and crafts of all kinds were something we did together. More recently, I've come to hate crowds in public places like she does. I'm learning to be okay on my own because I've watched her do it when I'm sure she wasn't confident in her ability to do so.

I do a lot of things because my father did. I inherited his ability to talk to anything that talks back. I learned the importance and art of conversing with someone but not revealing things about yourself. I place a lot of importance on family traditions. I have respect for rules and people in authority because he taught me to. I have underlying prejudices and judgments because he talked about his when my mind and views were impressionable. I am proud of myself because he is proud of me.

I do a lot of things because neither of my parents did. I listen to both sides of a story. I have learned to fight nice. I have learned the importance of equality and give and take in relationships. I have learned the value of honesty and communication between people, no matter what kind of relationship you have. Finally, I have learned the importance of faith and the necessity of finding happiness within yourself. I love my parents till the ends of the earth, but they did not do these things. I have learned from the absence of them.

Mom in Snapshots

I'm young, about four or five. Mom tucks me into bed and kisses my head.

"Good night, sugar bear," she whispers as she rises. "'Night Momma," I mutter sleepily. I snuggle into my covers and drift to sleep. I love when she calls me that.

I'm eight, and it's Christmas time. I bug Mom to get her Christmas stamps, markers, and blank cards out because, well, it's time to make Christmas cards. She obliges, and I take over the kitchen table with my materials for sending holiday joy. Mom sits down with me and helps me center the big snowman stamp just right on a card face. We talk about who will be getting one of my personally colored stamped cards this year, and keep working till my list is done. Later, I find my mother scrapbooking at her craft table in the basement. She asks if I want to help her with the set of pages she's working on; she needs help picking out which pictures to use and what color the background needs to be. I stand beside her chair and look at pictures of my brother and I from babyhood. "This one, and that one, and then these two because Travis is making a funny face," I decide. Mom smiles and takes the photos I hand her. This is her hobby, but she's teaching me the ways of memory keeping too. I don't know if I'll ever be as good as she is.

I'm twelve, and think I'm old enough to use Mom's make up. We're going on a family outing today to Duluth, so it's a perfect time to experiment with colors on my face. I hop in the bathroom where she is already dusting her blue eyes with her favorite Revlon color palette, the

rich, brown-toned one she's had for years. "Mom," I say with all the importance of a young girl ready to grow up, "Where's your mascara stuff?"

"Oh, you don't need that, Morgan," she says as she fluffs her dark chestnut hair and gives it a quick spray. I cough from the smell of Aussie Stay 'n' Hold.

"Mom. I'm old enough for make up now, you know. Can I please try it?" "How about I do it for you?" she bargains.

"No, I wanna do it myself." I'm firm in my decision. I know I can do it, I've seen Mom do it lots of times.

"Alright, fine, but don't take too long, we're going to leave soon," she admonishes and leaves the bathroom. I rifle through her makeup bag and find the silver tube I need. I park myself within inches of the giant wall mirror, and bring the black brush close to my eyeball. I blink at the wrong time, and I end up with mascara in my eye and on my cheek below my lashes. *Rats!* I think. *Now what? I don't know how to fix this . . .*

"Morgan! Come on, we're leaving!" I yell back something to stall my family, and I desperately rub my eye, trying to get the black gunk out of my eye and off my skin—but it only results in a raccoon eye. I stare at my failed attempt with makeup sadly, and walk out to meet my family. Mom looks at my one naked eye and one messy eye. "You got it in your eye, huh?" she says with a half-smile. I look down and nod slightly. She pulls me into a side hug as we walk to the car. I think she knew all along I wasn't old enough yet, but I appreciate that she let me try.

I'm fifteen, and just got my permit. Mom and I are running errands in Cloquet, and she's allowed me into the driver's seat. I'm a little nervous, but try not to show it. I can tell Mom is more nervous than I am. I approach a stop sign in a residential neighborhood, no cars to be seen. Mom visibly stiffens.

"Are you going to stop at that stop sign?" she says, in a tone I can't quite name.

"No," I reply sarcastically as I step on the brake pedal. "I was just going to breeze right through it seeing as there are no cars around, but now that you say so I guess I'll stop."

"Morgan, don't do that." I roll my eyes. "And don't roll your eyes at me, you weren't slowing down!" I roll my eyes in my mind instead.

I'm seventeen, and I found the *perfect* dress for my winter formal dance.

"Mom, I need this dress. Wait till you see it, it's gorgeous. I never thought I'd want one like this, I never liked mermaid cuts, but oh! It is sooo perfect." Mom and I are in the kitchen prepping dinner.

"How much is it?" Mom asks.

"Umm, well, it's not *that* bad...just two hundred dollars," I mumble the last part almost unintelligibly. Mom turns to face me, her eyebrows raised.

"Two hundred dollars for a Snoball dress? Morgan, I think we can find something cheaper."

I shake my head. “No way, Mom. It’s perfect, I’m telling you! You need to see it, I look great in it. Please, please, please? It’s my senior year.”

I pull out my trump card. It’s my last Snoball, and I got my last two formal dresses as hand-me-downs from my older cousin for free. So I’m thinking money can be spent on dresses this year.

“We’ll see, I’ll talk to your dad,” Mom replies.

“Mmmm alright,” I say. A week later I wake up and look around my bedroom. My door is open, which is odd. But it’s open because that perfect dress is hanging on it in a clear plastic bag, in all of its black satin and sparkly glory. I leap out of bed and find Mom and squeeze her tight.

“Thank you, thank you, THANK YOU!” I squeal. Mom laughs and hugs me.

“You’re welcome! I’m glad you like it and appreciate it.”

“Oh, I do! Thanks Mom!” It doesn’t feel like getting spoiled, it just feels like something Mom would do. She always does things like that.

I’m twenty-one, and Mom and I are meeting for the day in Grand Rapids. We laugh about something as we exit Target and head for the car and hop in.

“Ugh, Mom! I have nowhere to go for spring break and no one to go with! And you know Dad won’t let me go alone, either.”

“Not even if it was somewhere he wanted to go?” Mom replies with a small laugh.

“Not unless it was Thailand!” I shoot back, laughing. “Why Thailand? Is that where your dad wants to go?”

“Apparently,” I reply.

“Because of the Asian women?” she asks, still smiling.

“I guess. You know what I think, I think he misses you.” We’re both sitting in the car now, and Mom’s checking her phone for messages before we leave. I look at her, but she doesn’t look up.

“I think he’s realizing how good he had it, and now he can’t find someone else, and it’s just like, ‘Well, you kind of fucked that up, so there’s that’...pardon my French.” Mom still doesn’t look up, but I think she raised her eyebrows. I look out the window and hear the car start.

“Well,” Mom starts, “I suppose that’s it for the day. Is there anywhere else you want to go?”

The First Time Dad Said “Fuck”

It was close to Christmas, on a weekend. Can't remember what year it was—high school, sometime. One of those years where you feel old enough yet still badass when you swear out loud; you can say “hell” and “damn” out loud on purpose now.

There was some discussion between my parents about where we would go for Christmas; how we would split up the two or three celebrations we needed to be at and how we would split up the family visits so we didn't have three Christmases in the space of 12 hours.

“So are we going to Grandma Mary's on Christmas Eve?” I ask. That was the usual plan in years past, and I didn't see why we had to deviate from that.

“I think so,” Dad replies coolly. “But your mom has different plans.”

I turn to look at Mom, who was busying herself with something. “Ma, what else are we gonna do? *We always* do it this way.”

Suddenly Mom and Dad are close together in the wrong way. Too close. (Not pushing, but in the wrong kind of hold—like a stubborn pushing match that only lasts a few seconds.) I hear words come out of Mom's mouth in a jumble; I can't make out what she says. I hear Dad's voice and watch them separate as he points his finger at the front door and says, “Then get the fuck out. Leave.”

They break farther apart, probably amongst more words I don't hear clearly. I think Mom's crying. In a short time I see them retreat to their bedroom and hear the door drag across the carpet till it snaps into place, shutting them in with each other and words that can't be taken back. Travis and I loiter in the dining room. I stand against a window with my arms crossed. I'm

wearing pajamas and my bathrobe still. My arms are crossed tightly and a scowl hardens my face. Travis takes the opposite reaction than me: He is sad, crying a little bit. He looks frightened, but also like he's trying to hide it. Twelve year old boys don't cry anymore, even after things like this. He doesn't say anything. I throw something into the air between us about being done with this crap between Mom and Dad, not understanding why they need to fight, how they need to quit. I sprinkle my rant with a few choice swear words, leaving me feeling a little tougher rather than scared for the welfare of my parent's marriage—at least on the outside.

Dad in Snapshots

I'm five years old or so, just learning to ride a bike without those darn training wheels. I sit on a turquoise bike, a hand-me-down my father probably got for me. My little legs don't quite allow my feet to rest on the pedals. "Dad!" I whine, "My feet don't reach!"

"Well, hop off it there, let me look and see what I can find," Dad says, helping me down. He takes it into the garage, and before long brings it back out to me.

"Try it now!" he crows proudly. Dad has fastened small, fat wooden blocks to each of my bike pedals in an effort to make the bike fit my undersized frame.

"Here, let's get on... Okay, now I'll hold onto the seat and you start pedaling. I'll run with you for a little bit, then let go. Ready? You're sure you can reach now?" He helps me onto the bike and gets behind me, holding onto the back seat and tire to steady me before I go.

"Yeah! Let's go, Dad!" I squeal, my feet finally resting on the pedals, ready to ride like a big kid. I begin to pedal, and I feel Dad let go of the bike. As I go up the driveway, I can feel him smiling.

I'm eight now, and Dad and I are on a boatcar ride—just the two of us. The six-wheeler, or boatcar as we always refer to it, is an amphibious vehicle with two bench seats and three tires per side. Riding in it is always an adventure, and Dad's gotten it stuck in swamps and mud

several times. We drive to a big gravel pit on a warm summer afternoon and ride around a bit. Dad's packed his ever-present cooler with Lunchables and water bottles for our impromptu supper, which we eat while parked on the top of a very large mountain of dirt. His bright brown eyes are alight with joy and his smile is big, like mine. Dad and I don't do a lot just us two, so this is a great day.

I'm twelve now, and Dad calls me out the garage to help him do things with the car. I grumble to my mother as I pull on my shoes and throw on a sweatshirt; I have no interest in anything having to do with the garage, why do *I* have to learn car things? That's my brother's thing, not mine. I shuffle out to the garage and find my dad putzing with the wheels of our Lincoln, which is lifted on car jacks.

"Uh, Dad? What are you doing and why do you need me?" I ask, not bothering to hide the disinterest in my voice.

"I have to change the hubcaps on the wheels," he replies. I look quizzically at the car. "Why?" He gives some mechanical-worded answer that goes right over my head. ". . . So I need your help for this part, here. And don't roll your eyes, this is important for you to know. You'll have your own car someday and have to take care of it; I won't always be able to fix it for you."

"Mmmhmm, right. You know Dad, that's what car shops are for," I prod pointedly.

"No, car shops are for people who don't know how to fix stuff themselves for free. Those places are a waste of money," he replies. I cut him off there because I know he could go on about that

for a while. “Alright, fine. What do I do?” He shows me a wonky-looking wrench with a circle on the end, and lets me watch him slowly loosen and remove a bolt on a hubcap, explaining the process along the way. “Now you do this one,” he says, handing the wonky thing to me. I hold it for a second in my hand and cast one more look at Dad. He’s sitting in his garage chair, taking a moments’ rest. He rolls the sleeves of his flannel shirt and wipes his rough, calloused, grease-stained hands on a rag. He gestures to me to start, and I do. I replicate his movements to the best of my memory, and mutter angrily when it my bolt doesn’t come off as well as his. He comes back down and finishes the job for me and places the dirty bolt in my hand. “There, see, that wasn’t so hard, you can do it!” He says this in a drawn-out, teasing manner like he always does and I smile despite myself, like I always do.

I’m sixteen and learning to drive. Dad has set up two trash bins outside of the pole barn, creating a makeshift parking space for me to practice parallel parking. He gives me instructions and tips like always, and does it once with me in the passenger seat, so I can see how it’s done. He goes back up the garage, leaving me with strict instructions to practice at least ten times, or until I can do it without knocking the bins over. Another time, he lets me drive the truck with him in the passenger seat. We’re on the freeway, and I’m trying to strike that delicate balance between fast enough and too fast.

“Keep your speed up,” Dad implores when he feels even the slightest drop in movement.

“Dad,” I say, “There is no way you felt that; I was going sixty-five and now it’s at sixty-three, it’s *fine*.”

“You’re on the freeway, you’re expected to go the speed limit,” he replied shortly as he flicked his cigarette out the window. I glance over at him and obviously roll my eyes and sigh heavily. I can see more gray in his thinning black hair and more whiskers in his beard are turning silvery-white. I wonder how many are due to my driving.

I’m twenty now, and Dad is helping me move from my summer room to my fall room.

“Dad, I’m going to run upstairs and talk to Lauren real quick, okay? I’ll be back soon.”

“That’s fine, I’ll be here,” Dad says as he unloads another box and suitcase out of the moving cart.

“Thanks Dad!” I call as I bounce out of the room and up the stairs. When I get back to my room twenty minutes later, I notice my bed is moved up to the highest notch. “Um, Dad? How did that happen?” I ask, pointing to my lifted bed. “Uh, I’m Dad. I can do anything,” he replies easily. I shake my head. Usually—and for normal people—it takes two people to move a bed up or down on the bed frames. And Dad did it by himself. As I have done my countless times before, I shake my head and smile.

Snooping

I was looking for a joke my mother had shown me once not too long ago. It was one of those email chain jokes, and she had printed it out and saved it. I knew she kept it in the top drawer of her dresser, and I wanted to show a friend of mine. So, logically, I went searching for it. You know how you're always told as a child snooping is wrong, that if you do, you're almost guaranteed to find something you don't want to find? Well, I didn't think of that. I mean, I *did*, but I ignored it. I needed that joke, damn it. I rifled through the folded white papers and envelopes in the front corner of the drawer, and pulled a piece of paper out and unfolded it to check what it was. It wasn't what I was looking for. It was far from a joke, although I immediately wished it was. That paper was an email message from my mother to my father, and it contained a list of eight instances my mother suspected my father of cheating. A few of them even had names listed, along with descriptions like "Very hurtful!" and "We had only been married for X-amount of months!"

I stood still for a moment, trying to take it in, but my brain wouldn't process it. How could I? Here in my hands was evidence of the very thing I feared—that my parent's marriage was falling apart, and apparently had been since the beginning. Even worse, it was at the hands of my father. I couldn't tell if the email had been sent or if it was just something my mom wrote to blow off steam and kept for herself or what it was. I probably shouldn't have, and I don't remember why I did, but instead of stuffing the paper back in the drawer and trying to forget I found it, I made a copy of it for myself to keep, then returned the original to my mom's dresser. Later that week I hung out with my close friend Katie, and I showed her the email.

“Wow. . . I don’t know what to say, Morgan,” Katie said slowly after reading it. “What do you think about it?”

“I don’t even know,” I replied. “I just don’t want to believe it, I guess. You never do want to believe that, but it’s hard not to with this! Why would Mom write this if it wasn’t true? But what am I supposed to do, *ask* one of them? That’d be a great conversation: ‘So Mom, I found this list in your drawer and was wondering if all these things are true.’ Yeah, not going to happen.” I wrapped my arms around myself and rocked back and forth, trying to find more words. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to do about this. I can’t tell them I found it, and even if I did, what would it fix? I can’t un-see that, and what if they tell me it’s all true? Katie, I can’t handle this. What if my parents really get divorced?”

Katie and I both fell quiet, letting the question hang in the air. It was a loaded question for sure. Two of my friends had parents who were divorced, but it happened when my friends were young. We were juniors in high school at this point; I was sixteen and abhorred the thought of divorce. That happened to other people’s parents, not mine. I believed that. Nothing, not even this, was going to change my mind.

Mom

I don't think I look like my mom in reality, but if you compare our driver's license pictures, then we look similar—it was the first thing I noticed when I got my license renewed.

My mother is a beautiful woman, don't get me wrong. We just don't look out rightly as similar as my dad and I do. She is about 5'10 with big blue eyes and a lovely tan complexion that stays tan all year, much to my envy. I think she looks better with shorter hair, but she's growing it out because that's how she likes it. She, unlike me, can pull off gold jewelry. I got my big hands from her—she calls them “man hands”. I call them proportionate. In my eyes, she has always looked good. Never too thin, never too big. I just always told her she looked like a mom; if you're as thin as your 5'4, petite daughter that might be a problem. She's a stylish woman, which makes for fun shopping. I hope I age as well as she does; she has one crow's foot on each eye, *maybe*. And any lines around her mouth are from smiling.

If you asked my mother what she believed I thought of her, she'd laugh and tell you all the stories of my childhood where I remember her being mean. No nice stories of Mom, just ones where I got in trouble. That's not completely true, but there were definitely a few of those. For example, when I was a toddler, I *hated* it when Mom brushed my hair after a bath, or ever. I used to call her “the hair hurter”. Dad could do it, but as soon as I saw Mom pick up the brush I whined and whined. Mom was the stricter parent in some ways as I grew up. When she'd take Travis and I shopping, we had to stay with her in whatever aisle she was in, we couldn't go anywhere by ourselves for fear of being snatched by a deranged kidnapper. I did not like that policy at all. “Be careful” was her catchphrase for all things; we heard it at least once a day. Travis and I complained that she didn't trust us. She replied, “I trust you, I just don't trust other people.” Which of course made absolutely no sense to us. As a teenager actively honing her

backtalk and sass skills at every opportunity, Mom routinely told me that someday someone would slap me because I said a rude thing at the wrong time. I scoffed at that. To this day it has not happened, but I have learned to be more careful of the things I say to certain people because of those constant reminders. I hated driving with her in the car. She'd get nervous at just about everything I did or didn't do and vocalize it. As a result, I'd get flustered and make more errors. Eventually I learned to just drive with my dad.

On the flip side, there are good stories and memories of Mom and me. When I was young, it was a treat when she washed my hair in the kitchen sink. She had a camera on me and Travis our entire childhoods, so now I have an ingrained love of posing for pictures. She used to have us help her bake cookies, which we loved to do. When I had to get braces in tenth grade, she teased me that I could either have a car or get my teeth fixed; the cost was about the same. Of course I loved that. . . Growing up, I have always been close to my mom; I told her most everything, the big things and small things. As an adult, it didn't dawn on me until my second year of college or so that I did not need to tell Mom absolutely everything—including all the things I did that I probably shouldn't have. My favorite example of this is when I decided to start birth control after my freshman year of college, and asked my mom how to go about it. She looked at me and said plainly, "I didn't have to know that, you didn't have to tell me that. You're an adult, do what you want." I was struck dumb for a moment. I actually *shouldn't* tell my mother everything?! When did that become a thing of adulthood? In my mind, I was simply trying to keep up my open relationship with my mom, which I thought would give her peace of mind. I guess she didn't need it, but I did. Having had such an open relationship for so long, I didn't know how to keep things from my mom. It completely slipped my mind that she may not

have wanted to know absolutely *everything* about my life anymore. I maintain a very open relationship with her, but I've learned to keep some things to myself.

My mom has taught me a lot both directly and indirectly. She taught me cooking skills, how to plant flowers, how to keep a clean house (and the value of it) and a lot of childcare skills. Even now, she's the one I call if I'm babysitting and a crisis happens; Mom knows all about children. She encouraged me to work hard, reminded me of the importance of doing well, always wanted me to succeed and was proud when I did. She was the only one I remember telling me that it was not only okay but a good thing to have guy friends, even as a young child when you're constantly being teased that you "like" any boy you talk to. The biggest thing I learned from her was the importance of being okay on your own. She never regretted having kids early, but she told me countless times as I grew up I needed to be able to be alone. I needed to finish my education, I needed to live on my own, and I needed to situate myself financially— all before I decided to get married. This lesson took on much more weight after the divorce, and she reminded me of it more often afterwards I think, because she never got the chance to do any of those things herself.

My mother married at 18, divorced at 41. Mom was married for more than half her life—I have a deep respect for her simply for the fact that she is able to be on her feet and continue living a life she loves even after such a huge upheaval. She never got to do any of the things she drilled into my mind as important; never lived on her own, didn't have her own money until she started working after being married for fourteen years, and she never went to college. I appreciate her telling me this, but it pains me to know that she had to go through such pain to see the true value of these things herself.

Watching my mom go through the divorce was hard in several ways. Hard because I felt bad for her for all the aforementioned reasons. Hard because she decided to start over, move out, and begin again on her own and I knew it was difficult for her. But mostly it was hard because I believed Dad over her for a long time. Because of that, I refused to spend time with her. I didn't believe her accusations about Dad. I didn't listen when she called Dad names. Most of all, I didn't listen when she said this was the only way, it was the only thing left to do.

"I was becoming someone I'm not, and I couldn't do it anymore," she told me. It didn't make sense to me right away, but as I thought about it I realized she was right. I never knew my mother to be an overly suspicious person before she and Dad started having trouble. I didn't know her to be so quick to anger, or to question anyone's honesty before they started having issues.

After the divorce, our relationship was significantly strained. I think she could tell that I didn't believe her accusations, and it hurt badly that I didn't like visiting her new place, which she called me out on several times in the early aftermath of the divorce. She accused me (and Travis, early on) of taking Dad's side, of believing his lies. That was partially true; from the get-go Dad had been more open and honest with us about what went down between the two of them. Mom was much more private about her reasons for leaving, which led me to think that they were bullshit reasons. Conversations were strained and sometimes tear-filled. Phone calls were the same; she'd call when I was home on break and basically hiding out at Dad's because I hated going to her apartment.

"What are your plans today?" she'd say.

"Ummm, not much, why?" I'd reply.

“You could come visit, you know,” she’d say pointedly.

“Yeah, maybe. . . I might do something with a friend later, and I have a paper I should work on. . . “

“I see. I’ll see you later, Morgan.”

And then she’d hang up, leaving me feeling like the worst daughter on the planet. I’d angrily bite back tears as I held the dead phone to my ear, and then furiously throw myself into whatever activity I said I’d do to get out of visiting her.

It’s been two years since it happened, and it’s taken almost that long for mine and Mom’s relationship to heal. At times it’s strained again, but it’s easier to repair small hurts than it was to stitch our torn relationship back together.

As her daughter, part of me wants my mother’s advice on everything under the sun, but like my father, I’m finally learning that she does not know everything and she cannot help me with everything. Visiting has gotten a lot easier. I don’t think I’ll be totally okay with it for a long time yet, but maybe once she finds herself a permanent house to make her own it’ll finally feel like Mom’s house, not just a place she moved into to leave me, Travis, and Dad. We couldn’t talk about the divorce before, but we’ve had two deep, revealing heart-to-heart talks just in the past six months, and those have served as huge leaps forward for us.

My mom is still everything she ever was to me; caring, nurturing, a beautiful role model in many ways. But I have seen her fall from the pedestal I put her on for so long. I have seen her descend into behaviors I never would have thought she was capable of. I have seen her at rock bottom. But I have also seen her rise up and take control of her life and live the life she wants,

the one she never pursued earlier. She enjoys work, she is in her first semester of a two-year nursing program at a local college, and she is much more social than she used to be. I believe my mother is becoming the person she always wanted to be—or rediscovering the self she lost. Because of all these things, she is more admirable than she ever has been. I wish she never would have needed to go through the horrific and crushing pain that is divorce, but I know she is stronger and even more herself because of it. If I ever went through the same thing she has, I hope I can grow from it as much as she has.

Dad

When I was young, I was told frequently that I resembled my father, particularly by female relatives on his side. “Oh, you have his eyes!” they’d say. Or this one: “You got his freckles, didn’t you?” Even my mother agreed that the top half of my face—my nose and eyes especially—marked me as my father’s daughter. Characteristically, I inherited his sweet tooth, his love of talking to anything that talks back, and love for family gatherings.

Growing up, I loved my dad. Still do. He was everything a dad was supposed to be for his daughter; encouraging, caring, helping me grow and learn. He didn’t yell like my mother did when I got in trouble, he’s one of those men who doesn’t have to raise his voice to convey emotions, just tone. He’d tell stories of his own childhood, and when I got old enough to laugh at myself, he’d tell me stories of all the silly things I did when I was little. I loved those stories. My dad could do anything and knew everything. Any question I had, Dad’s response was, “Oh, I know that. It’s *this*.” I didn’t question it either. “Dad power” was his catchphrase and his favorite answer when us kids questioned why rules were this way or that way. Even now he says this.

In my eyes now, my father is a lot of things. He’s smart, personable, funny, and kind. He is a genuinely good person; I believe this as much as I ever have. He’s an old rock music buff and particularly adores the music of KISS, Pink Floyd, Bruce Springsteen, and Eric Clapton. He’s patient when it counts and pushes me to do better. He did the best for his family even when I didn’t believe that—when we moved six times during my childhood, I had a hard time believing that we moved for the betterment of the whole family. Now I appreciate the moves we made and I know he did it with all of us in mind. Dad has taught me good people skills and business practices. He went with me on a couple school field trips when I was a kid—he really liked being the “cool” dad, and still relishes that title. Essentially, my dad was my Superman

while I was growing up. He knew everything and could do no wrong. All that changed with the divorce.

I saw a broken man. I saw a man who was afraid of losing his children and his wife. I saw a man who didn't know how to run a house on his own. I saw a flawed man, a majorly flawed man. And that was something I had not paid much attention to growing up; it was something I looked past, if anything. Now instead of facing a man who could do everything, who knew everything, I am facing one who is at a complete loss as to where his life is going. He called me the evening Mom told me about the divorce over two years ago. I can still hear him in my ear, hoping that Travis and I would still talk to him after this. Of course my immediate response was yes, absolutely we'd still talk to him. He'd have to do a lot worse for me to not talk to him ever again, or for our relationship to change. But that was then.

Two years later, I believe things have changed between my dad and me. In the immediate aftermath of the divorce, I believe I clung to him and his story because my mom left, and in my mind, this translated to "Dad loves us more because he didn't leave us. Mom did". I refuted my mother's angry accusations about him cheating on her because I couldn't handle the possibility that the man I had put on a pedestal for so long had committed such horrible acts. The man I looked up to for so long was a family man if I ever knew one. He was the kind of parent I hoped to be someday. Now, after hearing the accusations, finding irrefutable evidence against him, and meeting (and saying goodbye to) the three ladies he dated after the divorce, I can say things are very different. I can say now that my father always was, is, and will always be a flawed man. My Superman has fallen.

Siblings

“You never go to Mom’s, you always just stay here!”

“What difference does it make where I am if no one is at either home? Why do we have to go to Mom’s at 11 a.m. if she doesn’t get home till 3?”

“It’s like you’re taking Dad’s side, that’s all.”

“Well you must’ve taken Mom’s side then.”

“Uh, yeah. You must believe Dad and not Mom then, I guess. You never want to see her anymore. . . .”

“What are you suggesting, exactly? That I don’t love my mom because I don’t go sit at her empty apartment? Because I’d rather sit at my old house until I can actually see her? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Nothing, it just seems like you don’t want to see Mom when you’re home, that’s all.”

“Oh, that’s rich! I don’t love my mother, yeah, that’s right Travis. You’re spot on with that!”

“Well you don’t act like it.”

“I am not perfect, but don’t you dare suggest that I don’t love my mother.”

I fumed silently while I fixed my breakfast, slamming cupboard doors and utensils when I could. *How dare he*, I seethed. *How dare my brother suggest I chose one parent over the other . . . he can’t say anything about this because he’s obviously made his choice.* I finished preparing my peanut butter- Ritz cracker sandwiches and chocolate milk, sat down at the breakfast bar, and

cracked open my newest issue of *TIME*. I tried to read an article about the new Pope, but my mind wandered to places I hated going. *What if I'm mad at Travis because he's right? No, he can't be. . . I didn't choose sides, I swear. . . I just. . . I tried to believe both of them, I thought. . . Yeah, that's what I did. I can do that.* Words about Pope Francis's new policies swam before my eyes as my thoughts continued down dangerous paths. *Well, did he have a point? NO. I won't do this again; I've done this way too many times this year. I'm done. I don't care what he thinks, what does he know?* I felt as if I had a devil and an angel on my shoulders hashing this out. My subconscious angel wanted to believe that I was playing the part of a good daughter who believed the divorce was a fault of both parents and that it was a perfectly common thing to happen nowadays and that there was no blame to be placed. But the devil on my shoulder wouldn't shut up, reminding me that it was my mother who broke the news to me, it was my mother who moved out, it was my mother who decided she wanted this. Sometimes I can put them both in a time-out, then bring them back and mediate a discussion so I can come to a conclusion that makes me feel like a good daughter again. Sometimes one of them wins. I hate it most when the devil wins.

News

If there is a good way to tell your daughter your new girlfriend is moving in with you, my father definitely missed that memo. Driving to Minneapolis, I was as captive as an audience as he could have asked for when he finally sprung the news on me.

I think we should start cleaning out the house; you know, getting yours and Trav's old stuff out that you don't use anymore. The basement is starting to look like Grandma's house. *Oh sure, I can start going through my room. No problem. Why the sudden need for it now? I'm getting a roommate. Note to you, Dad, a live-in girlfriend does not count as a roommate. We talked about it, and it sounds like a good idea. After all, what's the worst that could happen? Don't start with me; I have a whole list of bad things. Oh, and by the way, she has a thirteen-year-old daughter—she's moving in too, obviously. Great, I always wanted a sister. I'm cursing every time I ever wished for one. They will be moving in at the end of the month, just a couple weeks away if the plan stays as planned. Damn good thing I won't be home till Thanksgiving. Guess I'll get an early start at getting rid of my stuff to make room in my house for the new people. Thanks for the advanced notice, Dad. I think it'll be good, I've been lonely lately with you kids gone; it's a big house for just me and the dog. Cry me a river. I've felt guilty about leaving home for two years, thanks for solidifying that for me. Hopefully this fixes you. She and I talked about it, and neither of us believe in the whole "in love thing" and don't want to get married, but we enjoy each other's company, so we thought we'd try this. Ohhh man. Already this sounds so utterly perfect. Way to freaking go. You don't love each other, but hey, let's move in anyway. Don't roll your eyes at me, I saw that. Didn't roll my eyes, Dad, I looked sideways*

out the window. So . . . what do you think? How does that sound? It sounds like an awful plan. I hate it. I cannot believe you'd do this so easily.

“Sure, Dad, it sounds fine. If that makes you happy and you’ve thought about it, you go ahead. Whatever makes you happy.”

Crying

I heard it
Tried not to think of it
Thought about it
Cried about it.
Called friends about it
Talked to my aunt about it and cried.
She said, "Cry to your father."
So I did.
Angry words and accusations flew
And I cried.
He attempted to explain the pain away
It didn't help.
I cried again
He talked more, listened less.

The Girlfriend Chronicles

To date, the title “My father’s girlfriend” has referred to three different women: Lori, Dianne, and Ruby. I’m sure the title will get passed on to the next one before this project is finished. Watching three different women come and go and try to mesh their lives with my father’s has been interesting to say the least. I am glad I wasn’t around for most of it; that way I can forget about them sooner and easier. Here are their tales as I care to remember them.

Lori was the first. She had graduated high school with my father twenty-five years ago, and when my parents began their split in September of 2012, she was also conveniently divorcing her husband. My mother would later say she was a factor in their divorce—I have no way of knowing how true that is or isn’t. Lori was a short, thin woman who dressed stylishly for her age. I know she had two children significantly younger than Travis and I, and she was very eager to build a relationship with both of us. I thought it was nice at first, but in hindsight it was very annoying and it was so obvious that she knew we would never accept her. But still, she tried. I was nice because I had to be, but since I was away at college, I dealt with her very little.

I’m sure Lori stayed at my father’s house often that fall, but I remember one instance in particular that crystalized how I felt about her. I woke up one morning at home, and shuffled to the bathroom. Since my mother had left, the only “girl things” left in the bathroom were extra hair accessories and appliances of mine, things that I didn’t need at college. The first thing I saw when I flicked on the bathroom light was *her* curling iron. I stopped short and stared, not really knowing why the sight of her curling iron struck me to that degree. Hell, it was just a curling iron; I had one myself. What’s any different about that one? She’s a grown woman, of course she

has one and would take it when she travels; my mother takes hers with everywhere she goes too. But that logical train of thought didn't make it out of the proverbial station, because I became inexplicably angry instead. How dare she leave that in plain sight, in *my* bathroom? How dare she flaunt her unwanted presence in my house? I was the only woman who lived here now, and I wasn't even around very often! She was not allowed to live here in any sense of the word, and I certainly didn't want to see evidence of her being in my house. How dare her indeed.

Dad invited her over to Thanksgiving at my grandmother's house that year, just for a visit after dinner was over. I don't remember how I felt about it; I probably didn't say much about it. My aunt was not enthused about it. When I talked to her a couple weeks later, she told me that her second daughter, my cousin Jordyn, had been confused about who the new lady was at Grandma's house and why Auntie Anissa wasn't there. At this point, I believe all my extended family (including my younger cousins) knew about my family situation, but my father doesn't exactly advertise his private business, so my aunt may not have known about Lori until meeting her at Thanksgiving. Hearing that, knowing that it came from my younger cousin who has no idea what's going on, struck something in me. She was confused because she didn't know anything about this new person, or where her aunt had gone. In a sense, I leveled with her. I was confused too. I knew where my mother had gone, but it didn't make welcoming in a new person any easier. I had been so bent on going with the flow, going along with whatever made my dad happy that I tamped my emotions down until they weren't feelings anymore, just melded into steady stream of indifference.

By the spring of 2013, Lori was out. Later that summer as I was beginning my junior year at college, Dianne came into the picture. She was a few years older than my father, but as I recall she also had younger children that I never saw and hardly heard about. Dianne was a very

physically fit woman for her age, and also dressed well. In my opinion, she was a little too heavy with the eyeliner, but personality wise, she was easy to get along with. She also was an incredible cook, and spent both Thanksgiving and Christmas with us—which was fine by me, because that meant Thanksgiving dinner was one of the best meals I had in recent years.

I liked Dianne a lot more than Lori, and I think it was because she respected Travis' and mine's space. She didn't try too hard to be involved with us or get to know us, and that was important to me. I think she recognized that we were both young adults and didn't need or necessarily want another woman's presence in our lives, so she stayed back, making progress in her relationships with us slowly. I warmed up to her easier than I did to Lori. Dianne was also a lot more careful about how often she spent time at the house when either Travis or I was at home—she would double and triple-check with Dad that it was truly okay if she spent the night when we were home. At first it was strange for me, but I also think it was easier for me to handle because Dianne was the second woman I had to get used to seeing around my house rather than the first. And since I liked her better on the whole, it was easy for me to agree to spend time around her. Also, at that point I was very much working under the mindset of agreeing with whatever would make my father happy—something that would change within the year. As much as I grew to like her and hoped she would stay, things turned sour, as they have a habit of doing. In the spring of my junior year, Dad called me one day and told me in no uncertain terms that they were over. As per his personality, Dad insisted that he did nothing wrong that led to the demise of their relationship—she just went crazy, as women have a tendency to do. I doubted that heavily. My father is a lot of things, but understanding others is not one of his strong suits. I could see no conceivable reason to end it with someone who, by my account, not only tolerated my father and all his oddities, but cared for him. From what I saw, she made him happy. But, in

what would become a refrain of mine when discussing my father's romantic life, what do I know about adult relationships? They would come to try again in a couple weeks, but they would be done in finality by April of 2014.

I don't recall the first time I heard my father talk about Ruby. I remember him talking about a couple different Asian women he met later that spring and in early summer, and eventually it came down to just her. I met her for the first time June. Dad, Ruby, and I met up in Grand Rapids one rainy day so Dad could buy me a new bike—and so I could meet the newest woman he called his girlfriend. The first thought I had when I saw her was, *Well. Certainly doesn't look like she belongs in a place like this.* 5'3 with black hair just about to her waist, a loud, colorful print dress that left little to the imagination in regards to cleavage, and red lipstick, she was an immediate sore thumb in the parking lot of a café in northern Minnesota. I was surprised to say the least. Still in the mindset of comparing women to my mother, this was about as far as my father could get if he wanted "different". I gathered my composure and played the part of a good daughter. I gave her a hug hello and quietly observed the interactions between her and my dad through lunch, giving answers to polite questions that always come up when you first meet someone and they need to pretend to be interested in you for someone else's sake: What am I studying in school, what do I do for work, how is school going, do I have a significant other, do I get to come home from school often, etc. I was politely interested in her back, when she did talk about herself, which was not often at all. What interested me most was the vibe I was getting from watching the two of them interact; particularly the actions of my father. He seemed nervous, almost. I likened it to watching a couple on their first double date. To me, it felt like my father was exaggerating their connection; feigning their happiness. It didn't feel natural to me. It looked forced and uncomfortable, and it made me uncomfortable. The lunch finished without

conflict, continuing in that awkward way that no one acknowledges, and we headed to the bike shop. After I found a bike I wanted, Dad helped me load it into my car and asked me what I thought of Ruby.

“She’s fine, I guess. I don’t know, what do you want me to say? She seems nice,” I replied coolly.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter if you like her, because I do. I’m the one who’s with her.”

I balked. “Fine, if that’s how you feel then don’t ask if I like her. I guess it doesn’t matter what you think of my boyfriend. His family loves me, so it doesn’t matter if you don’t like who I bring home. Thanks Dad.”

I left shortly after that, his words repeating themselves in my mind. *That’s fine*, I thought as I drove back to Bemidji. *I never have to see her anyway; what do I care? What does it matter if I like her? Freaking ridiculous. I don’t even care.*

Not a month later I was riding in my father’s car down to Minneapolis and he told me that she and her daughter were moving in. He asked my opinion as an afterthought. I kept my mouth shut except to say, “Whatever makes you happy.” I was 98% done with this whole situation and I had only met the lady once.

About the middle of September I was talking to Dad on the phone, and he mentioned some discipline problems with Ruby’s daughter and their differing views on parenting. I didn’t say much, because my father is not a man easily argued with. After he told me about Natalie’s antics (more like complained about her), I finally said, “You know Dad, I don’t see this lasting till Christmas, if that! Sorry, but I really don’t think it’ll last.” I don’t remember what he said

back, if anything. A week later he called again and confirmed that both Ruby and Natalie were moving out. There was a small victory celebration in my mind, but I kept my voice calm and bit my tongue when all I wanted to say was, “I told you so”.

Today, at the end of November, I believe Dad and Ruby do still talk and see each other. I have no idea what the extent of their relationship is, because my father is not an upfront man when it comes to his personal life, but I would guess that she’s as close to a girlfriend as he’s got. He talks to several other women, currently, I think. Again, I have no way of knowing what his personal life is like until he decides to admit something. For now, these names have no faces and no value to me—but maybe they do for him. He’s turning into a man who is slowly descending into desperation to save himself from loneliness, even though he would fight the label of “desperate”. My aunt said it best: He is searching for someone to fill a void that cannot be filled by others, only through inner happiness. Until he finds that within himself, I think he’s going to be stuck in this sad, lonely cycle of false hope and temporary love. I wish I could help him. I wish he would do more to help himself. But he has proven times over that he does not know how to hold onto good people when he finds them. As much as I want to fix him, to help him, to save him from inevitable loneliness, I can’t. I can love him while I watch him struggle, but I cannot be the one to save him.

Taking Sides

Whose side are you on? That question haunted my mind for a long time. It started when I was first told my parents were splitting up, and continued on. I still wonder sometimes today, but the thought is notably less haunting and heavy.

Back then, at the beginning, it hurt to admit whose side I was on, and sometimes my mind could be swayed back and forth between the two sides.

Now, today, taking everything I have learned and seen into account, I can say that my trust lies elsewhere than it did when all this began. It's almost impossible to ignore hard evidence and bogus defenses.

I started out believing my father. I think I did that because it was somehow easier (and God knows why) to just believe that my mother had finally broken down in some way and this was her way of repairing herself than trying to convince myself that my father had cheated on her. That is absolutely unfair thinking, but in the thick of things, that's where my loyalties went. Maybe some of it had to do with the housing situation. Since my mom wanted out, she left. As far as I recall, my father offered her almost anything—she could take what she wanted, she could have the house if she chose. But she wanted out and away. In my mind, going to Mom's apartment simply didn't compute. If I wanted to go home, I wanted to go to my house. Apartments aren't homes, and certainly not for my mother.

From what I can decently recall, the shift in loyalty was gradual at first. Mom and I did not have a good relationship in the immediate aftermath of the divorce. I pushed her away because of what I believed she had done. I believed she falsely accused my father of cheating and blew up small situations or happenstances she saw as evidence. I saw all these reasons as

defenses for leaving, not as evidence that he had been unfaithful to her. As months went on and time distanced us from the event itself, we were able to talk freely again and the guilt dissipated from both of us (or maybe just me). Things got much better. The defining moment for the shift happened this summer. Mom came to stay with me in Bemidji, and somehow we ended up talking into the wee hours of the morning. We had a long, honest heart-to-heart talk about the divorce, my dad, and everything that's ensued. I even wound up reading my mother a couple pieces of writing I had done on the subject, something I did not think I would ever do. I never planned on sharing any of these pieces with my parents, but I showed them to Mom. I don't think her and I have ever had such a talk. It was a defining time in our relationship on a grand scale, and also in light of the divorce and the strain we had been through.

Mom talked about how hard it was to leave my father. She said she almost did it back in 2007, I believe. She brought papers home from a lawyer's office and cried over them for a week. She couldn't do it then. She explained to me that she and Dad tried to work on things. She needed Dad to meet her expectations at a certain level, and he always came up short. Whether this was out of choice or simply that he did not recognize how important this was to Mom and genuinely thought he was doing right by her, I have no idea. However he interpreted it, he did not give her what she needed, and so in her mind the last option was to leave.

She has told me several times over the course of the last two years—and it was the exact phrase she used when she first told me the divorce was happening—that she was becoming someone she wasn't. Those last five years, between 2007 till the fall of 2012, she had suffered a lot of anxiety and anguish over her marriage and she saw herself change into the kind of woman she never wanted to be. A woman who was suspicious of her husband's every move, a woman who drover herself sick with worry, a woman who wasn't able to give her all to her family

because of what worry and suspicion had reduced her to. As many times as I have heard her say this, it hasn't begun to solidify until now, after having that heart-to-heart this summer and the details I had not been privy to prior to that.

I have learned more about my father through this talk and a second one we had over Thanksgiving break than I ever thought I would learn—or ever wanted to know.

Manipulating. Controlling. Selfish. Inconsiderate. Narcissistic.

Those were the words my mother used to describe the man she spent half her life with. She vaguely referred to my father's numerous suspected instances of cheating and said, "That's not something you do to someone you care about. It's just not." She is absolutely right. She continued. He was never interested in the goings-on in her life. He didn't want her to go to school or work outside the home when my brother and I were young. He knows how to manipulate people's feelings and control situations and people around him, but he doesn't know how to understand others or the importance of unconditional, freely-given love.

I am at a loss for how my mother stayed married for so long. My only guess is that she did it for us. She wore herself down, was reduced to a shell of herself in an effort to be there for her children and give them what she thought was the best life. Now that I know her side, part of me wishes, for her sake, that she would have done this years ago. Time is priceless and finite—she deserves to be happy all the time. I can't imagine making that degree of sacrifice for anyone. My mother did the unimaginable for me, and I can never understand it or repay it.

My loyalties and trust have switched sides. Evidence will turn over your opinion faster than anything else, even if you have your heart set on something. Some things can't be refuted, no matter how hard someone tries to pull you back to their side. Now it's not about whose side I

want to be on, it's about the truth behind all the lies. The reasons behind the arguments, the cause of the tears, the cause of all the anguish and pain. It's about who told the truth and acted in the best interests of themselves and the people they care about—and that person is my mother. Deep in my heart, I am ashamed of the year I wasted, covering myself with a blanket of disbelief and anger towards her because I didn't know any better and didn't want to learn. Sadly, the people who tell the truth are sometimes the ones who aren't taken at their word.

I can't express the sinking feeling in my heart after hearing those words about my dad. Those are things a child should never hear, things no child ever wants to hear. I wanted the truth, and I'm learning it. I just never imagined it would hurt so much.

Reflection

“Who is that girl, the rod still quivering in her hands, rapturously balanced between two worlds? I sometimes think that if I could go back, follow the driveway down, past the woodshed and out into the meadow, I might find her—I might find what I lost. Like my brother wandering in the wilderness, I might find home.” (Barnes, 8)

I’m not sure what exactly I lost these last two years, but there are traces of loss in my heart. I have lost trust—trust in my parents, trust in promises, trust in the institution of marriage and security of love and family. I know there were times when communication between my family members was lost. Love was lost.

I don’t have a place to go back to, a home to return to in order to find these things I have lost. I have a time I sometimes desire to go back to, when all these things were still alive in my heart. I could say I want to go back in time exactly two years and two months, but that was right on the cusp of bad things to come. I could say I want to go back in time five years ago, but I know that was not a happy time either. If I wanted to go back to a time when my family was both together and happy, I would need to travel back almost ten years.

As much as I feel that I have lost, I know I have gained things too. I’ve gained a better sense of understanding. I’ve learned the detriment of blind trust and the importance of objectivity, and learning both sides of a given story. I have a boundless respect for married couples, ones that engage in loving relationships that I can look up to and hope to emulate if

there ever comes a time for my own marriage. I have seen my parents fail in more ways than one, and seeing them as fallible people shook my world. I think that because I watched this happen firsthand, I learned things that will help me to have a successful marriage. I learned how *not* to do it—now I know the better way *to* do it.

In regards to my family, there are times I wish my family was still whole. In ways it is—I am loved by both my parents, my parents still adore me and my brother just as much as they ever have. But sometimes I think of how much easier things would be if my parents were still together. Holidays would be easier, that's for sure. Calling home would enable me to talk to both of my parents, instead of trying to catch both of them on their cell phones. Going home would be simple, and so would visits to school. Part of me envies my friends that come from homes that still house whole, unbroken families. I wonder if there will ever be a time where I won't come home for holidays simply because it's too stressful to balance time spent with each parent and side of the extended family. This Thanksgiving was, I'm guessing, the first in a coming string of difficult holidays—no matter where I was, I felt like I was at the wrong place. Spending too much time with Dad, and not enough with Mom, or vice versa. Wherever I was, it wasn't the right place to be. I felt guilty no matter where I was. I expressed this to my mother, and she told me I couldn't run away from it just because I don't like it. The small part of me immediately thought *Yes, I can if I want to. See if I come home next year.* But the bigger part of me knows she's right. It will take time, but someday it won't be like this. It's taken time and love to get to the point we are all at now; why wouldn't that formula work for the future?

If you had asked me at this time two years ago what I wanted most, I would have asked for my parents to still be together. Now, after going through these two years and the tears, arguments, blame, forgiveness, and rebuilding they have contained, I can say that it's better this

way. My mother is happier now, I'm getting better, Travis is doing well . . . my father is not. But that is no fault of anyone else's. Of everyone, he had an opportunity to change this fate, but he chose not to. Maybe someday time and love will fix him too. I love my family. I never stopped. It's harder to do so now, but I know it's the only thing I can do; the only thing any of us can do. We've seen what anger, fights, and hatred do, and we can't return to that. This has been the hardest thing I've had to go through and deal with to date. I can't tell you how many times I wish it hadn't happened, that things were different. But then again, maybe I wouldn't have gained the things I did after going through the hardship—and regardless of everything, that would have been a shame. Change is never easy, but we are promised that it will be worth it. My family never asked for this, but perhaps it was what we needed to fix us.