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It's All Okay Now

I'm told I look like her, but others insist I have my father's eyes and his smart sense of business. Something I heard all my life.

The End

Looking out the ICU window, I saw the blurred line between night and day making its way into my twisted January morning. The sun peeked over the mountain at a spot fondly known as “the organs” – solid granite shooting toward the sky – so majestic and humbling it reminded me of how small I was. With my arms stretched out, leaning on the windowsill, the chill swallowed me, and I shuddered from the cold.

An ice blanket covered my mother and gauze was taped over each eye – her fever plateauing at a dangerous high of 108°. Antibiotics weren't helping and no matter how much I wanted to, I was told I couldn't touch her hand. I wanted her to know I was there, with her, for her, like always, but all I could do was gently touch the plastic blanket, near where her hand might be. The constant whir and the soft slapping of the ventilator consumed me as I tried to pray.

Her doctor, wanting to talk to Dad and me, suggested we step into the hall. Nothing was working. He gave an example to help us understand the gravity of the situation. *“If we were to give all the medication that we have given to your wife and mother, to a healthy person, their head would explode.”* He paused, looking at each of us trying to be as gentle as possible. *“Nothing is working, and I think it's time to think about taking her off life support.”* The doctor shook his head. *“The continuous high fever has done irreparable damage to her brain, and she will never wake from the coma. Her other*

organs are beginning to fail as well. She's not going to make it." He looked down momentarily. *"Would you like a moment?"*

The Beginning of the End

"I'm pregnant," Patsy said. My mother was more scared at that moment than at any other time in her young life. My father, Bill, stood next to her – saying nothing.

My grandfather scowled and took one step toward his future son-in-law, "What in the hell are you telling me? By who – by you?"

When Patsy came along, it was a perfect time for her father to shower his love on her. She quickly became the brilliant, sparkling diamond in his eye.

She was born a year after an older sister passed away from complications of pneumonia during the Dust Bowl. Losing Annabelle, when she was just a little over a year old, devastated both my grandparents.

Before "this", her father meant everything to her, and he felt the same about her. She was his favorite. "This", the out-of-wedlock pregnancy that shattered his feelings for her, led him to treat his own daughter with pure contempt.

These feelings, these memories, this shame would be something she would struggle with for the rest of her life.

Humiliated and with their good name tarnished, it had been decided by my grandparents that she *would* marry. But Patsy's heart was breaking – she didn't want to marry. She wanted that moment in time to go back to the way it was before she got pregnant. She *didn't* want to marry this man. Only her sister, Joy, knew how she felt.

Every dream she had was at its end before it started – that's how it felt anyway. Modeling wasn't in her future anymore.

Things weren't going well, so she went to live with her sister and her family in a larger nearby town. Her dreams would remain just that – dreams.

It was only thirty-six miles away, but the way of life was drastically different than the one she knew on the farm. Joy had a four-year old daughter, April, that Patsy was nuts about.

“Maybe it won't be so bad when you get married,” April said to her aunt.

“Maybe not,” Patsy returned. She smiled and gently cupped her niece's chin in her hand.

When the time finally came, there was no wedding. They stood before a Justice of the Peace where her sister and brother-in-law stood up for them. There was no honeymoon, there was only an empty house with a few strewn boxes and old, rotting curtains falling off their rod. Her mother and daddy weren't at the ceremony.

Standing there, Patsy came to fully realize what was happening. *My God, I am going to marry him*, she thought. Her mind raced, *I can turn and run, or say “no”, pretend to faint, or ...?* She was ready to give a resounding “no” but a weak “yes” came out of her mouth.

After, and nervous, Bill waited in the living room with Joy. She talked to him about the weather and how exciting moving into a house can be, she even asked about his family, but he responded with flat one-word answers. Patsy met his family once when they went to his parent's home to tell them about the pregnancy and their upcoming marriage.

Patsy also remembered someone suggesting she get an abortion. She would never forget hearing those words – nor who said them.

A few weeks later she showed signs of depression – Patsy's eyes were red, and she had dark circles under them. She'd lost weight. With no appetite and very little sleep, it was not only bad for her it was doubly bad for the baby. She had become so depressed, her psychiatrist ordered Electroconvulsive Therapy. It would be the best for her and the baby right now. Patsy wasn't pulling out of her

depression on her own and therapy wasn't working. *That was it! No discussion.* Clearly, her parents made another decision for her.

It wasn't long before she succumbed to the pressures of marriage. I was about four weeks old when she divorced Dad. She would be married five times by the time I was four years old – three of those times were to my father.

Unable to care for me with her mental health issues, I went to live with my grandparents on their farm. I flourished – I lived with them for the next four years before my parents married for the last time and decided to move to a town west, sixty miles. I was four when I went back home, but the deep connection between my grandmother and me lasted until the day she died.

Back to the End

I asked her out loud – coma be damned. “Did you ever love me – I mean really love me?” “My God, think about it – from the age of eight I've lied *to* you, I've lied *for* you, I've fed you, I've given you drink, I've watched you like a hawk, I've spied on you, I've driven you everywhere, I've cried, and I've kept you from blowing your brains out and still you commit a slow suicide.”

Cirrhosis of the liver is a slow, painful, deliberate death. Not understanding the severity of the disease, she had been killing herself slowly for years and I was to blame for some of that. I could be a real bitch when I wanted to, sometimes deliberately telling Dad when she had been drinking. When and what I said to him, depended on how abusive she had been toward me that day.

When the doctor finished talking to us, Dad looked at me and through my frown he knew what I was thinking. I nodded slightly and he nodded back. Looking at the doctor, his lower lip trembled as he said, “Take her off life support.”

It's 8:45am now and you're lying on a flat, cold, steel bed with nothing over you but a thin blanket pulled up to your chin. There aren't any monitors and the silence in the room hangs low – it's as thick as southern mud. They told us to say goodbye, but I didn't know how. I watched you and your breathing – it was

shallow, and your eyes were only slits, yellow and lifeless. A candy striper on her first day, stood near the door and softly cried for you as you lay dying.

My mind rejected what I saw – this couldn't be my mother. My mother was beautiful, with black hair, hazel-colored eyes, and a smile that could melt even the hardest of hearts. I thought it couldn't be happening. But it was.

Belief

After numbly moving through the long day and making so many decisions, I was exhausted. I laid down to rest about eight o'clock and didn't wake until six forty-five the next morning. A few moments later I remembered a dream I'd had.

She and I were alone in a dark place that I didn't recognize. Silently, she handed me a perfectly shaped rose with no thorns. She smiled as she gave me the beautiful flower. Mom was thin and dressed in one of her remarkably beautiful, handmade dress suits that I hadn't seen since I was a young child. She was stunning and she smiled and kissed me on my cheek. Moments later, I looked down at the rose in my hand, and when I looked up, she was gone.

Never losing someone to death, I didn't understand any of what I would be going through. Selecting a plot at the cemetery, purchasing a coffin, and getting her clothes for the service. The obituary was written by the mortuary – by strangers. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make sense of what life was going to be like without her.

Not long before she died, I deliberately hurt her feelings. I wrote a poem for a friend who was helping me deal with the hard time I was going through. Mom was getting sicker, but I rationalized my behavior and didn't pay much attention to her. I pushed my hatefulness onto her and deeper into me. I told myself that for fourteen years, since I was eight, I worried about her at every turn – every drunken day and night, every minute, every second. As I read the poem, I saw her cringe as I praised my friend, thanking her for her friendship. I saw the hurt in Mom's eyes, but I was determined to read

it all the way through. *My childish, hurtful behavior is something I can never take back.*

Some bad memories lingered just beneath the surface – the pain was there – still fresh and still raw.

I was fourteen and in junior high school when one morning the first bell rang, and students converged in the center of the main building with either side of the hall opened up. I bumped into Tanya – a girl my mother demanded I stop being friends with three weeks earlier – she was a little wild and Mom didn't like the way I had begun to act hanging around her. I had done what I was told, however, saying "hi" and innocently walking down the hall with Tanya would be short-lived. I looked up and nearing my first class was my mother, fuming, marching toward me. She saw Tanya and grabbed my arm and jerked me out the front door of the school. Raising her voice, she told the counselor she was taking me home, but I would be back. I was in the eighth grade, and I knew what was coming.

Mom cursed and yelled at me all the way home. She shouted about how much she was going to enjoy "straightening me out" – *again*. She didn't believe me when I told her I wasn't friends with Tanya anymore, calling me a liar. When we got home I had to cut my own switch from a willow tree. Mom handed me a worn-down paring knife, and as I sawed the skinny limb off, I knew it would only be minutes before I felt the snap of the branch wrap itself around my legs. *"By God, I told you to stop having anything to do with that girl. You'll damn sure listen to me or you'll get more of this."*

I tried not to, but I couldn't help but quietly cry in the silence as I looked out the car window on the trip back to school. The humiliation and the shame I felt in those moments clutched my heart and hurt worse than anything else she had ever, or would ever, do to me. I wanted to die.

Rationalizing

As a very young child, I remember feeling draped in love and everything about my mother brought me an incessant feeling of well-being.

She was so different when I was little. The past twenty-years had taken everything out of her, but at the age of four, my mother was my entire universe. I adored her.

When I was seven, she took me to my first movie, Mary Poppins. We were the only two people in the theatre. She had worked at the theatre all through high school and the owners gave us a special showing. I was thrilled – I even got to see how movie popcorn was made.

Without love and without guidance, a child is left to their own reasoning. I was the only one who was convinced that if I left home, Mom would die. So, I decided I would take the beatings, keep my mouth shut, and pray that someday I could leave and create a life for myself. Something good, something clean, something for me.

The Inevitable

When she died, my entire world had ended, and I didn't know what to do. Walking out of the hospital together, April stopped and looked to the sky, "What a beautiful day to die." I didn't know what to say.

Walking around the parking lot, looking for our cars, I stopped and lifted my eyes toward the beauty she spoke of. It *was* a pretty morning. Like a piece of turquoise from Bisbee, the sky was intensely blue and there wasn't a cloud to be seen. It was so clear and bright that morning it looked like you could reach out and snatch a piece of heaven, right then and there. It was a Thursday morning, January 17, 1980, and I was twenty-two. Mom was forty-three.

Back to the Beginning of the End

All Mom ever wanted was to be loved by the first man *she* loved – her daddy. For more than twenty-two years he ignored her, and when he did speak to her, it was negative and condescending. Her heart was broken. My grandmother tried reasoning with him throughout the years, but he refused to change his mind. It took my

entire lifetime for him to speak to her as a child he loved, but the damage he did for all those years had been exact.

A Gift from God

The End

“Mother and Daddy, how did you know I was here?”

“Bill called us.” Her father looked down with tears in his eyes.

Mom leaned forward stretching her arms out. “Daddy, here take my hand.” He hesitated not knowing if it would be okay. In her eyes, he saw all those years of pain he had inflicted on her.

“Please Daddy, hold my hand. It’s okay.”

“Mother, take my other hand.”

Holding both her mother’s and daddy’s hands, Patsy told them she loved them and how sorry she was for everything.

“Honey, don’t think about that now, it’s not important. We love you so much Pat.” Her daddy looked up just moments before the nurses wheeled her away.

“I love you Patsy. I’m sorry.” He lowered his head and slightly scuffed his foot on the tile, like a young child might do, as she was taken to the ICU.

She shouted, “I love you too Daddy – you see, it’s all okay now.”

That was the last time she spoke to any of us.

I’m told I look like her...