

The Life-saving Power of a Pack of Nabs

I no longer cry. Tears can't wash away the past. I wake up numb and wish for evening to come. I yearn for the drifting feeling at the onset of sleep. Would it linger forever if I were to never wake? I wonder.

A decade has passed since I got away. Free from Tad, but not free from the haunted images that swirl in my mind. When Tad took me, though my mother hadn't spoken in months, she screamed, "Don't take my baby!" I was 17. I imagined Dad searching for me. I was their only child.

First thing Tad did was dye my hair jet black. There were no mirrors, no windows, only a dim light and a collection of locks securing the door. Night and day evaporated, and time was without intervals. I yearned for the taste of a McDonald's cheeseburger. The beanie weenie cans were small and few. A sniff alone of freshly baked cookies would have given me unmeasurable hope. I'd become one with the musty stench confining me. What I missed the most? Mittens. Especially her purr as she circled my lap and then cozied against me. Thinking about my mother and father—that hurt! I believed Tad when he told me that if I ran, he'd kill me, my daddy and my mama. So, I did what he said. Everything he told me to do.

The day I escaped I feared Tad would make good on his words. He'd rarely visited mid-day—and never stumbling drunk. He reeked of bourbon, steadied himself against the table, tossed the keys aside, and poured another drink. When he passed out cold, I ran like a loosed animal—gravel spitting in every direction under my feet. Darting past a dilapidated building and through briar bushes, I took mere seconds to glance back for Tad. I crawled under fences with no care as

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barbed wire tugged at my skin. Once the paved road found me, I waved frantically at the first passing car. I hadn't considered what to do if I'd ever gotten away from Tad. Where would I go? Not home! The kind couple who picked me up dropped me at the park. I lied and said I was meeting friends there. I didn't dare ask to be taken to the police station. I trusted no one. My only goal was not to be found. Tad would come looking, I had no doubt.

First thing I did was chop my hair off jagged above my shoulders using a knife blade I'd grabbed before I ran. Had I had a razor, I would have shaved it off. The park was nearly empty, and though evening was coming on fast, I was good to sleep right under the tree—my new found 'safe spot.'

The vagrant would have had no chance of befriending me, but I was starving. I couldn't resist the Nab peanut butter crackers. She'd tempted me with them, trying to get me to talk. I grabbed them and ran. The second day, she'd learned better. She didn't show me the goods right away as she neared my safe spot. She was old. I wasn't scared. Only scared that on the other side of a tree or waiting in a parked car was Tad.

"I know you're hungry," the homeless lady said. "I'm just gonna sit here." She opened her bag. I glanced in. Nabs.

"There's a shelter where you can stay. You can sleep there. They got food," she said.

I shook my head frantically. That's exactly where Tad would search. The Nabs weren't worth someone being able to recognize me in a picture if Tad asked.

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“It’s just a tad …” the lady said.

The words ‘cooler today’ followed, but I’d already struck to my feet like lightening. “Where is he?”

She scrambled to stand. “No one. No one is here.” She pointed in every direction.

I could hardly hear her. My heart pounding and ears thumping, I’d have run in an instant if I’d known which way to go.

She unclasped her handbag and pulled out the Nabs. “You’re safe. Look around.”

I did. I hadn’t stopped looking around except to see the Nabs she held.

“If I hand you these, you’re going to run,” she said.

I stared at her for a second, then the Nabs, then again in every direction. Finally, I leaned back against the tree and slid down to the ground. As she edged slowly to sit near me, it would have been simple to grab the Nabs and run. I didn’t though.

Opening the Nabs, she pulled one out. “Your name? Doesn’t even have to be your real name. Just any name.” She shook the Nab in her hand to show that she’d give it to me when I answered.

“Raquel. It’s Raquel.” I grabbed the Nab and stuffed it in my mouth.

“My name’s Marcella. But you can call me, Roxie.”

She held a second Nab. “How old are you?”

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I didn't answer. She started to take a bite of the Nab.

"Seventeen," I said and grabbed the Nab.

Pulling out another Nab, she said, "Tell me about something. Anything. Don't care if it's your favorite color or favorite animal."

"I used to be pretty," I said to Marcella, Roxie, or whoever she was. It felt good to talk to someone. A woman. My mother hadn't only stopped talking, she'd stopped listening way before that.

She handed me another Nab, and with each I kept talking without even a question from her. "Dad got in trouble. He was gone for a lot. He owed people money."

I pushed the next Nab into my mouth. "Mom rarely came out of her bedroom. She'd quit caring about everything—even herself. I was with my dad in the foyer when they took me."

"Social services?" she asked.

"No. Tad—" I choked on the bite. "I'm scared," I said.

Marcella stood slowly. "I know where there's food—real restaurant food. I know a place to sleep that has a roof and walls. It's just me and my cat."

I had the best two weeks with Marcella, eating from a restaurant dumpster, sleeping on the floor of a dilapidated, abandoned home, and cuddling with her Kitty-Kitty. When she asked about my family, I didn't answer. When she asked what I was going to do now, I told her, "Whatever you do."

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The night Tad busted in, his buddies had me before I could stumble from the blanket keeping me warm. Tad kicked Marcella and didn't stop. It was two long months before the police found me. They'd got a tip. They knew Tad. They also knew I couldn't go home. They knew my father as well. He's the one who'd *let* Tad take me. Dad had been warned there would be consequences for not paying Tad what he owed.

My mother now in a mental institution and my father, along with Tad, locked up for a long time, I searched for Marcella, Roxie ... whoever she really was. I get it, because my name's not really Raquel.

Marcella saved my life not only once, but twice. She had to have been the one to tip off the police. So, she'd survived Tad too. That was a relief to know. I never found her, but in the most unpredictable way, today, just in the nick of time—she found me.

Though the police labeled the case solved and filed everything away neatly, it wasn't that simple for me. Nearly a decade later, I struggle daily. My social worker, therapist, preacher—no one really understands. I can't make sense of it all—consumed to the point I welcome any means to escape.

My therapist says, "Healing takes time. Trust can be relearned. And forgiveness is something I do for myself—not anyone else." I told her, "Two weeks with a homeless lady is the closest thing that my nearly 30-year-old self ever knew as sincere and good in my whole life." As I left my therapist's office, I said, "Show me a Marcella moment again, and I'll believe."

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I don't know what I expected. Honestly, I expected nothing. And that's why I woke up this morning, planning to fall asleep *forever* tonight.

Instead, it is 2 a.m. I am still alive. In fact, I can't sleep. Moreover, I'm inspired something breathtaking, beyond words.

While digging this afternoon for as many pills as I could find, in the background jabbered a radio talk show. Jay Mercer interviewing author El Kage. She just released her second novel, a book called *Roxie Applesauce*. The life story of her late grandmother, a homeless lady, named Marcella Ciscal.

There I am, in Chapter 13, and 14, and 15:

Marcella looked toward the tree where the boy sat. "Who?"

"That girl," Ashley tilted her head toward the tree. "She was here yesterday, too."

Marcella glanced at the mud-stained tennis shoes that peeked beneath raveled jeans and the skinned elbow looking for any indication to why the lady thought it was a girl. From her purse, she pulled a small pack of Nab crackers and headed toward the tree.

Tomorrow, I have somewhere important to be—in the park with a pack of Nabs.