

LUCKY

I'm the luckiest person in the world. That's what my sister used to tell me. But it's not true. If I were really lucky I would be a billionaire and be able to sing like Christina Aguilera. But I'm pretty lucky. Last year I took up canning. You know, food preservation, canned goods, jelly and applesauce, that stuff. Let me tell you, it's so much better when you do it yourself. When I was making strawberry preserves the whole house smelled like cotton candy. After I filled all the jars I wanted to lick the rest from the hot pan. It was that good. I made a few more batches: black raspberry jam, brandied peaches, some pickles and corn relish. I was feeling pretty good about my abilities so I decided to enter all my stuff in the fair. I couldn't wait to go see how I did.

"Where are my strawberry preserves? I see my other jars but I can't find the strawberries."

"Did you look up front? The champions are on the front table." the Canned Goods Chairman said with a hopeful smile.

“Oh, yeah, sure, that’s where they are.” I said as sarcastically as possible. “I never even canned stuff before but I’m sure I won champion.”

Still rolling my eyes I traipsed to the front of the canned goods section and looked for my name on the table of champions. All this summer in the jars was beautiful. I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I could still smell the strawberries cooking in my kitchen.

The biggest sign said: Best in Show: a collection of jelly by Robert Ferguson.

Not mine.

Grand Champion Soft Spread: OMG! OMG! OMG! Bee Umstead!!! Me!!!! “No fuckin’ way!!!” I yelled before I remembered I was in a room with a bunch of little old church ladies.

Tears popped into my eyes as I danced around the table. Unbelievable.

“No fucking way.” my sister deadpanned. “That is some bullshit. You did not just win.”

“I did! I did!” I squealed, dancing around and doing a little jig. “I am now a champion, no, a *grand* champion canner. Everyone is getting strawberry preserves for Christmas!” I said as I continued my happy dance in the dusty aisle of the Home Arts building.

I loved the fair, even when I didn't win. Coming here every summer brought back really happy childhood memories. I loved the people and the animals and the exhibits. They were like my extended family. I remembered when Mrs. Helgenberger taught me to crochet, and when Matt's mom showed me how to cross-stitch. I never won any ribbons then, but I always wanted to. Now I finally had.

"Unbelievable" Penny sighed. "Bullshit. You are so lucky. All the time. Do not give me any strawberry preserves for Christmas, I don't want them."

"Why can't you be happy for me?" I asked quizzically. I looked her in the eye but she looked away with that tight face. I knew the answer.

I won at everything. My sister thought I was the most undeserving person to ever win, get hired, not get a traffic ticket. You name it...if I was lucky at something, or did well at something, or got off scot-free because the district attorney accidentally dismissed the charges, she thought it was a huge travesty of justice and demanded cosmic retribution. Ha.

"Whatever. I'll never hear the end of this now." She said rolling her eyes at me, but with a hint of a smile. She was my sister after all and really did love me. "Do you want to go buy a thousand jelly jars to start work for next year's fair?" She asked before adding "stupid" under her breath.

“Yes!!” I yelled and danced around some more. Her envy wasn’t going to ruin my celebration.

“Let’s go get some lunch, my treat.”

“It’s a hundred degrees out there, Mama Warbucks. We’re not staying at the fair are we? Let’s go somewhere air conditioned?” she asked.

“Definitely. Where’s Justin?” I asked as I whirled around once more. My Justin was a troubled young man, but he loved the fair like I did. We came every year and he wouldn’t miss it no matter what.

Just then we heard a loud popping sound. A couple pops in a row actually. And some screaming. And then lots of screaming and yelling.

My sixteen year old son Justin came running in to the Home Arts building holding his hand over his gut. Red stuff was running down his shirt as he fell on the floor right in front of me.

I didn’t understand what was going on at first, but someone was screaming.

My sister was a nurse and yelled to the fair lady “Call 911, he’s been shot!”

She dropped to the ground beside Justin and put pressure on the wound. “Bee, come hold this, NOW!” I complied silently and in slow motion dropped to my knees and held my hand over my son’s bleeding wound.

Suddenly the paramedics were there putting him on a stretcher and taking him to the ambulance. I could kind of hear the sirens, but they were strangely muffled. I could sort of feel her pushing me in beside him, but I seemed to move as if through water.

Piercing sirens, bleeding son, yelling medics...it all seemed far away and quiet even though my brain was flashing red and blaring noise. My head was spinning and I felt really light and dark all at the same time.

“Breathe in, breathe out” I thought. I didn’t realize I was saying it out loud until Penny agreed with me. We both kept chanting together as if saying it was the only way to make it happen.

“Shit, there she goes...” was the last thing I heard her say before I fainted dead away.

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I came to in the hospital emergency room.

“Ma’am, I need to ask you a few questions.” the police officer said. “What happened? Ma’am, can you hear me?”

“Can she hear me?” he asked of the nurse.

“What did happen?” I asked slowly as my eyes filled up with tears. “Where’s Justin? Is he okay? What happened? Where’s my sister? Who are you?” My mind was filling up with questions faster than anyone could answer.

I could feel my heart pounding and my chest tightening as I tried to sit up. I couldn’t breathe again. I saw the doctor running over as everything went black again.

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I came to and I was still in the hospital emergency room. No one was standing over me this time so I had a few moments to take in the scene.

Doctors and police were huddled around a bed on the other side of the room. I could see nurses working frantically. One of them looked up and saw I was awake. Then I saw a really old man with an oxygen mask moaning on another stretcher. No one was attending to him. He waved his arms around but no one saw him, no one helped him, no one cared.

“The mother’s awake. Jackie, go!” I heard a nurse whisper.

Jackie was a young woman in bloody scrubs who walked over to where I was propped up on the stretcher.

“Jackie? How is he?” I whispered in a quivering voice.

“They are still working on him, I don’t know. He was shot in the abdomen, the bullet hit his liver and a kidney, tore up his intestines. The doctors are doing everything they can. It’s too soon to tell.”

OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG. OMG.

I sent him some of my good luck telepathically. I thought about praying but I had been an atheist for years and that just seemed pointless. Everyone dies. I hoped it wasn’t Justin’s time to go. I thought about all the things I had been lucky at: cards, work, canning. Then all the things I hadn’t been lucky at: love, money, parenting. I was a lonely single mother but my baby sister thought I was the luckiest person in the world because I won a purple ribbon at the county fair. I sure needed that luck now, or rather, Justin needed it. I wanted him to have a good long, lucky life.

“I’m calling it. Time of death: 2:42 p.m.”
