

"You talk funny." Stephanie's red pigtails swayed like a matador's cape. She was my only friend.

"Stupid you," I screamed.

Stephanie and I were playing on the playground swings. There were other kids there, but Stephanie was the only one who would play with me because her mother and mine liked to sit and talk. She had been on the swing a long time and didn't want to get off. I tried to tell her it was my turn, but she wouldn't share.

"Mommy! Mommy! Anne called me stupid," the redhead cried and ran to her mother, who was sitting next to mine. I followed. I didn't think I had done anything wrong. I had only wanted her to get off the swing.

Stephanie's mother embraced her and played with her hair.

My new mother gripped my arm, nearly raising me off the pavement, and jerked me toward where Stephanie and her mother stood.

"Tell Stephanie you're sorry," my new mother ordered.

I stayed quiet trying not to cry. I thought, what have I done wrong?

"Say I'm sorry," she repeated.

I clenched my teeth as tears rolled down my cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Stephanie. Anne is a bad girl. We'll go home now," my mother said to Stephanie. Then she turned to Stephanie's mother, "I'm so sorry. We won't come to the park tomorrow. This one is grounded."

She tried to grab my hand and I dropped to the grass, wailing. The woman reached down to pick me up, her long red fingernails circling my arm. I started kicking and screaming, now in full tantrum mode.

"Anne, please get up!" The woman's face turned red as she bent down to lift me.

"Lula! Lula!" I screamed. She knelt next to me and put her arms around me, trying to calm me down. I continued to yell for Lula.

"Anne Murphy, I've had enough of this. Get up right now," she hissed. Although I was only five, I knew she was losing her patience, but still, I howled.

"I no like you," I mustered enough courage to say, hoping the other lady would call the police and they'd come and take me away. I didn't want to go home with the blond woman.

When her coaxing didn't get me to stop, she grabbed me from the back and stood up, holding me close to her body. I kicked and flailed my arms, trying to get away, but she overpowered me and got me into the car seat. As she drove away, I looked out the window. I was trapped, and it was pointless to try to escape. She had won. I cried all the way home, thinking she was going to kill me and ground me like *picadillo*.

When we got to the house, my new mother carried me to my room. I noticed a bright red mark on her arm where I had bitten her. She pushed me inside and slammed the door shut.

"Stay there until Mark gets home!"

I howled for a long time like she was torturing me, hoping the neighbors would hear and rescue me. Eventually, I stopped and started playing. I liked my room, so I didn't care if she left me there the whole day. The man would come to my rescue when he got home. I liked my new father. He played with me and didn't yell. The lady's name was Hillary. They kept calling me Anne, but I knew that wasn't my name.

I got lost in my world of dolls. I had a dollhouse full of furniture with a mommy, a daddy, and a nanny who made food for the babies and rocked them to sleep. I'd hum a lullaby because it

would soothe me, although I didn't know the words. By the time the man got home, I had forgotten I was in trouble. Then I heard them screaming. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but I knew it was my fault. I thought, she must be telling him what I did. I waited for my new father to come for me, expecting the worst. But when he came to get me in my room, he gave me a big hug and led me downstairs for supper. Hillary didn't say anything, but I could tell she had been crying. My new father had not agreed to ground me to pieces and bury me. This was evidence that he loved me, and the woman did not.

This was the first memory my therapist helped dislodge, the earliest one I had of Mark and Hillary. I lived in their house, had just started at a new school, and everything was strange and confusing. I didn't understand my parents, my teachers, my playmates and they didn't understand me as if I been dropped on earth from another planet. I remember crying myself to sleep every night. And my sleep was filled with night terrors. Even now, at twenty-five, I still dream nearly every night, and my dreams are rarely good.

Another persistent memory haunted me, but I wasn't ready to share it with the therapist.

"I don't understand. You're pretty, and guys like you, but they run away after they talk to you. What's wrong with you?" my best friend asked me.

We were freshmen at a private high school, and in all the years since, I'd hear her voice judging and filling my head with self-doubt and blame. I asked myself the same question all my life. What's wrong with me? Why don't I fit in? I repelled people. Everything I touched turned to shit. I hated myself, and it appeared sooner or later, I turned everyone against me. It took years to adapt to the world I found myself in. Now, though, I understood the adaptation had been superficial. It let me get by. Inside me were hidden memories and experiences that caused me lots of pain and turmoil and that, in time, I would unearth.

After graduating from the University of Delaware, I still couldn't figure out what I was going to do with my life and my mother suggested I see a therapist. She reminded me how I had everything a girl could want, looks, money, smarts, supportive parents, my whole life ahead of me, and I was determined to throw it all away. The therapist was her last attempt to try to fix me.

She was right. I had it all, acceptance in the prestigious George Washington School of Law, a luxury condo in DC, a gorgeous boyfriend, but I was miserable. I lived in constant anxiety, haunted by fear during the day and nightmares at night. I just wanted some relief from the pain of living. When the therapist started probing and asking questions, I wasn't prepared to deal with the torrent of emotions rediscovering my past would bring.

The announcement alerting passengers of the train's arrival in Wilmington caught me by surprise. I hurriedly stuffed my notebooks into my overnight bag.

"You dropped something," the man behind me said. He handed me a pamphlet with big, bold letters that announced: YOU ARE NOT ALONE – GET HELP NOW. I almost shouted, "It's not mine!" Instead, I said, "Thank you." I crammed the brochure into my purse and hoped he hadn't noticed what it said. By the look he gave me, though, I knew he had.

I hadn't seen Mom since last Christmas, our first without Dad. She was waiting for me inside the terminal. We hugged, said the usual pleasantries, and made the customary inquiries while walking to her 450SL Mercedes.

"How's Brad?" she asked.

"He's fine," I said. Hillary liked my latest boyfriend, Brad and I didn't want to explain we'd broken up—one more failure.

"How's school?"

"Good."

"Should I take the top down?"

"Sure. It's a beautiful night." I replied. It gave us the perfect excuse to spend the next half hour mostly in silence. Neither one of us wanted to talk about Dad; his ghost sat between us in the car.

When we got home, we quickly retired to our rooms.

The following day, I got up early to go for a run. It was still dark outside, but I knew the neighborhood well. I dressed quickly, pulled my hair back in a ponytail, and headed out the door. I decided to run two miles instead of my usual five. I wanted to be back in the house before Mom got up, and the hilly route I chose would be more challenging than DC's flat streets.

When I returned, I went to the kitchen to wait for Mom. I knew it would be her first stop when she came downstairs, after showering and before locking herself in her home office. I started the new, expensive coffee maker and breathed in the strong caramel and nut aroma of Mom's fancy coffee. When it was ready, I got a cup from the cupboard, grabbed the coffee pot, and then put it back, deciding I didn't need coffee to make me more jittery. I was determined to talk to Mom, and I knew it was going to be complicated. I'd have to stay calm and be very sensitive.

Dad's sudden death had devastated Mom. He had been in great shape and had never exhibited any health issues. The last time I saw him was when I had been home for the holidays, two Christmases ago and my first time back home after enrolling in GW and moving to DC. Dad had seemed preoccupied, like he wanted to tell me something. Other than that, we had had fun,

happy to be back working in the stables and playing with the horses. Maybe it had been my imagination.

I received the call on the morning of January 7th. As I listened to the voice on the line, I felt my strength leave me, and I held on to the windowsill, barely understanding what I was hearing. I looked down to the bitterly cold and gloomy DC streets outside my bedroom window, numb and unable to move for a long time.

That morning, Mom had been downstairs when she heard Dad call her. Thinking it wasn't urgent, she continued preparing breakfast. When he didn't come down, Mom had gone upstairs to see what he wanted. She found him on the floor, his hand still clutching his chest. She said she had grabbed his phone from the night table and called 911 immediately. It took the paramedics a while to get to the house. The night before, a northeaster had dumped more than four inches of snow, and the road to our house was nearly impassable. By the time they arrived, it was too late. He was gone.

The next few hours, days, weeks were a blur. A neighbor had called with the news because the doctor had sedated Mom. Another one picked up Brad and me at the train station. Brad helped Mom and I with all the arrangements and got us through the worst five days of our lives. I had been a zombie, going through all the motions without really being there, acknowledging friends' condolences, thanking them for all the food and thoughtful words. When the service was finished, and everyone had gone home, I had guiltily felt a sense of relief, glad it was over.

Brad returned to DC two days later, and Mom and I were on our own. Without Dad, the house became a suffocating museum. A wall came up between us, and what had never been a warm and tender relationship turned cold and distant. Mom shut me out, and I didn't know how

to reach her. I didn't try. I blamed her for Dad's death, for not responding to his call sooner, not performing CPR, not having done enough to save him.

Out of a sense of duty, I visited her weekly for the first two months and then once a month until I stopped altogether. The last visit had been in December. We celebrated Christmas alone with no tree, no lights, no fancy dinner, no annual visit to Longwood Gardens, no cheer, and nothing to celebrate. Melancholy descended upon us. We had dinner Christmas Eve at Giordano's in Kennett Square and ate the leftovers on Christmas Day. The following day, I went home.

It had been nearly four months, and after resisting through several sessions my therapist's suggestion that I talk to Mom, I was back home. Even though the weather had changed outside, everything was the same inside the house, as if suspended in time.

I heard Mom walking toward the kitchen and braced myself. As soon as she walked in, I blurted, "Mom, we need to talk." I didn't want to lose my nerve. I hoped she hadn't noticed the anxiety in my voice.

"Sounds serious. Is everything ok?"

I thought, darn, she knows me so well. I cringed but quickly recovered.

Mom walked to the mahogany cupboard across from where I was standing. I could see her reflection in the wood's shine. As always, she looked flawless, her blond hair impeccably styled. Her French manicure looked fresh as if she had just come from the nail salon. Even in slacks and button-down shirt, she looked totally decked out.

"I want to talk about the fire," I said. Was it my imagination, or had mom frozen for an instant?

Mom grabbed the glass pot and slowly poured the coffee. She curled her fingers around the mug but didn't raise it to her lips.

"What do you mean?" Her voice sounded tense and severe. She stood at the kitchen counter with her back to me as if examining the steam rising from the cup.

"What happened that day?" I asked, trying to sound casual. I remembered the last time we had had this conversation. We had screamed at each other, and the conversation had ended in tears and muffled apologies. I thought, this time, I'm not going to lose my cool. She's going to have to answer my questions once and for all.

"I've told you before. There was a fire at our house, and everything burned."

Mom walked to the sink as if wanting to get away from me. The large, granite kitchen island became a barrier between us. I moved, getting closer to the sink.

"How come I don't remember any of it?"

I had the notion that if only I could remember the fire, the details, where I'd been when it happened, everything would become apparent. I would regain all my memories. My life would make more sense.

"You were too little."

"Mom, I must have been like six."

"You were only five," Mom quickly replied. For her, no further explanation was required.

"Why are you bringing this up?"

"You haven't told me all that happened. I've read trauma can sometimes block us, and that may be why I don't remember any of it. How did it start? Were we inside the house? Was I there?"

"Leave it alone, Anne," Mom said. "Things happened; we moved on. Why can't you just be grateful for all you have now?" She looked at me imploring but quickly turned and gazed out the window. She reflexively touched her pearl necklace. "It will only make you sad."

"I'm already sad, and I need to figure out what happened." I pulled out two of the heavy counter chairs, careful not to scratch the pinewood floorboards, and motioned for Mom to sit next to me. She pretended not to notice.

Mom stayed quiet. She remained motionless by the sink, gazing out the large picture window. The day outside was beautiful, sunny, and breezy. From where I was standing, I could see the treetops swaying softly.

I tried again. "Why won't you tell me? What's the big deal?"

"It's not a big deal. I simply don't wish to talk about it," Mom replied, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Mom, this is important. I feel like I didn't have a childhood. It bothers me not to have any memories. No pictures. No toys. Nothing." I raised my voice slightly. I could feel the tension building inside of me.

"That's because you broke everything except Brown Bear and Thumbelina." Mom walked toward me, her arms outstretched as if to embrace me. But she changed her mind. Instead, she opened the top drawer of the island and looked through it. Not finding whatever she was looking for, she closed the drawer gently.

"I got those when I was older."

"Older? You were only five."

"What about before five?" I insisted, trying to look into my mother's eyes. She wouldn't look at me.

"I don't understand why you want to bring back bad memories."

"Because even if they're bad, it's better than nothing."

Mom sat next to me, reached for my hand, gently running her index finger over the ring on my right hand, a white gold band with tiny diamonds Dad had given me for my eighteenth birthday. She noticed my chipped and bitten fingernails but didn't say anything. She finally looked up and said, "I'm tired. Let's talk about something else."

I thought, she's doing it again.

"Every time I bring this up, it's the same thing. You say you're tired or you don't feel good."

"That's not true."

"It is, and you know it."

Mom lowered her gaze and whispered, "Please. Don't be rude." She slowly got up as if she had suddenly remembered her now cold coffee. She grabbed the mug, took her first sip, and grimaced. She didn't return to the counter and stood by the window, guarding the mug close to her chest.

"I'm not rude. I need to know the truth." The anger caught in my throat. I swallowed hard.

"There's nothing to know."

"How could I have forgotten so completely? I must be suppressing all my memories. That's why I keep having such horrible dreams."

"You and your silly dreams," Mom sighed. She tried to smile, but the smile didn't reach her eyes.

"They aren't silly. My therapist says my dreams are my subconscious trying to help me uncover whatever I've been trying to quell. She's helped me recapture some memories."

"What does she know? I'm sorry I ever suggested you see a therapist."

"She's helping me understand why I act the way I do, why I screw up all my relationships and can't get close to anyone. Why I feel so anxious and depressed."

"Everybody gets depressed."

"I feel like it's getting worse. This constant anxiety isn't normal."

"You're perfectly normal. You just need to go out and have some fun."

"I have plenty of fun. The visions I see in my dreams scare the heck out of me. Do you constantly dream of drowning? I do—over and over again. Sometimes in a pool, other times in the ocean or a river. Another common image is that I'm behind bars and trying to escape. Most dreams end with a loud, thunderous roar that wakes me up, leaving me exhausted."

"It's just bad dreams. They don't mean anything."

"But there are more," I whispered. "Dad would have talked to me."

"Well, he's gone," Mom cried.

"I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to say it that way."

We both looked away and were silent for a long time. Mom busied herself washing her coffee mug. I fidgeted with the fake fruits in the table's centerpiece. I'd blown it, and the conversation was over.

I was about to get up and leave when Mom turned around to look at me. Her face was pale, and she hid her trembling hands in her pant pockets. She slowly shook her head as if she had lost some internal argument, then said, "You're right. It's time we talked. Wait here. There's something your dad would have wanted me to give you." She turned and went upstairs.

Dad had been my rock. Without him, I felt lost. Mom had been the caregiver, the problem fixer, the attendee of teachers' meetings, and the discipline enforcer. Dad had been my protector,

my confidant, and my buddy. He got me as no one else could. He read to me every night, allowed me to keep the light on so I wouldn't be afraid in the dark, and came to my side whenever my frequent nightmares awakened me. It was to his side of the bed I'd crawl to, quietly so Mom wouldn't hear me. He would let me sleep there, safe in the comfort of their big soft bed and the sound of their snoring.

Growing up, I had always felt a little awkward and out of place. It had been hard for me to make friends. I preferred to spend hours studying in my room. Mom wanted me to be popular and encouraged me to participate in everything. Dad never forced me. He understood my need to be alone and encouraged me to pursue the solitary activities I loved: reading and creating imaginary worlds with pictures I would cut out of magazines and spread on my bedroom floor.

When I told him I wanted a pony, he built a stable in the back of the property and got me a pony, followed by a beautiful Andalusian mare, to take horseback riding lessons. Later, he bought himself a Kentucky Walker quarter horse so we could ride together. We tried to get Mom to ride with us, but she didn't like horses and didn't think it was the right sport for me. So, Dad and I spent hours together riding and grooming the horses. I cherished those memories and missed him so much.

By anyone's standard, those would have been happy days. I had the ideal family, parents who loved me and gave me everything. I lived in a grand house, attended the best schools, and had all a girl could want. Yet something had always felt odd, as if I didn't fit in. Something told me I shouldn't get too comfortable because one day, it would all evaporate.

When Mom returned, she was carrying a small wooden box. She asked me to sit down and placed the box in front of us.

"There was never a fire. We don't have anything from when you were born because we didn't bring you home until you were five. In this box is everything we have from when you came to live with us."

She slowly removed the box's contents:

- An envelope with a flimsy, official-looking document,
- a newspaper clipping with a photo of a little girl looking up to a man holding her hand,
- a postcard size, square piece of paper with a name and message inscribed,
- a small, dirty rag doll, and,
- an unfinished letter from Mark.

And with those five items, the woman who, for twenty years, I had believed was my biological mother changed my life forever.

"Remember when I told you nothing is random, and everyone who comes into our lives has a purpose?" Martin asked me. "There's a reason why our paths crossed."

"Our paths crossed so you could bring me to my birth mother?"

"Maybe that. Maybe more. I'm just saying." Martin flashed a big smile. I felt the warmth of his friendship and the comfort of his proximity. Martin had proven to be a true friend. He hadn't only helped me find my birth mother, but he had helped me find myself.

After learning of my adoptive parents' deception, I left my old life behind and went west in search of answers about my past and myself. I felt deceived by Hillary and Mark and abandoned by my biological parents, who had sent me to the United States alone at the age of five. I wasn't sure if I ever wanted to be reunited with my real parents, but my unhappiness propelled me on an uncertain search.

Today, Martin and I were sitting in an office of a Refugee Detention Center in Miami, waiting for my biological mother to be released. She had arrived from Cuba six months earlier, braving the ocean waters, she had made the treacherous boat trip searching for me.

The room was barren, with only a framed picture of Reagan on one of the walls by the door. A bright red sign above the door said EXIT. Martin and I laughed when we sat down and noticed it. There was only one door and no windows in the room. How else could anyone get out? We commented on government waste, not such much out of conviction, but to make the time pass.

"Thank you for all you've done to bring me to this point without telling me what to do and trying to run my life. I don't know how to thank you."

"We'll figure something out." Martin leaned in and gave me a quick kiss. I wasn't sure what the kiss meant or where it would lead, but I was glad he was there with me.

I fidgeted on the hard chair, smoothed my skirt, crossed and uncrossed my legs. I was fearful of my mother's reaction when she saw me. Would she recognize me? I had brought with me the box Hillary had given me. I wanted to show my mother its content. It was all I had to connect us. I looked inside the box as I had done a hundred times before, trying to make sense of all that had happened.

The official document was a visa waiver, allowing me entry into the United States from Cuba. I now appreciated more the opportunity it had given me to live in freedom and all that privilege had given me, an advantage I had taken for granted and not even recognized.

I looked at the newspaper clipping and the photograph of a powerless girl looking up to someone for help. I knew I had been that little girl long enough. I had proven to myself I was a survivor. I had driven across the country facing an uncertain future, confronted the harsh reality

of being a foreigner in the only country I had ever known, dealt with my pain and loss, and was now prepared to reckon with my past.

I read the small piece of paper with my name and a plea for someone to help me and thought about my grandmother who had pinned the note to my dress and put me on an airplane without my parents' knowledge or permission. She had done it out of desperation, believing Fidel Castro's government would take me from my parents and put me in an indoctrination camp. She thought she was saving me from Communism. She had trusted that the people of the United States would be kind and big-hearted enough to take care of me. How could anyone trust that way? For a long time, I hadn't trusted anyone. I believed I had been wronged, betrayed by my foster parents who had lied to me for years, abandoned by my biological parents who had never come looking for me. How could I ever learn to trust?

I caressed the ragdoll and held her to my face. My doll had made the journey with me and had given me strength when I thought I couldn't go on. Each step of that journey had taught me lessons in forgiveness, hope, and trust. As painful as it had been, that journey had led me to Martin, who, with patience and generosity, had helped me see it was worth taking a risk to trust and love again. I looked at Martin, and he smiled, and I knew he understood. I handed him the doll. I was making progress because had learned to trust Martin.

I looked at Mark's creased letter. I had unfolded and folded it hundreds of times, rereading each time in disbelief that he and Hillary weren't my real parents, not understanding why they had never told me. I had added two more letters to the box, and I pulled them out and reread them.

The first was a copy of a letter from the Archdiocese of Miami. In the letter, the Archdiocese told my grandmother I was in foster care, and that it would be in my best interest if

she didn't continue to write. My parents' situation in Cuba was hopeless, and they'd never be able to come to this country. The Archdiocese believed and recommended that I be left in Hillary and Mark's care so they could raise me as their own and that I shouldn't suffer further trauma. Now I knew what had happened and realized Mark's letter hadn't been an admission of deceit but a declaration of love.

The second was a letter from my biological mother. While at the center, she had been seeing a therapist who encouraged her to write her story. In it, she described everything that had happened from the day I was born to the day she set sail for the United States. I learned how much she'd suffered and how she had forgiven my grandmother and found the strength to move on. And most importantly, she hadn't abandoned me; she loved me and wanted to be reunited. I, too, wanted to be reunited and finally find the inner peace I had been searching for. If my mother could forgive all who had hurt her and trust we'd be reunited, I could too. The time had come for me to free myself from the pain and fear of the past.

The End