

A New Life

“Here they come now,” my mother has an angelic voice. She was a nurse, and it was like she was born to care for people, to care for everyone except herself. Jerry and my dad stepped out of my dad’s truck and made their way to the house. My dad looked disturbed and Jerry had a bounce in his step. I could tell Jerry was high. I wondered how he had gotten high while my dad was around. I wondered if my dad could tell.

“Did you have fun?” My mom kissed and hugged both of them. My dad had taken Jerry “out for a drink,” which was weird because my dad didn’t drink anymore. He quit before I was born. It was a male bonding thing and it made me uneasy, but optimistic. Now that Jason was born it seemed like Jerry really cared about me. I guess I can understand how it was hard for Jerry to care when Jason was just a lump in my belly. I was sick for 9 months. So sick I could hardly get out of bed. Now Jason was two weeks old, and though he hadn’t let me sleep, yet, it felt good to have my body back, not to be vomiting so much. I just had to remind myself that it was post-partum whatever making me feel sad and hopeless. Everything was great, Jason was in the world.

“It was a blast,” Jerry kissed Jason on the forehead and then kissed me on the lips. “Can we talk?” he looked at my parents, as though asking their permission to be alone with me.

“Sure, sure,” my mom took Jason from my arms.

“Thanks,” I kissed Jason as she took him from me.

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Jerry led me to my bedroom. From the taste of his kiss, I hoped he wanted to make love. He sat me on the edge of the bed. He pulled the ice chest out from under the bed. He kept it full of beer so that he didn't have to walk past my parents' room every time he got himself another beer. He sat on the ice chest.

"Check it out, man." I used to hate it when he called me man, but I was starting to realize that he meant it more as an exclamation. "Your dad is so cool." My heart was soaring.

"He took me to the Kit Kat Club, y'know, for the Saturday buffet they have." Jerry liked to go there most Saturdays. Free hotdogs and \$1 beers were what Jerry called a buffet. He also referred to the bikini dancers as strippers, as if we lived in a state where it was legal to show nipples. "I was telling your dad about my plan to move to Oregon."

I wasn't sure when the plan to go stay with his friend who grew pot in Oregon, had turned into a plan to *move* to Oregon. I must have missed that with all the vomiting. "So I asked if we could use the camper." My dad had gotten a cheap camper from a lady at work who had needed cash fast. "Think of it, man, we could take off in the camper. Live by ourselves!"

This would have thrilled me 9 or ten months ago. Now it terrified me.

"My dad said we could use the camper?" The thought of my dad and Jerry at a bikini bar was really messing with my head. I wasn't sure what bothered me more, the fact that they went to a bikini bar together or the fact that they seemed to be planning my future without consulting me.

"He said we could buy it for what he paid for it."

"How much is that?" I knew it was only a couple hundred.

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“I dunno. I thought you said he got it for free. Didn’t some lady at his work give it to him for collateral for some loan she never paid back?”

“I think so.” My dad had told me the story, but now I wasn’t sure if I had gotten the facts right.

“Wasn’t the loan only \$200?”

“I guess.”

“Well, check it out, man. Once I sell that coke, I’ll make almost \$500. We’ll have enough for the camper and we’ll be able to make it to Oregon in style.” I knew ‘almost’ depended on how much he cut it and how much he kept for himself.

“We’ve got Jason to think about now.” My heart was sinking. This felt so wrong.

“Jason will love Oregon.” Jason wasn’t old enough to have an opinion. Jerry was in a hurry as usual. I wasn’t sure about the details, but I knew the main reason he wanted to move to Oregon was because there were several people in Boise who wanted to kick his ass or worse.

“I gotta swing by Frank’s house.” He left without kissing me. I heard him start up the little Datsun 210 my dad had given me for graduation. My dad was a handy man at the Holiday Inn and he bought old beat up Datsuns, fixed them up and sold them for a nice profit. He could get a beat up old Datsun for like \$200, fix it up and sell it for \$1200 or more. He probably could have gotten \$1500 for the Datsun he gave me for graduation. Jerry treated it like it was his own.

“Is everything alright?” My mom was cuddling with Jason on the couch.

“Yeah. Where’s Dad?”

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“In the garage.”

My dad had the insides of another Datsun spread out on his work table. It all seemed like a mechanical mystery to me. The smell of grease comforted me, reminded me of my dad. My memories of him always felt nicer than actually being in front of him. That made me sad.

“You have fun with Jerry?”

He didn't look up from the work table.

I gently touched his arm and he swung around like he was going to hit me.

“Didn't hear you come in.” He looked relieved that he hadn't hit me. He turned up his hearing aide and pulled up a stool for me.

“You have fun with Jerry?” This time it sounded more like an accusation than a question.

“Kind of. Are you mad that I took him to the Kit Kat Klub?”

“Why did you go there?”

“I let Jerry pick the place.” He kept working at the hunk of metal in front of him. “The girls there knew him by name.” He looked at me. I didn't give a reaction. “He's young, Josephine, but there are roads you can get on that, the longer you stay on them, the harder it is to get off of them. He might pull his head out of his ass someday, but do you really want to gamble on that?”

“He hasn't asked me to marry him or anything.”

“It's already bigger than marriage, Jo.”

“Maybe you just think he has his head up his ass because we didn't plan this, but he is taking care of me now.”

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“Is he? Where is he right now?” He sounded almost apologetic.

“If you think he is so fucked up, why did you offer to sell him the camper?”

“Are you guys really moving to Oregon?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“What’s he gonna do in Oregon? What are you going to do in Oregon? Have you thought about what it is going to be like, raising Jason in a town where you don’t know anybody?”

“We know people in Bend.” I was arguing with him almost reflexively. “We’ll meet people.”

“All I’m saying is I want you to think about what you are doing...”

“I know dad, I make one mistake and now you think I am an idiot.” I could tell that hurt him. I think I wanted to hurt him.

“All I’m saying is that if you are going to move to Oregon, I’ll sell you the camper. I’m on your side. I just think you...might be making a mistake.”

“You mean *another* mistake?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you thought it, and you think Jerry and I don’t know what we are doing. Well, you’re wrong.” That was not how I had expected that to go at all. I left in a huff. Looking back I think I was just trying to talk myself into it. Now I had a reason to go to Oregon, to show my dad I knew what I was doing. To be right. Even before I left the garage, it felt empty. I knew Jerry was going to go whether I went or not. I had to go; Jason deserved to have a father. And I didn’t deserve to be alone.

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“You’re just going to let them move to Oregon?” My mom sounded hysteric, but still angelic somehow. I listened as I lay in bed breastfeeding Jason, waiting for Jerry to come home.

“What do you want me to do? Tell her she’s not allowed to go? Tell her she is grounded?”

“Yes! Tell her she can’t go.”

“If I tell her she can’t go, she’ll go for sure, you know that. She’s 18; she can do whatever she wants.”

“Well, you don’t have to make it so easy for them. Why did you say you would sell them the camper?”

“Do you want me to make it hard for them? How long do you think they can keep living here? Do you want them to run away from us, or do you want them to start a new life.”

“But in Oregon?! Can’t they live in Boise?”

Jason stirred and I stopped listening. Being confused and frightened was more familiar to me than the brief feeling of happiness I had been feeling over the past few weeks, when it seemed like everybody could get along and everything could work out. I wanted to disagree with *everybody* who had ever lived, because they *all* must have had their heads up their asses for the world to be as fucked up as it is. I was weighted down by responsibility. It was the first time I had ever *truly* feared for anyone other than myself.

“I’ll keep you safe, sweet baby Jason.” I whispered into Jason’s ear so that I wouldn’t have to listen to my parents talk about me as though I was a baby. I kept

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whispering until I heard the Datsun pull into the driveway. I sat up to look out the window. I could tell by the way he walked that he was high. He practically kicked in the front door.

I couldn't tell what was going on in the front room, but my dad later told me that Jerry stormed in the house, and slapped two hundred dollar bills down in the kitchen table. "Thanks for the camper, Mike, I'm gonna start packing her up right now."

My dad stepped in front of him before he could walk down the hall to my bedroom. "What's the money for?"

"For the camper. You said you would sell it to me for what you paid for it."

"What are you gonna do? Haul it outta here with the Datsun?"

Jerry didn't understand.

"Look, Jerry, why don't you go to bed and we will talk about this in the morning."

"In the morning?" Jerry's voice was louder than my parents had been arguing. "Me and Jo are driving to Oregon tonight." He burst into the room. "Get packed, man, we're going to Oregon."

"Just go to sleep, it's too late to drive tonight, we can talk about this in the morning," my father's words were reasonable, but his tone was all irrational anger.

"Come on." Jerry ignored my father. "We gotta get our stuff together. We'll be in Bend by morning."

"But..."

My dad grabbed Jerry by the front of his shirt and slammed him into the wall. When Jerry tried to talk, my dad lifted him 6 inches off the floor, Jerry's twisted collar

choking the words off. My dad took two huge strides, with Jerry held in both hands, and slammed him into the opposite wall.

“Listen, Goddamnit!” He showered Jerry with spittle. “You’re going to sleep and we will talk about this later!” He dropped Jerry to the floor. Jerry collapsed to his knees trying to catch his breath. My dad stared at Jerry, his shoulders tensed like he was ready for more if Jerry tried to stand up. Jerry didn’t even look up. Without taking his eyes off Jerry my dad led my shocked mother out of the room, shutting the door behind them. Jerry crawled into bed once we heard their bedroom door shut.

“You’re dad’s fucking insane, man.”

“You’re tweakin’.”

“You saw what he did to me.”

“Cuz you’re tweakin’.”

“And now I think he is going to go back on his word about the camper.”

“He just wants you to get some sleep so you can think straight.”

“I am thinking straight. I want you to get packed up, and as soon as your dad leaves for work, we’ll take the camper and go. My brother will follow in the Datsun.”

“Your brother?”

“Yeah. Jesse’s gotta get outta Boise as soon as he can.”

“Why don’t we all go in the Datsun and we can stay with your friends in Bend.”

“I don’t know how long we will be able to stay there. With all three of…” he looked at Jason, “all four of us, we’re gonna need that camper.”

“We’re not stealing the camper from my dad. Come on, Jerry, he’s my dad. That’s too fucked up.”

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“We’re not stealing it.” He opened the window and I thought he was going to crawl out the window and steal it right now. “I left \$200 for him on the table.”

“\$200?”

“Yeah. He said he would sell it to me for what he paid, well, that’s what he paid, right?” He threw one leg out the window.

“I guess he paid \$200 for the camper, but that was just for the camper, he had to go out and buy a truck to put it on.”

“How much did he pay for the truck?” He pulled three fifties out of his pocket.

“Shit, I don’t know. Where the fuck are you going?” He was half way out the window.

“I gotta go tell my brother the situation. He’s expecting us to pick him up with the camper tonight. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared into the night.

I was afraid he would get his brother and they would steal the camper and leave without me and Jason. I was mad at my dad for pissing Jerry off so much, and I was mad at Jerry for being so pissed off. I wanted to be mad at *everyone*, but I knew it wouldn’t help, so I whispered to Jason. “It’ll be okay, sweet baby Jason, it’ll be okay.” I repeated that until I fell asleep.

I usually remember my dreams. I’ll never forget the dream I had that night. I was in a graveyard and in the distance I could see a big party going on. There was a disco ball hanging from a tree and streamers were draped across the headstones. I was walking towards the party, I could see the people, and I thought they were dancing to the music thumping in my chest. I got closer, the music got louder, and I could tell that they weren’t dancing; they were fighting. They were all paired off, one-on-one, in violent

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wrestling matches. I saw Danny and Stephanie and people I knew from High School. Then I saw Jerry, and I was jealous of the girl whose head he was smashing into a gravestone. I was so close to it all, I began to run, scared of all the violence, but also horrified that I wasn't a part of it. But just as I started to run, a hand thrust out of a grave and grabbed my ankle, like a scene in a bad zombie flick. I tried to scream, but I couldn't. I could hear Danny screaming as somebody who I think was my Biology teacher held her down and slapped her face over and over again.

"Mom." He crawled out of the grave. "It's gonna be okay, Mom." He pulled himself out of the dirt. He was six foot tall and full of muscles. He was Jason. He wrapped his big arms around me and laid me down in the soft dirt. "I'm not going to let anything hurt you, my sweet..." He kissed me on the forehead and headed off towards the sound of the music. I called out to him and he turned around. I could see his green eyes. Where did he get green eyes? I wanted to stand up, but I was too tired.

"I love you." Jason called out to me just before he turned and was engulfed by the spinning lights and pulsing music. I took a deep breathe and I yelled so loud, so painfully (sorrowfully?) that it snapped me awake.

"Jesse's gonna sleep here tonight, okay?" Jerry and Jesse were both climbing in the window.

I shrugged my shoulders. I looked at the clock. It wasn't night anymore.

"When's your dad get home from work?"

Jesse began getting undressed, moaning as though each movement caused him pain.

"I don't know. 5 or 6." I never felt safe around any of Jerry's family.

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“We’ll sleep till Mike gets home and…”

“Sounds good.” Jesse grabbed a blanket from the foot of my bed and curled up in it and was instantly asleep.

Jerry climbed into bed with me, muttering about how tired he was.

“We’ll have a new start in Oregon, you’ll see, it’ll be cool.” He curled up like a baby and put his head on my shoulder. Jesse began snoring and I realized why we were going to Oregon. Jerry didn’t have parents who cared about him the way mine did. It didn’t have anything that made him feel like he belonged. By taking me and Jason to Oregon, he had a chance to make his own family. He needed that more than I did. And I was going to help him. I was going to show him how much love made a difference.

I dozed for awhile until I heard my mother in the kitchen. I slipped Jerry’s drooling head onto a pillow and I took Jason into the kitchen with me. My mom was making herself some coffee. Her hours at the hospital were sapping the joy from her face, from her soul. I knew it was hard on both of them to have Jerry living here, not working or contributing. Katy was in California making a new life for herself.

“Are you OK, Mom?”

“Oh,” she spilled the sugar she was spooning into her coffee as though I had caught her doing something shameful. “You scared me.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t used to be so scary.

“It’s OK. I’m fine. How are you two?” She used a baby voice as though she was talking to Jason, not me.

“I think he is eating too much. And he never seems to sleep. And he cries if I put him down.”

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“Oh, don’t worry about it, he’s fine.” She took him from me, cradled him in one arm and drank her coffee with the other. She sat down at the table and gave a long sigh.

“You wouldn’t believe the night your grandma had.” I hoped she wouldn’t go into detail. Her work stories of blood and needles and damaged flesh were more than I could usually handle.

“Do you think Dad will let us buy the camper?”

She sighed again and sipped her coffee. “Do you really want to move to Oregon?”

“Yes.”

“Why so far?”

“We just need a new start. We need to make a new life and get away from some of the people in both our lives who can’t see us for who we are and who we are trying to become.”

“Is Jerry the one you want to start a new life with?”

“He needs a new start more than I do.”

“Let me give you a piece of advice that my mother gave me. Marry a man you will grow to love, not one you would love to see grow up.”

“Who said anything about marriage?”

“All your father and I are trying to say, is think about what you are doing. Think about Jason.”

“I am thinking about Jason. And Jason needs to be with his father and if his father needs to leave Boise than we all need to leave Boise.”

“Is Jerry in some kind of trouble?”

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“No, Mom. But how’s he going to do anything but get in trouble when everybody in Boise already has their mind made up that he is trouble?”

My mom raised her eyebrows doubtfully and sipped her coffee.

I got up to leave, but she wouldn’t let me. Without a word she gave me a hug. It was a hug that said she would love me even though I was screwing up. That’s what I had to get away from, everybody and everything that was telling me I was screwing up. I didn’t return the hug; I took Jason from her and went back to my room.

“I love you, Mom.” I said it like a good-bye.

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“\$2000!?! ”

“I told you I would sell it for what I paid for it.”

Jesse went to wait on the back porch with the bags I had packed for us while they slept. My mom and I watched from the couch. She grabbed my hand to hold it, and it just pissed me off. I wanted to take my hand away but I was sure that would cause more drama than I wanted to deal with.

“I thought you got it from a lady who couldn’t repay a \$200 loan!”

“That’s how I got the camper. Then I found the truck for \$1000, because it didn’t have any wheels. Plus I had to put a new transmission into it. All and all it cost me about \$2000. If I sold it in the thrifty nickel, I could get \$3000 for it.”

Jerry snatched up the hundred dollar bills that had been sitting on the kitchen table all day. “Take this and keep the Datsun for the rest of the payment.”

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The Datsun had been my graduation present. I had to graduate in night school because the principal thought pregnancies were contagious. My father looked at me, checking to see if this was OK with me. I gave him a look that tried to say Jerry spoke for both of us.

“The Datsun is barely worth \$1000. If you have another \$1000, the camper is all yours.”

Jerry glared at him and counted out the wrinkled bills from his pocket. He thought for a minute and then stuffed the bills back in his pocket.

“Me and Jesse are loading up the Datsun.” He left.

I got up to follow him. I grabbed the car seat that Jason was already strapped into. My dad grabbed the car seat from my hands gruffly.

“I’ll carry it for you.”

It didn’t take long to load up the Datsun. Jason and I were in the back seat, Jerry was driving, Jesse had shotgun.

“Be good.” My dad slapped the driver side door as we pulled out of the driveway.

“Shit, shit, shit.” Jerry started slamming on the steering wheel as soon as we turned the corner.

“Chill out, bro.” Jesse put a hand on Jerry’s shoulder.

“Fuck that! We’re going to Oregon, man!” He pulled into a pawn shop a few blocks from my parents’ house.

“Wait here!” He jumped from the car and grabbed a bag from the trunk. He wagged his finger at me. “Stay put!”

“What’s he gonna sell.” I knew Jesse knew, I just wasn’t sure if he would tell me.

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“Don’t know.” He stared out the front windshield as though he hadn’t noticed that the car had stopped moving.

I wonder how much it would have changed events if I had known that he was pawning my mother’s jewelry. I wonder if I would have taken Jason, grabbed my bags and staid with my parents. It frightens me to think, that, though I would have been mad at him for stealing from my mother, I still would have gone to Oregon with him. Maybe I wouldn’t have. There’s no way to know now.

“What’d you sell?”

“Just crap that was taking up room in the trunk.”

“How much did you get?”

“Enough to get your dad’s camper.”

“No way! What’d you sell a power tool?” I should have realized that there wasn’t anything that he or his brother owned that could get more than \$20 at a pawn shop.

“Just crap, OK?” Jerry was angry when I thought he should be happy about the money. “What’s with all the questions anyways?”

Jesse turned around in the seat to snarl at me. “Let’s just be happy that we’re gonna get the camper so we don’t have to end up sleeping in this tin can, alright?”

I leaned back, not sure what to say. Jason fussed, so I whispered in his ear. It always calmed him.

“Where’d you get the money?” My dad looked suspiciously at the wad of bills Jerry handed him.

“My mom.”

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My dad looked at me.

“Can we have the camper, Dad?”

He rummaged around in his desk drawer till he found the pink slip.

“Give it a good ten minutes to warm up anytime it is colder than 50 degrees.” He handed Jerry the pink slip and the key.

“Thanks.” He didn’t even look at my mother. Jesse was tossing our bags into the camper. My father helped me get Jason comfortable in the camper.

“So I guess Jerry’s mom is happy for you guys.”

“Yeah.” I hated to lie, but I didn’t really know the truth either.

My mom gave us all tearful hugs and wished us luck, even Jesse, who she had only met twice before. We weren’t out of Boise before we were doing lines in the back of the camper. I began to feel like this trip to Oregon *was* my choice, as though it was something that I had been moving toward since I was born. The powder I was putting up my nose also made me feel like everything we did had such a small impact on the world, that in a way it justified or excused any action I took. Jason’s green eyes tried to stab their truth into me, but I didn’t want to feel it, couldn’t feel it. Jesse took the wheel and Jerry and I made love in the back of the camper as it hurtled us into our future, our new life.