

## I Am Hurt

A little gray in her hair now, smile lines around her eyes, but definitely Ashley. Standing at my front door, holding out her hand. I wanted to take it, but I didn't know what I wanted it to mean.

Ashley and I were best friends in fifth grade. Kim made up our threesome. Although we lived too far from each other to visit in the afternoons, we were inseparable during school hours. We all three had parts in the big event of that year, our class production of *Romeo and Juliet*. Ashley was cast as Juliet, no surprise to anyone. She was the prettiest girl in the class with her long, blonde hair and big, blue eyes, and we all knew her parents would be able to buy her a marvelous costume. Her father was Ron Holcomb, our state representative, and her mother was the heiress to a chain of upscale hotels. Ash, who did everything well, was fantastic in the part. When she did the balcony scene I really felt how unfair it was for Romeo and Juliet to have their lives ruled by who their parents happened to be. Little did I know then.

I was Mercutio. I figured Miss Langston picked me for that part because of my short, curly hair that would work well in one of the male parts. There weren't many boys in our class and even fewer willing to be in the play. I wasn't pretty like Ash. I had plain brown hair that went everywhere but where I wanted it to and plain brown eyes. Even my

believed them and sometimes I didn't. Summers, when most of my friends went on vacations, were definitely times when I didn't. But Kim accepted my answer and that was what was important then.

I managed to keep my feelings to myself until I got home, but then I ran up to my room, threw myself on my bed and raged through my tears. "I hate her, I hate her." Mom, who always knew what to do, gave me a little time and then came upstairs with a glass of lemonade and a cool wash cloth. She sat down on the bed beside me as I washed my face and took a long drink. Then she asked if I wanted to talk about it.

By then I was controlled enough to say, "Ash didn't invite me to her birthday party." But the words were so horrible I threw myself back down and started crying again.

Mom smoothed my hair back from my face. "I'm so sorry, my poor darling. But it doesn't have anything to do with you. I'm sure Ashley wanted to invite you. But something happened a long time ago that made her mother hate me. That's what it's about. You didn't do anything wrong."

I lifted my head to look at her. I couldn't imagine my mom doing anything to make anyone mad. I sat up again. "What did you do?"

"I'll tell you about it when you're older." That was all I could get out of her.

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We started middle school that fall. Kim had moved away and Ashley and I no longer spent much time together. Ashley had her own horse now, didn't talk about much else and hung out with the other girls who were into horses. We would never have been able to afford a horse. We couldn't even afford riding lessons. But anyway I was more

interested in drama classes. I joined the drama club and made new friends. Although Ash was her usual friendly self when we bumped into each other, I was never completely comfortable and was relieved that we had gone our different ways.

Everything was fine until the day I found the envelope. I was rummaging in Mom's purse to see if she had any gum, when I saw a blank, unsealed envelope from Ashley's father's office. I was curious and I opened it. Inside were two hundred dollar bills with a sticky note saying, "For Donna's junior prom."

For me. Why? I took it into the kitchen where spaghetti sauce was simmering on the stove and Mom was cutting up garlic for garlic bread. I waved the envelope around. "What's this?"

Mom turned around, saw the envelope and caught her breath. She looked afraid, really afraid. My stomach squeezed in on itself. The smells in the kitchen were suddenly heavy and unpleasant. "What is it?" I asked again.

"It doesn't concern you."

This thing that she knew and that I didn't, that obviously did concern me, filled the room as though a stranger had just thrust his way through the door. "How can it not concern me? It has my name on it."

"Let it go," Mom said, and I could hear she was serious. But I couldn't let it go.

"What does Mr. Holcomb have to do with me?"

"Shh. Lower your voice. Dad will hear."

"What's he not supposed to hear. What are you keeping from me?"

"Donna." Her voice was stern, but I knew I had some power here.

"Do you want me to ask Dad?"

She sighed, went to the sink, washed her hands and turned to me. "Let's go out back."

We sat on the porch swing, the afternoon sun low in the sky. The yard was in full bloom, but the scent of the daphne, which I usually loved, seemed too sweet. Even the click, click of a hummingbird as he explored the fuschias and penstemon sounded ominous. Mom and I rocked the swing back and forth, our feet moving in a unison perfected by hours of sitting out there together.

"I was a senior in college. His name was Ron Holcomb. He was handsome and fun and on the varsity team in every sport. When he started paying attention to me, I thought I was in love." We swung back and forth for a while in silence. "I was young and stupid and wasn't careful." I didn't want to hear the words that I knew were coming, words as unreal as soap bubbles floating out of her mouth. She touched my cheek with the back of her hand. "That's how I got blessed with you."

I scraped my foot on the ground hard and stopped the swing. "You're telling me that Mr. Holcomb is my father?"

She nodded.

"That Ashley's Dad is my Dad?"

"Mr. Holcomb is only your biological father. That's all."

"But Dad...." Dad wasn't my real father? Dad--the smell of Aqua Velva, the arms that were always ready to hold you, the rough cheek, the deep laugh, the funky Hawaiian shirts. And if Mr. Holcomb was my real father, what was Dad? My fake father?

Mom reached out to put her arm around me, but I jerked away. "Donna, sweetheart. It doesn't mean anything. Dad is your real father and always will be."

"Are you saying that Ashley is my sister?" My throat was tight and clutched at my voice.

She nodded. "Half sister. We both got pregnant within a month of each other." She took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "I don't know which one of us hated him more then, but her family made him marry her."

"Does Dad know?"

"Yes, but he didn't want you to ever know. He was there when you were born." I could tell that she was close to tears, but I was hard inside, unfeeling. "He feels like he is your father, your only father. He loves you so much."

I didn't want to talk about Dad any more. "Does Ashley know?"

"I'm sure she doesn't."

I slid off the swing, slammed the door as I went into the house and avoided my parents for days. I never spoke to Ashley again, although I watched her obsessively from afar.

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I looked at Ashley standing at my door, her hand extended, her smile friendly. My anger at her had become too heavy to carry long ago, and besides I knew she wasn't the one it was about, but what was I supposed to say to her? How much did she know?

Finally, having no choice, I held my own hand out. As I touched hers, for the first time I didn't think about her as "his daughter" or "her." I thought, "My sister."

"I know everything," she said, her voice gentle.

I had wanted to hear those words for years, had fantasized thousands of ways to orchestrate the revelation of my identity, many of them unkind, but now that my dream

was reality, I couldn't grasp my role, as though I had memorized the lines for Lady Macbeth and had found myself on stage in the middle of King Lear.

I invited her in.

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It was the evening of our high school graduation. I had showered, dressed and read my valedictorian speech one last time. My anticipation was so high that I hadn't been able to eat for two days, but I was glad to hear that my voice was strong and clear. "Gnothi S'Auton," was the title of my speech. "Know Yourself." In retrospect the irony was humorous, but at the time I only knew that my speech needed to be special. Using a Greek phrase seemed very impressive to me and that was the only one I could find that was at all appropriate.

All through our senior year I had ached with longing, not to be Ashley, not to have Mr. Holcomb for a father instead of my own Dad, but to break through this barrier that separated me from something I shouldn't be excluded from. Everything Ashley had, from her horse to her kind personality, felt like something that I was not allowed to participate in because of some deficit in myself. I plotted, schemed, played out scenario after scenario where my true place would be known, but it always came down to telling the world that my mother and I were rejects and, even worse, hurting Dad by making him think that I wanted something more than him.

But when Ashley announced that Mr. Holcomb had agreed to speak at our graduation, I saw a way. I could become valedictorian and be up on stage with him and give a perfect speech. He would notice me then and be proud of me.

I worked hard all year to make that happen. I already had good grades and was in the National Honor Society. I loaded my schedule with Advanced Placement courses, joined everything I could think of and succeeded. I was chosen as valedictorian. Then I spent hours writing my speech. I took it to my English teacher for help and advice, to the librarian and then to Dad. When I thought it was perfect I spent more hours practicing my delivery. Now, as Mom called me to get in the car, I gave one last look in the mirror. My gown draped the way it was supposed to and my cap was on at just the right angle. I clutched the leather folder Dad bought for me to keep my speech in. I was ready.

In the car on the way over I imagined a scene where I would read my speech and afterwards Mr. Holcomb would put his arm around me up on the stage and tell the whole audience that I was his daughter and he was proud of me. I knew that he would never do anything like that; it would ruin his career. And I wouldn't want him to do that to my Dad. But maybe he would just whisper to me, "I'm so proud of you."

Dad let us out, went to park the car and I went to join my class. The waiting was hard, but I had been in drama for years now and I knew the jittery feeling would go away as soon as I opened my mouth. We trooped onto the stage, where I sat in the front row with my classmates and he sat on the side with the principal and some of our teachers. He made his speech and then sat down before I was called up, so we were never standing close to each other as I had imagined. Then it was my turn and I read it perfectly. The whole auditorium clapped afterwards and, when I looked over at him, he was clapping, too, and smiling. He liked it.

As my classmates were called one by one to get their diploma my awareness clung to him. This was the man whose blood ran through my body, whose DNA shaped

mine, whose approval I irrationally and desperately needed. I noted the way his eyebrows grew together like mine, how his frame was broad and short and his hair brown and wavy like mine.

Afterwards, after the ceremony was over and we dispersed backstage, I saw him talking to the principal. Most of the students rushed off to find relatives and friends, but I lingered until he finished and then approached him. My heart was pounding and the stage fright I had never experienced before gripped me. I pushed it down. This was too important. "Your speech was great," I said. "Thank you for coming."

"You did a great job, too." He shook my hand and his face crinkled with smile lines.

This was my moment. "Do you know who I am?"

His eyes hardened and his chin jutted. He grabbed my arm so hard I could feel each separate finger bite into me. "If you ever say anything like that again," he said softly, but each word chiseled to a sharp point, "you and your family will be more sorry than you can imagine."

I did not watch him walk away. I ran to the back stairs where I could be hidden. I collapsed on the top dusty step, my face in my hands. "I am hurt," I thought, the words repeating themselves over and over so that they filled my mind and barricaded my consciousness from the memory of what just happened. "I am so hurt."

I don't know how long I sat there, afraid to be seen, trying to wipe the tears away, knowing my red eyes would be a giveaway to the world of my shame, but Dad found me eventually and took me in his arms. When he finally released me the front of his shirt had streaks of dirt where I had put my hands on the dusty stairs and wiped my face. He wet a



handkerchief at the water fountain and wiped my face, then took me out the back and around the corner to the car. "Get in the front," he said. "You'll be more comfortable"

"But Mom...."

"Mom won't mind. You're the important one today."

He went back for Mom and the boys, and they crowded together in the back seat. We went out for ice cream and I managed to act the way I thought someone would who had just graduated from high school. I don't think the boys even knew I had been crying.

For days I replayed the scene, giving it every new ending I could think of, but it was useless. I couldn't get rid of the scene that ended on the dusty steps.

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I led Ashley into our living room, thankful that I had vacuumed the day before. She sat on the sofa and I sat across from her. "Can I get you a cup of tea?"

"I would love that."

I went to the kitchen, filled the kettle and then thought better of it. I found a bottle of wine, grabbed a couple of glasses and returned to the living room.

She smiled when she saw what I had brought. "Good thinking."

I'm not a big drinker, but the pleasure was intense as the first sip reached into my tense muscles and nerves. I settled back in my chair and, for the first time, met Ashley's eyes.

"This is...", she said, and then paused and looked at me, her eyes inviting me to smile. "This is awkward."

I laughed. How could I not? "Awkward" had been our word in fifth grade. Everything was awkward, from our homework assignments to our teacher to our choices

of food in the cafeteria. We had so tormented a substitute teacher once that he had turned on Kim, yelling, "If you say 'awkward' one more time, I'll awkward you." The class had gone from giggles to outright laughter and he had left the room and hadn't come back. Our principal had made us spend the rest of the day copying the word "awkward" over and over, but it was worth it.

"You found out our junior year, didn't you?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I knew something was wrong. I thought it was something I had done."

I felt warm tears begin to form in the corners of my eyes. "I don't know why I was angry at you. You hadn't done anything. But I was angry at everyone. You, my mother, your father."

She smiled. "Our father," she said gently.

I shook my head. "I can't go there."

"He's part of what I came here to talk to you about."

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Him. That's what he has always been in my mind. There is no name for what he has been to me. Biological father, sperm donor, accident of birth--these are the bare facts. Add that he was the one whose acceptance I yearned for but who disowned me. The one who for years I explained myself to in my thoughts, as though he were my judge. I hated him but could not, or would not entirely banish him.

He had been a cancer, digging his claws into me, though sometimes it felt more like I was holding him close, afraid to lose him. There was a time when I would Google

him on the internet, just to follow his career, and find that two or three hours had passed as I read every speech by him, every article about him and checked out every photo.

I dreamed about him. In most of the dreams Ashley and I were doing something together and he appeared and I had to leave. Sometimes I would be watching them walking by, happy with each other, as I peered through some small, upstairs window.

I told my husband the essential facts, and my boys, too, when they were old enough. But I never told anyone about graduation night.

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My first child. They placed him, wet, naked, warm, and totally beautiful, on my stomach. With my hand in my husband's, I drank in the miracle of this living creature, touched his soft brown hair, looked into his clear eyes. But even in the midst of my amazement and love, I felt a brush of anger that "he" would never claim him. Then Dad, his shirttail hanging out, his hair ruffled, but his face shining with pride, took little Mike in his arms and, his voice breaking with emotion, said, "My grandson. My first grandchild." The softness in his eyes and the love in his voice washed thoughts of that other one away. What did he have to do with us? We were a family.

I wanted him gone then, out of my life, but he wasn't yet ready to leave. His shadow would still sometimes fall across my path. I would hear him whisper, "You don't count." "You're not good enough."

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"I just found out yesterday," Ashley said. "I hope we can be real sisters someday." She paused. "If you are willing, of course. But he is dying now. There isn't any time."

“There’s nothing he can give me anymore.”

“But there’s something you can give him.” She put her hand up to silence the protests I was about to make. “Let me finish. I don’t know the details, but I know you weren’t treated right. I know he can be a jerk, and I know you don’t owe him anything. But he’s dying and he wants to be forgiven. Isn’t there some way you can...” Her voice trailed off. The pain in her face was obvious. My old love for her stirred.

I couldn’t say no to her, but I couldn’t say yes, either. The best I could do was tell her I would think about it.

“I understand. But he doesn’t have much time.”

Our embrace when she left was warm and mutual and it bore hope for a future.

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I went back and forth but couldn’t decide what to do. “If you want to tame a monster in your dreams, make him give you a gift.” I couldn’t remember where I had heard that, but it had the ring of something that might be true. But he had given me a gift. He had given me a sister and I had run from his gift. Was there something I could do now to fix it? Forgive him? I thought of his face, his hard eyes, the way he threw his words at me as though they were weapons. Forgive him? Never.

I tried to order my thoughts by asking myself what I wanted from him. In a perfect world, if I controlled what I could have, what would it be? I wanted him to know the pain I had felt and to understand it. I wanted to be heard.

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answered. "And I could do it because I didn't care. He wasn't important to me any more."

"He was a jerk, I know, but he was my father."

"He wasn't mine."

She nodded. "Something happened between you. Tell me."

"It was the night of our high school graduation," I began. And my sister listened.