

Just Another Battle

Imagine needing something so badly that you would kill for it. Imagine. Imagine needing something so badly you would steal for it. Can't even sleep without it. Breaking out. Hallucinations. Lack of sleep. Waking up on Coney Island beach with some empty bottles of diet coke, newspapers, and needles spread out beside your feet. Imagine needing something so badly that you have no real sense of consequence; where life is almost like a videogame. You don't worry too much about your actions because you know you'll always get a redo. But not today. Today, I need it so badly, if I don't get it...it's game over.

Today, I woke up with a deep and persistent craving to use heroin again. This isn't a passing, mild craving you might feel when you realize you forgot your wallet after walking past an ice cream truck on a hot summer afternoon. No. You can get over that. These are like cravings you feel for water when you're hiking across a desert. They are deep. They are persistent. They are hard to ignore. Time waits for no man and neither does Heroin. Being addicted to heroin can feel a lot like riding a rollercoaster. When you have the drug in your system, you feel as though you're on top of the world. but when the shit wears off, you start this rapid downward spiral into the lowest of lows. Into pure and utter darkness. The guys here call it the "The Super Flu." It feels like being hungry without having any control over it. Hungry to the point where you become sick. All of a sudden you're shaking, sweating, vomiting and you just want to die. Honestly. All you want is just something to give you that relief. Even when you try to refrain from feeding into the pain it feels like there's a tight grip on your arm. Meanwhile, the other hand is covering your eyes. Being addicted to heroin is like the you are the slave and heroin is the slave master.

I lay flat on my back, staring up at the ceiling for a moment, then at my phone. *10am*. I'm at my fourth halfway house this week. You don't know this about me, but I hate overcrowding. It's annoying because I sort of hate people. I mean, the dudes here are cool and all, but sometimes their feet stink and they fart really loud without warning. I just hate it. I hate the smell of beans and broccoli and I hate them. I get where they are coming from though because i'm one of them--an addict.

I think today's Monday, so I have to see my caseworker, Shauna. I wait until my name is called. *Garnett!*, the black woman at the front desk grunts. I get up slowly, dragging my feet to the far end of the narrow hallway. I sit in her office and she shouts at me immediately, *you're going to rehab!* Shit. I saw that coming, but I can't go. No fucking way. If i'm suffering like this now in the streets, I just might die in rehab. I get down on my knees in front of her. Yes. I have no shame. *Come on, you don't know hard it is to let this go.* She rolls her fierce brown eyes, *Garnett, I don't have time for this.* I'm gazing into her eyes now. Trying so hard not to laugh because I know I don't mean this. I've done it so many times before. *I swear to god, I'll stop. I'll make you a deal, I say.* She looks at me like I just told her to go fuck herself. *It's a good one, I promise.*

NO! She screams. *No deal.* I stare at her blankly. She closes her eyes and takes a deep breathe. *You have one more chance to clean up your goddam act. Now get out of my face.* I rise and speed back to my cot. Damn. That was a close one.

Writing is the only thing that helps me when i'm sober, but I can't write forever. My hands start to ache along with my muscles. Sometimes it feels like i've been beaten with a metal bat. I start shivering like a wet dog tossed out in the snow. Like right now. My hands have gone numb and i'm trembling. My head is throbbing. My stomach keeps cramping. I feel like I could just throw up my intestines. I close my eyes for a moment, imagining myself dipping my body into a hot bath. Something that will ease the aching in every inch of my body. The voices in my head grow louder. It's a woman. She taunts me. She likes to see me suffer with guilt. I reach under my cot and into my duffle bag, pulling out a small notepad, and flip over to a fresh page.

Tara,

I wish I had a photo of you. Anything. I hardly remember what you look like. I just remember the day your mother went into labor. But I don't remember you because I wasn't there. Heroin had a tight grip on my arm that day. She was so persistent. She told me that she was more important. Not my wife or the birth of my daughter, just her. I remember your mother calling me. She was screaming and crying on the phone. I was so high, I thought she was being murdered. But once I came down, I realized she was in pain and she needed me there with her. But I really needed to get high. Like right now. I'm so bored. I just want to get high...I feel detached from myself and reality. I have lost all pleasure in daily activities. Getting up in the morning is a real effort for me. I don't know where you live. There's a good chance you'll never get this letter because I have absolutely no idea where you are. But I still hope that all is well with you. Have a blessed day today, sweetie.

Thinking of you,

Dad

When i'm not at the halfway house, i'm supposed to be looking for work. Today, i'm headed uptown to this junkyard in the Bronx, to sell some auto parts. Just because i'm a heroin addict doesn't mean I can't be a businessman. I was always good with numbers. It's not that hard to look through a bunch of crap at a junkyard to sell, but other times, it's like trying to find a needle in a haystack. Like trying to sew your own arm back onto it's detached shoulder. Impossible without the proper means; without any real resources. I've learned to hustle in these streets. That's what this shit does to you. Not everybody gets it. Being a hustler is a *skill*. Making something out of nothing. Like creating a meal out of a dollar. I can talk my way in and out of hell too--another cunning skill I developed in order to feed this addiction.

People can't see me. I walk aimlessly and they look right past me. Our eyes don't even bother to meet. Why would anyone want to look at me? I look like shit. My eyes are red and my teeth are yellow like the color of bananas left to rot. I'm missing both of my canines and i'm black. I think that's enough of a reason for people to look the other way. I still feel like I want to vomit. I've got this knot in my stomach and I swear to god if I don't get high tonight I might kill myself. The hallucinations are getting worse. The voice inside my head is just unrelenting. It's like when a child cries and demands candy from their parents. *I don't have any candy!* You might say to your kid. *I don't have any!* I scream, pounding on my temples. *Leave me alone!* Now she's laughing. Fucking bitch.

I approach the junkyard and immediately hunt through the piles of broken sink pipes, rearview mirrors, bumpers, and musty rims. If I could just find one decent part, I might be able to get enough money for at least a gram of heroin. It goes for about \$100, but I usually work out a good bargain. I continue rummaging, making as much noise as I can to silence the voice in my head. Suddenly, I feel a tapping on my shoulder. I turn around and scowl at the man in front of me. *What the fuck do you want?* I ask. He looks at me blankly and takes two small steps forward. *Needed some help?* he says.

Unless you've got 100 bucks or some dope. which I don't think you do, your best bet is to go fuck off! Suddenly, he reaches into his pocket and I think i'm about to die, so I prepare myself for it. I glance at his hand and notice a small plastic bag. Inside the bag is everything my heart could ever want. It's like magic or like falling in love for the first time. You don't know what is going on, all you know is that it feels good. I look at his bag of heroin the same way people in Christmas movies look at snow. I run over to it and before I know it, my body is diving into its white beautiful substance. I shut my eyes and it feels like I'm a kid again. I'm making snow angels. I imagine myself like one of those kids in a Christmas movie with mouth open catching little white snowflakes on my tongue.

My battle with heroin is like trying to untangle a ball of yarn, just when I think i've got it, I find a new knot. A new reason to go get high. Coming down is the worst part about it. Everything goes back to gray. Sometimes black. When coming down from a high, I feel anxiety and unremitting fear. You know when you're underwater and you need to come up for a breath? That's what heroin withdrawal feels like, only not exactly, because it's worse. You can't come up for water. You feel like you're suffocating. The good thing is that the heroin will be out of my system in about 2-3 days and my next test isn't until Monday. They're smart here though. They know we'll be tempted to get high every now and then so they switch the drug test days. Throughout the day, the voice in my head will whisper, *man, this would be a perfect moment to get high.* I try not to entertain that thought. Instead, I ignore her. I ignore her and write until my hands and body ache.

Hey Sweetie,

Happy Mother's Day! I wish I could tell that to your Mom, but then I thought about you. Do you have any kids of your own yet? If I remember correctly you should be about 21 or so. I miss you. And I miss your mom. How's she doing today? You know, sometimes I wonder what your mother ever saw in me. I was just a regular dude, selling clothes on the street trying to make a quick buck. I loved the hustle. It keep me going for a while too.

The first time I saw your mother she was speed walking down the streets of Harlem. She was holding her phone to her ear, talking as loud as she always did. I was standing on the corner of 125th street with my table and duffel bag of clothes. When she spotted me, she stopped and scanned the table. She picked up a pair of Apple Bottom jeans and asked me how much they were. I said, "for you they're free." She looked at me and laughed. When I asked her what was so funny she said, "you remind me of Ice Cube" I stared back at her and laughed. "That must be a good thing" I said. She pointed at my face, "your birth marks." I touched my face and laughed. Your mother had a weird obsession not only with Ice Cube, but with birthmarks. I have three on the right side of my face that look like little chocolate chips, just like Ice Cube. Sometimes I get to thinking that's why your mother fell for me, or at least gave me a shot. I remember it vividly though. She had the most beautiful smile. I fell in love with her light brown eyes and high cheek bones. Her skin was glossy and smooth like the color of mocha. I had never seen anyone like her honestly. I live with a lot of regret. You don't even understand. I miss you and I'm sorry. For everything. K, I love you. I'm feeling a little tired, I'm going to rest for a while.

Love,

Dad

Now, i'm in the Hospital and my head is throbbing. Fuck my life. What happened? How did I get here? I try to turn over to look for my clothes, but I feel that knot in my stomach again. I need to get the fuck out of here. My stomach has never hurt this much. I manage to reach over the side of the bed and grab my clothes. I rip the tape and IV off my chest and arms before shoving my head through my T-shirt. Suddenly there's a white woman, with hands that feel like she's kept them in an icebox her whole life. She hurries over to me and places the IV back in my arm,

Mr. Garnett, you have to keep these on

I'm fine. I grunt.

No you're not, she argues. I grill her with my hateful eyes and slap her hand away. Being sober makes me irritable like that.

I saidddddddd, I-AM-FINE, I shout. She stops and stares at me, obviously appalled. Like I give a shit.

Mr. Garnett, you were in a diabetic coma for the past three days.

What?

You also have a urinary tract infection, she says. I laugh instantly. I thought only women had those. You were throwing up excessively and now you might have internal bleeding in your stomach.

When can I leave?

I'll have to consult with your doctor. You should focus on getting better. I'll be back with your meal shortly.

I'm pissed off, but at least they're taking good care of me here at Long Island Jewish Medical Center. They gave me some disgusting purple liquid to soothe my stomach before they get to work on the internal bleeding. There's this one nurse that comes over, she peeks her head in and asks me if I need anything. I hate hospitals, but at least they're doing their jobs right. I'm not surprised that I ended up in Long Island. Sometimes I end up trembling in dirty bathroom floors covered in piss and vomit. A cold hard bench in Central Park, or the D train subway cart until I get kicked out by the conductor. That's how I've repeatedly ended up on Coney Island Beach surrounded by coke bottles, newspapers, and needles. I just need it that badly. My diabetes has put me in the hospital a few times. Well, actually, I put myself there. I need to really stay away from all sweets. Another addiction that I am going to beat. It's just another battle. Nevertheless, I'm going to be okay. They said they'll release me tomorrow. God is showing me mercy.

Abbbbbb! I scream, sitting up in my bed that is now a pool full of sweat. It's consuming me. It literally has a brain and it shares mine. *This would be a great time to get high,* she teases. I slap myself in the face and shake my head. It's been so long that I can't really remember what "normal" feels like. This *is* my normal. There are moments of the day where I am perfectly fine. I am able to go to the store, talk to my caseworker, and attempt to look for a job. Yet, there are other times where I really need it. Like right now. It's 3am and I just need it. I need it just to get out of my funk. I need it to feel okay. I need it so that I can stop shaking, gagging, vomiting and crying. I need it in order to stop these hallucinations, my insomnia, my racing thoughts and my nightmares. I reach under my cot and grab my notepad.

Tara,

How are you? Me, i'm not doing too well honestly. I'll spend three strong days ready to tear the shackles off my wrists and another three more days, feeling like I could just die. My withdrawals make me really depressed, it's scary. Living with depression is like fighting with an invisible enemy. Sometimes you don't even know the root of the problem, you just know you want it to go away.

I don't know why I started using heroin. It just happened. Maybe that's what you're wondering now. Why did I start? Why I never bothered to look for you? Why I never made an effort to keep in touch? Why I couldn't choose you over heroin? Why I let this take over my life? I ask myself the same questions almost everyday and the only thing that comes to my mind is shame. I know you probably don't think about me, but I always think about you. I think about what you look like when you talk. If you change your hair color often. Is it curly like mine? I wonder if you wear glasses like me. Whether you have my eyes, ears or nose. I know you hate me. And that's okay. I hate me too.

Sincerely,

Your not so great of a father.

I've seen him in pictures, but I have no real memories of him. I've seen him in pictures, so I know what he looks like, but I have no real memories of him. I don't like talking about him, but it always comes up. In school, when meeting new people, in the hair salon, supermarket...**everywhere**. They'll ask, *What does your dad do? How do your parents feel about you going away to school? Your dad must be so overprotective? Your dad is okay with letting you study abroad? My dad would freak out.* I get asked about my father so much that I've made up several stories about him. The stories vary, depending on my mood, but I enjoy making up stories for this man. This man, who ultimately, is just a figment of my imagination. Sometimes I'll say things like, *he's in the army* or *he's an English teacher in Africa*. Or my favorite one, *he died when I was a baby*. You'd laugh at how gullible people are. Their eyes light up with immense awe and pity. It's sickening how nosey people are these days. Sometimes, I don't like people for this reason.

Oh, shit! I shout, while staring at my phone screen. 11:45am. *I'm late*, I grunt. I quickly hop out of bed and race to the bathroom. How the hell did I manage to over sleep? I'm not going to make it. I'm just not. *Mom*, I shout, banging furiously on the bathroom door. She swings the door open and I almost bang on her chest. She takes a step back.

What the hell is wrong with you?

I'm late for my interview, I shout in annoyance, pushing past her.

Why didn't you set an alarm? She asks. I roll my eyes. *What time do you need to be there?* I ignore her.

Answer me! She shouts.

Mom, the interview is at 12:30. There's no way--

You'll make it, Tara. I smile helplessly, trying to hide my rage. *If I make it, it'll be by the grace of god*, I snap sarcastically.

I finish my shower in under five minutes. It's gross, I know, but a girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do.

Eat something before you go, mom presses. She always does this.

It's bad enough you didn't wake me up, mom. I can skip breakfast. She stares at me with the face of a puppy after you've yelled at him for pissing on your new carpet.

I'm sorry ma, I pause. *This is just such a big deal to me. NYU! If I can get into this school I--*

Relax, T. You'll be fine. You're a smart girl. They're going to love you. Typical loving words of encouragement from a supportive parent. I'm thankful, but still on edge. I quickly glance at my phone. 11:55am. Okay, okay. So I might be able to get there through the skin of my teeth. I search through my purse to make sure everything I need is there. Keys, wallet, metro card, photo ID and

sample short stories. I hurry over to my mother and plant a soft kiss on her cheek before racing down the stairs.

The good thing about living in New York City is that you can run down the street looking like a total idiot and nobody will judge you. Everyone is in the same predicament. We are all either late to work, school or an interview. I race to the 4 train and pace back and forth on the platform. Where the hell is this train? I glance at my phone again 12:04pm.. Oh my god. Now i'm freaking out. I know the 4 train usually takes forever, but it's like the universe is just punishing me now. Suddenly, I hear a rumbling in the distance and I move closer to the platform edge. The doors slide open and I rush inside. Its Monday and of course, there's nowhere for me to sit, let alone breathe. I'm squished between a old lady with a big black purse and an elderly man whose breath smells like a dead mouse has been laying on his tongue for months. I gag softly. ***Stand clear of the closing doors please.***
****Ding dong ****

Hold the doors! Someone shouts from the distance. Oh god, I hope they miss it. I have somewhere to be. *Hold it,* they shout again, their voice drawing closer. ***Hold it!*** they repeat. The person behind me shouts,

Wait for the next one idiot! Suddenly, a man comes rushing between the doors and they close in on his neck. He looks like he's just walked right into a guillotine. I roll my eyes in annoyance. The man forces his way into the cart and we're all rolling our eyes now. I stare at him for a moment and notice his bloodshot red eyes. He's got dark circles around them. His lips are chapped and I don't even want to think about what his teeth look like. For a split second, we make eye contact and I dart my eyes in the opposite direction. I feel him staring at me and now I really want to get off this train. God, I hope he doesn't follow me. I don't need this today.

The train opens on 125th. *Finally,* I think to myself, as dozens of people pour out of the subway cart. Moments later, the train comes to a stop on Grand Central. Great, next stop. It's 12:15 now. I glance over at that man again. He's staring at the floor completely withdrawn from reality. His eyes are blinking rapidly and for a moment, i'm afraid he's going to collapse. He's leaning over now, barely able to stand. The train rocks to the side and we all nearly fall over. He stumbles to the floor and we all stare as he remains on the ground.

These fucking dope fiends man, I don't know why they bother to ride the train, a young woman mumbles to her friend. I look back at her and she's chewing her gum loudly and staring at him in disgust. Nobody helps him up. They just watch him lay there. I hesitate before walking over to him.

Are you okay? I ask, placing my hands on his arms, lifting him up. He grunts quietly and looks up at me. His eyes still bloodshot. He looks at me and doesn't say a word. Now i'm scared. Should I have just let him lay there? Was it even my place to try and help? Silence. Silence and more silence. I take a few steps back. The train comes to another stop. I turn away, pretending not to notice him, but I feel him staring at me.

The doors slide open and I push past the people in front of me and rush to the exit. I don't bother looking back. That was probably the weirdest experience of my life. I quickly glance at my phone 12:25. Five minutes! What the fuck. I rush outside and look to my left. There it is. My dream school. I stare up at the beautiful purple banner with white letters that read, **New York University**. I close my eyes tight and take a long and hard deep breathe. Now exhale. You got this.

So what inspires you?

That's easy, I say to myself. Writing, travel, social justice, racial, and economic equity. The things that really matter in this world, duh.

Being able to contribute to community, I respond. He doesn't write any of this down. He just stares at me.

Define your community for me.

The African American community in the South Bronx. Our struggles go unnoticed on a daily basis because we have no real voice.

And being a writer is going to help you do that? Contribute?

I absolutely believe so. He continues to stare at me, as if he is waiting for me to say something more. I continue,

I've always been better at expressing myself through words. It's like my words keep me grounded. I think I will be able to empower my community by giving them a voice of their own..through my stories. He stares at me blankly. His voice stoic, yet deep with thought. I wish I could read his mind. I sit there with my palms sweating. *What's the hardest thing you've ever been through?* What the hell? This is not the kind of interview I was expecting.

I...uh...I don't--I don't really know. I say, regretting it the minute the words slip from my mouth. Now I'm fucked.

You seem very passionate when you talk about your community, he pauses, *but what makes a good writer and most certainly, a good leader is one who can conceptualize and empathize. What is it about your own experiences that have inspired you to be a leader in your community?*

The words came out full force, striking me in the chest like a heavy punch. This guy is intense, but he's a writer himself. What else can you expect? I ponder for a moment and immediately, I think about my father. I could make up a new story right now if I want to. Or for the first time in my life, I can chose to be honest.

I, like a lot of people in my community, grew up without a father. I pause. *I know it's not the same experience for everyone, but when you're father chooses his addiction over you--it's like--you live life wondering if you're even good enough.* The words just continue to spill out like falling dominoes. *It feels like all you really know how to do is...doubt yourself...because the one person who should care...actually doesn't...and it hurts,* I say softly, my voice cracks. At this point, i'm numb. I don't even think I can cry. I look up at him and he smiles widely. Now i'm crying. I feel like an idiot.

That's the kind of emotion you need to put into your writing. Invest in that and you will see tremendous progress. I nod repeatedly, sniffing as he passes me a box of tissues.

*This is so embarrassing, I whisper. He chuckles,
Are you kidding? I keep a box of tissues for moments like this all the time. You're not the first nor the last. I nod in agreement. He slowly rises from seat and shakes my hand.*

Good luck, Miss Garnet.

Thank you, I whisper, slowly closing the door behind me.

No one has ever asked me if I was okay. But she did. When i'm shaking and vomiting and sweating nobody asks me if i'm okay. When i'm curled up into a ball, lying on the side of the subway platform, not one person stops to ask me if i'm okay. But she did. She had the voice and the touch of an angel. It was like I had woken up out of my daze when I heard her voice. It was like getting slapped by a wave of bliss. She didn't even know me, but she cared enough to ask me if I was okay.

Garnett! The woman at the front desk calls. I drag my feet down the hallway and into Shauna's room. I sit down and this time she doesn't yell at me. She looks me dead in the face and says,

You blew it, Garnett. I hang my head low. This time, I don't beg. I don't tell her i'll change. I sit there in silence. It actually feels good. Just listening to the lights in the room flicker and her cheap fan blowing musty wind in her direction. It's too hot for this shit anyway. I'm sweating like a fucking pig.

Garnett, do you hear me?

I feel my eyes beginning to drop. My vision is blurred. I'm blinking hard trying to adjust my eyes. My head is spinning. It feels like I just got off some horrible fucking ride that spins until you want to swallow your own vomit. Oh god! I can't. *Please make it stop. Make it stopppp! Make it stopppppp! Ah, please! Stop,* I shout. I bite down on my hand as if its a goddam steak. The voice in my head is getting louder. She's fighting me. She's throwing punches and jabs and laughing as she does it. *Make it stop!* I scream. Shauna rises from her desk and rushes out the room. I hear her screaming for security. Two men come rushing over grabbing me by the arms and legs. I'm kicking my feet and screaming like a child throwing a tantrum. *Make it stoopppppp!* Suddenly, I feel a sharp pinch on my shoulder. In an instant, my eyes drop low. My headache slowly fades and all is black. Black like night. Black like the end. Black like it's game over.

Hey Tara,

It's been awhile since i've had the time to write. Well, in reality, I just didn't have the strength to. My recovery hasn't been easy, but one day at a time. Today makes four months being in rehab. One day at a time, is what I tell myself. It helps. The voices have eased away. I still have nightmares, but at least here I have what I need. A single bedroom, a kitchen, access to the gym, laundry facilities and job placement. They call this place the Luxury Rehab Center. We get apartment style housing, food,

entertainment and all that comes with it. The only condition is to get a job after you finish the program and maintain your counseling appointments and group therapy. I prefer the group therapy only because I hate talking about myself. My new caseworker or counselor, I should say, is a real sweetheart. She reminds me of you. Her name is Denise. She's soft spoken, but assertive. Something tells me you're the same way. I don't know how I got so lucky. Landing in a place like this, I don't deserve it.

I got a job as janitor in the building. It's not as bad as it sounds. It definitely keeps me busy. I'd like to start writing more. It's hard once you fall off. I wish I could see you and tell you I've changed. I think I've changed. I do. I'll have to prove that somehow. I promise. K, hun. Gotta go. Group therapy time.

Yours,

Dad

How's everyone feeling today? Marie asks. She's our group therapy coordinator. She's got short brown hair and eyes that sink into her face like Frankenstein. I can't judge though, I'm definitely uglier than her. Some of us smile placidly. Others lie and say they're okay. Like me. I'm not actually okay. But when you ask a dumb question, you're always going to get a plain response. There's three other guys in this group: Dane, Shean, and Allan. Then there's two females who sit quietly every week: Janet and Alba. Marie sits up in her chair and says,

We are going to do something different today. Some role-playing, she smiles. We all stare at her. She tells everyone to pick a partner. Dane scoots next to Allan and Shean makes his way to Janet. So there's me and Alba left.

Now, person, it doesn't matter who, should pretend to peer pressure your partner into using drugs. The other person should practice resisting the peer-pressure. What can you say in response? What actions can you take? Can you think of any ways to be conscious and in control of your urges? I stare at Marie. Is she serious? We all look at each other awkwardly.

The purpose of this activity is to explore the psychology of drug abuse and to practice saying "no" to drugs. I never thought of it that way. It was almost like the word "no" didn't exist in my vocabulary. I turn and face Alba. Her icy blue eyes are piercing into mine. She's got skin like sandpaper and thin lips that crack right through the middle. Again, I can't really judge. I'm definitely uglier than her too. She doesn't speak. Neither do I. We stare at each other for another few seconds. She looks at me and bites down on her chapped lips,

So you wanna get high? She asks with assertion. My heart skips a beat and I immediately want to say yes.

No, i'm good.

You're lying, she snaps. For a moment, it doesn't feel like we're acting.

How would you know? I respond.

You're just like me. You live and breathe this shit. You can't let it go. Damn, she's right. This is hopeless. We continue to stare at each other until Marie's voice interrupts our magnetic gaze.

How did that feel? She asks. Silence. Nobody wants to be here.

How about you, Terrance? She asks with purpose and excitement. Why me? Why does she have to call on me?

I don't know. I guess it felt like a lie.

What did?

All of it. Pretending to feel some way that I don't really feel. Be someone that i'm really not. She nods and shifts her eyebrows. I think she's really trying to understand.

Thank you for sharing, Terrance. She pauses, *Now...let's move onto another activity.* She slowly rises and passes each of us a sheet of paper. *I want you all to write about who you want to be when you leave here.*

What do you mean? Dane asks.

I think Terrence makes a great point. You shouldn't be pretending to be someone that you're not. You've all been here for some time now. We have to think about the future. What's next for you? Who do you want to be?

That escalated quickly.

Anyone want to start us off? Marie asks. Dane responds immediately,

I want to be a security guard.

I want to open my own restaurant. Janet says.

I like to draw. So, an artist, I guess. Alba adds.

I want to make music, Shean smiles. Marie looks at me. I stare at the floor.

I'd like to be...a mailman. I say. Everyone looks at me like i'm a idiot.

That's all very interesting, Marie nods with encouragement. *I want you all to do some daily reflections from now on. When we meet next week, we will brain storm ideas for how we can get you all to where you want to be,* she smiles. We all rise slowly and I leave feeling more hopeful than I did yesterday. I feel someone tap me on the shoulder, I turn around slowly,

Why a mailman? Alba asks. I look at her and chuckle.

I like to write letters that I never get to send, but it's a mailman's job to make sure they get delivered.

How did the interview go? Mom asks.

Oh, it was just great, I reply sarcastically, *I cried. So that's a plus.*

You cried? She repeats. *Why?*

I hesitate. Mom and I usually don't talk about my father.

Mm, well...be asked some really personal stuff.

And?...like what?

I told him about Dad. She stares at me and I look away. *I know you don't want to talk about it. We don't have to--*

No, she objects, *we should.* In an instant, over 21 years of pain comes running down my face like a waterfall. I sit beside her on the couch and place my hand on her lap. She caresses my hair like she used to when I was five. I miss being five. Being five was so much simpler.

I can't understand why I keep crying. I don't even know him.

Do you want to?

Want to what? I ask.

Do you want to know your father? I sniffle and remain silent.

Tara, baby. This isn't about me. I'm not going to make this about me. Now, my head is throbbing. This is why I don't like to cry.

Do you hate him? I ask. She looks at me and smiles,

Of course not. Look at you!, she says with pride, *I've been blessed with a beautiful and intelligent young woman as my daughter. I have no reason to be resentful. I just wish I could have done something to help him change, but you can't change people, sweetie. You just can't. You can bring the horse to the water, but you can't make them drink it.*

Hey sweetie,

You'd be so proud of me if you were here. I've been sober for almost a year. It feels good. The Luxury Rehab Center set me up with a job at the Post Office on Jackson Ave. I can't believe how lucky I've got. I still don't think I deserve God's mercy. I've let him down. I let your mother down and I've let you down. But on a positive note, Phil is such a great guy, you would like him. We met the day I came in for my interview. He was heading out the door pushing that giant cart full of mail that every mailman has to push. I held the door open as he exited. "Thank you, my brother" That was what he said to me. I told him I had an interview and asked if he could give me any advice. He told me to give him my name and he would put in a good word for me. I couldn't believe it. All I did was hold the door for the guy. Phil is just one of those pure souls. The kind of person that doesn't ask for anything. He gives and expects nothing in return. So selfless and honestly, just the coolest guy I know. I only been working at the Post Office for about two months and he's taken me under the wing. I'm actually at work right now. I like the evening shifts because it gives me time in the morning to get to my doctor appointments. Phil is really good about helping me manage my sugar intake. Since his mom died from diabetes he doesn't joke around. But anyway, let me get back to work. Talk soon!

Always in my heart,

Dad

I close my note pad and place it in my jacket pocket. Phil is sorting through letters and packages before he heads out for delivery. He picks up an envelope and comes to a sudden stop, staring at the letter carefully.

Stop being nosy, Phil, I joke. He ignores me and flips the envelope over several times. Taking time to look at the front. Then the back. Then the front again.

Terrance, check it out. He says, eagerly handing me the vanilla envelope.

What is it? A ransom note or death threat? I laugh, slowly walking over to him. I grab the envelope and scan it closely with my eyes. I almost piss on myself when I see the words on the front of the letter. I take about a billion mental photographs before I flip the letter over. I hold it up to the light and

shake my head. *It can't be*, I say. Oh, but it is. It is real. Here it is. A letter and it has *her* name on it. *Tara Garnett*. Right above it: **New York University**. I'm trembling now. As I press the letter up against my heart, and burst into tears. I'm crying so loudly that an elderly couple starts to stare at me from behind the glass window. Phil pats me on the shoulder, *You okay, T?* I quickly wipe the tears from my eyes, still clutching the letter. *Yeab*, I whisper. *I am now*.