

Absences

Staring at my first basketball trophy, I remembered how excited I was to win it. How, for a moment, I had been the best player in Illinois. Perhaps the world. I ran home, overjoyed to share the news with my parents. That sense of accomplishment led me to play professionally in Europe, but nothing I did was enough to win my parents' love.

“Are you around next Thursday, David? We are having a family lunch before Geneva's rehearsal dinner,” my mother, Laretta, said.

When my mother called to drop off a box of my old things, I didn't think it would turn into drama, but I should have known better. My sister, Geneva, was getting married next Saturday. I had plans to spend the week in New York. My return flight was Friday afternoon, plenty of time before Geneva's wedding. This lunch hadn't existed when I confirmed my itinerary with my sister.

“Mom, I'm going to New York. Geneva and I talked about it before I bought my flight. She doesn't care if I miss the rehearsal dinner. I'll be there for the wedding.”

My mother scoffed. “You only care about your friends, David. What about us? Family is the most important thing in the world,” she said.

“I moved back to Chicago, didn't I?”

“That didn't stop you from leaving for seven years,” she said.

I moved back to the city last August to study business as a graduate student at Northwestern. My sister had earned her PhD in Mathematics from the University of Chicago after completing an undergraduate degree there. My mother thought the University of Chicago was superior, even

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though I could recall her praising Northwestern on several occasions. She loved to talk about Chicago's prestigious institutions, always much prouder of her city than she ever was of me.

"You'll miss a celebration," my mother said. She took the trophy from my hand and placed it back in the box. She folded the lid to hide the artifacts of my childhood.

"I'll attend the wedding," I said.

"If you aren't too busy drinking beer with your friends, that is," she snorted.

"Geneva and I talked about it, mom. If you had told me about this lunch before, I would have booked an earlier flight."

"Oh, it's not too late to change your flight. Your father and I would be happy to pay, but a trivial event couldn't matter to a basketball star like you," she said.

Guilt filled me every time I disappointed my mother. The way her lips turned down as her eyes rounded. Her voice dripping in sadness, as dewy as the tears forming in her ducts. "I'll be there for the wedding, mom. Was there anything else in the car?"

"Oh, so now you're kicking me out? I see how it is, David. You should have just stayed in France with that nasty attitude. This is how you treat me for bringing your things?"

I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. As my mother often did, she stormed out of my condo, slamming the door. I knew she would say horrible things when I wasn't there to defend myself, but that was my life. My normal.

There was only so much I could do to appease my mother since she didn't love me.

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Guilt wore on as the days passed, like the bruise from a nasty fall. I loved my mother but didn't understand why she couldn't treat me in the same way as my sister, Geneva. Why had I

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been born second? Why had Laretta's ability to love changed with my birth?

The woman sharing my bed stirred. I had been awake for thirty-seven minutes. Every time disappointment overwhelmed me, it became hard to sleep. The woman, whose name I couldn't recall, ran her fingertips along my toned chest. "Everything okay?" the woman asked in a sultry whisper.

"Yeah. I have insomnia."

The woman rolled over. I would make her leave in a couple hours but wasn't in a rush. I hit the gym, showered, and ordered breakfast from a cafe around the corner. My one-night lover ate her charity meal before using my shower. Women loved its luxury. Finding a woman to share her body with me was easier than deciding what to eat.

I closed the door on the woman whose face would fade from my memory as quickly as ice cream in the sun. I ripped the sheets from my bed, throwing them in the washer. There was just enough time to clean before my flight to New York. I hated coming home to a dirty apartment.

Hours rolled around the clock, and I couldn't stop thinking about how my mother would act upon my return. Her disappointment always came with repercussions. When I graduated with my bachelor's in business administration from a state university, my mother didn't celebrate. She wanted me to study chemistry, a subject I had excelled at in high school, but I knew science wasn't my passion.

I followed my heart and found massive success as an athlete and would show my business ventures the same dedication.

My phone rang. I knew it was my mother. Her final offer. *Stay home or upset me.* She never said the words, but her actions spoke louder. I could never win.

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“Hi, mom,” I said.

“Have you left for the airport yet?”

“Just finished making the bed. Leaving now.”

“Your friends must be excited to see you,” she said.

“They are,” I agreed.

“It’s too bad you’ll have to miss our lunch. Your father is disappointed you didn’t check with me before planning this trip to New York,” she said.

My father, Warren, always took my mother’s side, even when it made zero sense. He was the owner of several restaurants but did nothing when Laretta scolded me at my graduation dinner all those years ago. Now my mother’s last-minute lunch, which she probably hadn’t planned until after finding out about my trip to New York.

“Geneva and I talked about it, mom. I’ll see you at the wedding. I have to leave, or I’ll miss my flight.”

She hung up without another word. I slid the phone into my pocket, grabbed my bags, and locked the door.

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On the flight back to Chicago, I dreaded my sister’s wedding. Hanging out with my friends from the team was refreshing. The drama had faded to the background until a photo of everyone eating lunch together popped up on my phone. Yesterday’s lunch that didn’t exist until long after Geneva had planned her rehearsal dinner.

When I got home, I rolled my suitcase to the bedroom and unzipped it on the floor. I sorted the dirty and clean clothes, placing them where they belonged. When I checked my phone, my

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sister had sent a message.

Geneva: Mom's having one of her fits because you missed the impromptu lunch. Please just try your best to get along with her tomorrow. PLEASE!!!!

Everyone believed my mother. They saw me as the problem through her eyes. She turned people against me, leaving me without a rope to grab. No net to catch me as I fell.

Me: You have my word, sis.

I lounged around the house until drifting to sleep. When I awoke the next morning, there wasn't much time to get ready. I had to skip the gym and hurry out the door. Geneva was having her wedding at the church where our parents married on the South Side of Chicago, which was across town from where I lived.

I arrived at the wedding with fifteen minutes to spare, but that wasn't good enough for Lauretta. She was sitting next to my father, Warren, in the pew nearest the altar. When I approached, she shooed me away. "You're late. How dare you try to sit up here," she said.

"I got stuck in traffic."

My mother looked at me with an intensity that made me recede from my position. I glanced at my father, but he turned his attention to the cross looming over the room. I found a place near the back of the church. A familiar-looking woman smiled when I caught her eyes. She must have been a friend of Geneva's.

The wedding was gorgeous. I wiped a tear from my eye when my sister kissed her new husband. As difficult as it was to see my parents treat us differently, I still loved my sister. She had shown me love when my parents couldn't, and I would always support her because of that.

I drove a few miles north to the reception. My mother and father appeared a minute after I

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had. They waved when they saw me. I forced a smile as they walked toward our table.

“Glad you were punctual to one of Geneva’s events,” Laretta said as she kissed my cheek.

“You have a good time in New York?” my father asked.

I told him how the guys and I went to restaurants, a concert, clubs, and a spa for massages.

Warren commented on missing his single days, and my mother slapped him on the shoulder.

“Speaking of single, David. When are you going to settle down like your sister?”

My father’s eyes glazed over. He stood, telling my mother that he was going to find wine.

My mother dug into me about how Geneva was better in every way. When I averted my eyes, the woman from the church pew quickly shifted her attention as though she hadn’t been eavesdropping. She was at the next table.

“Mom, do we have to do this now?”

My dad came back with two glasses of wine. I didn’t say anything about my desire for some liquid delusion. The waiters were making their rounds, so I would have mine soon enough.

“Warren, please tell your son about the benefits of marriage.”

“Mom, I get it. I date but haven’t found the right woman yet. Leave it alone.”

Geneva rolled into the reception hall before Laretta could reply, stealing everyone’s attention. People cheered. They hollered. I stared at the woman who I assumed was Geneva’s friend. She had brown hair that spiraled down to her shoulders. Olive skin. Hazel eyes. I was sketching her face into my memory.

The servers brought out dinner, and I asked one to leave a bottle of wine for the table. My mother was telling embarrassing stories from my past to relatives I never saw: the time when I pissed myself in high school (because they wouldn’t pull over), how I lost my mind and got us

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kicked off a mini-golf course (because my parents ridiculed me for missing putts), or when I cried on their front porch three years ago (because they had eviscerated the one girl I brought home to meet them).

The way my mom told the stories, they sounded funny. A grown man crying over spilled dessert? Pathetic. Laretta forgot to mention how my date had thrown her apple pie and stormed out of the house crying.

“You’re full of shit, mom!”

“David!” my father said.

My mother placed a hand on her chest. “How could you say that?”

Someone was giving a speech, but I didn’t care. I was tired of my mother’s mental games. Her playing the victim. “You forgot to tell them how you chased my ex-girlfriend out of the house like a raccoon. She was so upset she threw that apple pie! So what if it made me cry! You’ve never loved anything about me!”

I could feel my eyes burning, but I refused to cry. I grabbed my suit jacket from the chair and left as quickly as I could.

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“Wait,” someone said.

I turned to find the woman from the church pew running my way. The nerves from yelling at my mother slowed my escape. I leaned against my car, waiting for her to reach me.

“Sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” I said, not yet understanding why she had chased after me.

“You didn’t, David. Don’t worry. Your parents shouldn’t treat you like that. I’m Geneva’s

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friend from college, Margaret. She always talked about you. I used to admire how your parents treated Geneva, but...”

I shrugged. “Thanks, Margaret, but it’s not your fault.”

“I know, but here,” she said, passing me her business card.

“You don’t want nothing to do with me,” I said.

“Don’t hesitate to call if you want to talk.”

“Who are you? A therapist?”

“No, I’m a high school math teacher, but my parents didn’t love me either,” she said. Before I could reply, she smiled softly and backed away, her curls blowing in the wind. She disappeared inside without turning around. I tucked her card into my wallet.

No matter what happened, I wouldn’t forget Margaret’s name or face. I drove home. When I arrived, I took the box my mother brought out of the closet. Sometimes I wished I could return to the sweet innocence of childhood.

Staring at my first basketball trophy, I remembered how excited I was to win it.