

Time Out

You stare in the mirror sitting at *Beauty is our Beast* salon. You’ve been coming to Marilyn’s since the first scissors snipped your bangs. You were perched on a booster seat back then.

And when you were in high school, Marilyn snipped away your locks as she snapped Dentyne Ice. You cried as she talked in between gum cracks. Her gold hoop earrings dangled out of sync with half a dozen bracelets dangling around both of her skinny olive arms each red curl fell to the floor.

“You like, no? What’s the matter? You no like?”

You nod dutifully. Tears pour down your cheeks. You don’t know why the tears are there. You don’t know how to stop them.

You’re fourteen and under siege with an army of emotion. Some days are good but most suck. You never know what today will be. Heck today, this hour or this minute.

“What’s this about?” Your tall lean always stoic mother, Eloise McNamara asks.

“It’s a good cut. What’s with the tears?” She says standing at the register waiting to pay. You shake your head and avoid eye contact. If you knew you’d gladly tell her.

Today is different. You’re here at Marilyn’s alone. You’re eighteen. Three hours ago you chopped your hair off. Bad idea. Now, you want Marilyn to fix what you did to your hair. If only she could fix everything else on the should have known better list: don’t spend an afternoon with a boy in your dorm room, don’t let yourself get *carried away*, as good old Mom would say, don’t hitch a ride when you’re feeling crazy, don’t take Mom’s stash or check out Dad’s email to “Shit, is that another woman?” when he leaves his password lying around. And above all else, don’t cheat on your uptight boyfriend that you keep trying to ditch, but can’t get out the right words to say . . . get lost for good.

But your big mouth ex-good friend, Carole, she was never a best friend, spills to your freaking boyfriend, Charlie, about the guy in the dorm. She could have had uptight Charlie, if she wanted him. You think that’s why she told him. You don’t care anymore.

You kept trying to break up with Charlie but you didn’t want to hurt his feelings. See that’s the problem with you. You got stuck with a psycho-boyfriend because you couldn’t say “Game over, get lost loser.”

Instead he shows up with all this, “I need to talk to you” bullshit and you fall for it. Again.

You swear if he had gotten into law school, any law school, he wouldn’t be as focused on you. Instead you are stuck being his replacement obsession. You finally had the guts to ditch him after he called you twelve times in one day. Then he sent two dozen roses. Then he waited for your Mom when she finished her shift at Medical Center.

“Your daughter is making the biggest mistake of her life, Mrs. McNamara.”

“Well . . . since Sharon’s only eighteen, I think she’s probably got a few more big mistakes left in her. Don’t you think she’s a little young to settle down? Besides . . . what happened to law school, Charlie?”

Still he won’t take no for an answer and you’re stupid enough to meet him, to think that he would never hurt you. Of course, you get in the car and of course you lock the door, freaking force of habit. Driving along and the next thing he says, “I can’t live without you.”

See that shit just kills you. Maybe it’s because you’re a replacement, named after your dead sister. But that’s another story.

Who names their midlife mistake after their dead first kid? The lovely Eloise and Arthur McNamara did because they lack imagination as only two parents who are bereaved. They named you, Sharon, after your dead sister.

Never met her, and probably wouldn't even be here if her wonderful boyfriend, Brian Sullivan, hadn't hit a tree on the Saw Mill Parkway way back twenty years ago. That was the night your sister, Sharon, went head long into a tree. She died instantly.

Brian lived and invited his deceased girlfriend's family to his wedding ten years later. You remember going too. You stood right there in a little chapel way up in Brewster, New York, watching Brian walking down the aisle with a dark headed woman whom he had found to replace his first love, Sharon, your dead sister. Everyone loved Sharon. And everyone said, “Oh . . . you're Sharon too . . . with red hair.” Yeah, that's right just like in the Dr. Seuss's story, *Thing One and Thing Two*.

Do you know what it's like competing with a dead sister? It sucks. First off, she was a goody two shoes, close to your mother or at least that's how the story goes. Who the hell knows?

The only way you know anything is from Aunt Violet. She's fifteen years older than you. Sharon and her used to be friends, and of course, cousins. You call her an aunt because she feels more like an aunt than a cousin. She's the only one who seems real.

Violet knew that her Auntie Ellie was more than just quirky. She was a down right nut job and Dad, well he just tried to pretend, with his pocket protector glued to his freaking shirt like it was armor against the onslaught of emotion. That's how Charles Winooski became a good outlet to kill time until graduation rolled around. Who knew he'd try to strangle you with your own scarf in his freaking Ford Suburban? What a way to start freshman year at Sarah Lawrence.

“Sharon was quirky,” Violet says, walking through Inwood Park. This was the day after you escaped from Charlie's Ford Suburban. You took the last Conrail home from Bronxville.

“She could get pissed off real easy and just stop speaking to you,” Violet says.

“Like my Mom . . . she does that with Dad all the time.” You confess to Aunt Violet. “Dad says it's the change of life and all she's been through.”

“Well I suppose . . .” Violet says.

“Haven’t we all been through a shit ton of trouble. I’m stuck with her freaking name. Who thought that was a good idea? At least my school friends call me Shay now.”

“Would you like me to call you that too?”

You nod as Aunt Violet rummages through her handbag, pulling out a cigarette. “I’m back on these damn butts again.”

“Hey, you’re only human.”

You walk with Violet in silence through the park. Violet’s cool. She gets you.

Thinking back now to when you were a high school junior, you hoped for an end to this namesake crap. You envisioned getting out from under the old parents pathetic attempt to resurrect dead sis. You lived in her room since birth. She wanted to be a nurse. You hate sick people. Mom’s a nurse. All you could tell from that was nurses got better drugs than most people, except for doctors, of course.

Dad’s a chemical engineer and so can you say fucking, clueless. He didn’t need drugs to be out of it. He was in his own little geek world to begin with.

“Been running wild,” old Ellie aka Mom might say, if she paid attention.

First off you got to run wild because Ellie and Art were a very different Mommy and Daddy now than they were to dead sis. Mom gave birth to you at 43. That didn’t sit well with her figure, or you imagine, her sex life. What the hell do you know? You’re a kid, that’s what you keep getting told. And you bought that bullshit to a degree.

Old parents are boring and depressing. They don’t ask the right questions and don’t seem to care about the answers. They don’t think kids know anything. Kids do. So you could say, “I’m staying at Patty’s house. Her Mom’s a nurse too. Patty’s mom works at Mt. Sinai.” They didn’t even know each other, but naïve Mom must have thought, “Oh, another nurse, that’s fine.”

Of course, you always told your Mom that you were staying at Patty’s house. And you did. It’s just that Patty’s mom worked the night shift, so she wasn’t home until seven.

You globed on double lash mascara, Patty wore belly shirts and five inch heels. You laughed, slipped a token into the turnstile slot at the 207th Street Station and rattled down the subway steps into the A train. When the conductor called out, West 4th Street, you sashayed off the train and into an NYU mixer, living Madonna’s classic song, “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” protected with a fake ID and always more desire than cash.

The neighbors knew you were running wild, but no one would ever say anything to the lovely Ellie and Art because they’d *gone through so much*. Violet saved your ass more times than you’d care to admit. Feel bad about the whole thing now staring at yourself as Marilyn dabs Paul Mitchell styling gel through what’s left of your hair.

You thought about skimming the parents’ liquor cabinet. Mom and Dad opened several bottles, good shit too. They’d never notice a little missing from here and a bit more from there. Never be greedy and you won’t caught, that’s the way to be, except when it isn’t.

That’s a side effect of having old parents, you actually relate to older people better until it blows up in your face, the way the Charlie thing did. You knew this too. Still you kept thinking the freaking parents would say, “Sharon, replacement daughter, why not hook a younger boy than this Charlie guy?” But they didn’t. Mom’s counted off the days until she could retire and head to Fort Lauderdale, send you off for good like a first class package and chalk kid number two up as been there and done that.

When you met Charlie at a NYU mixer, he was a senior with applications sent out to law school. To you at seventeen, he seemed hot. Still even then you knew he was too old. At first you liked the newness of a guy with a dorm room. He used the “L” word. There’s nothing like being a sucker when you’re a cynic at heart. You and Charlie wandered through Greenwich Village stoned, listening to sidewalk musicians, our mouths orange from licking Italian ice in the dead of winter. Then, back in his room, you liked the comfort of his arms tucked around you.

You felt safe, cared for, like you never felt at home. You knew this was a strange in-between age, getting ready to get the hell out and still needing parents. You never stopped wanting Ellie and Art to want you. Instead you were just a replacement for their real daughter.

At home, you noticed funny shit going down. You had a hunch Dad was cheating. You didn't want to reveal that at one of those freaking depressing family dinners where all you could think, washow much longer? Let them deal with their own shit. You'd roll a joint in your room even if it was *her* room. It's the only room you've ever known. You walked in Inwood Park through the woods as far as Fort Tryon Park. You toked up wondering what's with Dad . . . who knows? Are engineers really from this planet?

Once you got accepted to Sarah Lawrence you thought they'd say something positive. You're into sculpture, pretty good at it too. Zip. It didn't matter, not really. By then you could see clearer. Charlie's waitlists were forgotten. He talked about getting an MBA, but he was a toll taker on the George Washington Bridge. Good money, but not a career path unless he wanted to die at thirty from exhaust fumes.

He turned into a freaking grownup overnight. Man what a turn off. Not like seventeen into eighteen hadn't been a huge change. Now you were able to see the end of this bad joke as replacement Sharon. The world of Shay was beginning to bloom.

Then Charlie showed up with a little black velvet box and inside was a gold heart for Valentine's Day. This was around the same time you were finally getting the courage to ditch him. Couldn't after he took the heart out. Son of a bitch kept buying jewelry. You feel awful dumping a guy who has already been rejected so much and spends his life on the fucking GW Bridge having to look at the Jersey side.

Then Mom found out Dad was cheating on her. Boy did that suck, all hell broke loose. Man it was bad. Like here you are stuck being Mom's number one. Honestly, you didn't get her. And you

couldn't get rid of Charlie. Freaking people were just clawing at you. Then, it was time for the prom and you figured, be practical, keep him around for a date.

You listened to girls screeching about stupid dress styles and freaking yearbook photos. You never understood all that end of life as a high school kid. Shit, you were happy to say cool, be gone. That's when you went to confront Dad. Because even though you didn't get Mom, she was still Mom. Dad was just some computer geek like the Best Buy idiots. He always gave longwinded complicated answers for *everything*. You never really knew what he was talking about. It was that day when it dawned on you that maybe it wasn't you. Maybe he was just full of shit and that he made sense to no one. He turned out to be a real downer. No wonder Mom was always popping a pill for this and another one for that.

He flaked out like a hysterical high school twit; never associated with that kind of kid. My own funny farm at home satisfied that quota.

“Hold on to that foolish boyfriend you've got your clutches into now. No one will ever want you. All you did was 'cause trouble from the moment you took your first breath,” Dad said.

“Thought you wanted me to replace your dear perfect Sharon?”

“You'd never replace her. You'd never in a million years be half as good as her. It took Brian a decade to find someone who even came close. Face it, you were just a . . .” he said.

“Say it! I'm an accident. You two never intended to have another kid. You just didn't have the guts to get rid of me.”

You slammed the door and ran down the stairs. He never even followed. That's Dad. He's no freaking father of the year.

So now loser law school flunky turned MBA hopeful started to look much better than before. Mom took way more ups and downs than was appropriate and the only one you could turn to was Violet. She had her own story, but her alcohol and pill consumption didn't appear to be a concern. Her battles were with butts and chocolate called her name a lot. That's what she said anyway.

Back sitting in Marilyn’s chair . . . she styled what was left of your hair. You loved it. Hoped Charlie might hate it. This way you hoped to have yet another breakup fight. As only your life would have it, he didn’t mind the haircut, the cheating or even that you told him to leave. He didn’t.

You handled all of that like a freaking zombie pro until you tell Violet and she mentions . . .

“You know that after Sharon’s death . . .”

“What?”

You didn’t know anything. Your whole life was a big smoke screen.

“They were ready to break up. Your Mom found herself pregnant. They took it as a sign and stayed together.”

“Are you serious?”

She nodded. She cried. That just pissed you off. Here you are finding out that you’re not only a replacement, but a straight-up accident. And she’s crying.

You wrote Charlie a letter, mailed the heart with it, send it from the post office, even insured it, just to be sure. Watched Marilyn blow dry your red hair. She was a real good hairdresser. You could never get your hair to sit perfect, the way she did. You left her a big tip.

Knew Mom wouldn’t be home for hours. You opened a sealed bottle of Jack Daniels, took a taste here and a sip there. Screw that shit. They didn’t ever really want you. You took a few of Mom’s sleeping pills with a small handful of her valium too. You didn’t want to die. You just didn’t want to deal any longer.

You figured if you were really Mom’s number one she’d wake you up. If Violet had a clue, she’d check-up on you. You poured the Jack into one of Mom’s Waterford Crystal goblets, the kind she used for special occasions. You swallowed a few more pills, flipped through the latest *Self* magazine. Not too many pills because you didn’t want to vomit. That was gross. You just needed a little attention, some reassurance that you were supposed to be here, on this planet, today, as you, and not the namesake, or the accident.