

## QUALITY TIME

With closed eyes Sharon's mind continued to race between memories of her only daughter Nikki walking across the stage for her eighth grade graduation to the first time she was arrested a year after Harry died. As paranoia fueled her racing thoughts Sharon imagined what it would be like to take her first drink at the age of fifty-two. Instead she opened her eyes and glanced over at her five year old grandson Richie sitting next to her on the couch watching television, the white and red Christmas lights from her tree dancing in his glasses' reflection. Mrs. Watts from his school called Sharon a few hours ago to inform her that Nikki never came to pick him up after the early Christmas Eve dismissal. Lost in her thoughts Sharon could only smile when Richie noticed her staring at him, giving her back the same sweet smile that Nikki used to when she was his age. Seeing this filled Sharon with a few moments of joy that would only dissipate seconds later once she remembered the disastrous existence Nikki was dragging both herself and Richie through with her actions.

Sharon's heart jumped when her cell phone rang, hoping it was Nikki revealing her whereabouts. Instead it was her youngest son Jerry.

"Any word yet?" He inquired, a symphony of inaudible noise providing the soundtrack behind his voice.

"Nope." Sharon replied.

"Well what you want me to do Ma? Me and Kim takin' the kids to Jersey to see her folks an' we don't have room for Richie--"

"Did I *ask you* to get him?" Sharon sassed, prepared for another involved argument about Nikki and her subpar parenting skills. But instead she quelled it upfront. "Look, I'll let you know when I hear from her."

"Don't bother." He stated. "We'll probably stay in Jersey until New Year's."

"Whatever. Merry Christmas." She said, hanging up and tossing her phone onto the nearby love seat. In the ensuing moments after their brief conversation Sharon suspected that Jerry's rotund, overbearing

## QUALITY TIME

wife was probably somewhere on the sidelines coaching him through all of the possible ways he could stay detached from the situation. Of her three offspring Sharon sensed the desire of entitlement from Jerry since childhood. And because of his determination and academic prowess he was afforded many opportunities to untie himself from his humble Northeast Philadelphia roots and remain distanced from his family.

Thirty minutes later Sharon had grown tired of worrying and waiting. At that point she knew Jerry was useless and her eldest son, Harry Jr., lived in a halfway house in Dover. She went to the bathroom to splash some water on her face. Catching a quick glimpse in the mirror she took notice of her interwoven strands of gray and brown hair and the paleness of her skin, remembering a time when she dyed her hair sunny blonde every week and would go tanning down the shore in the summer. That girl was a far cry from the widowed grandmother she had become.

But, she still had a hell of a lot of heart.

“Rich, get your coat baby. We’re goin’ for a walk.” She said. Richie leapt up from the couch to grab his puffy red and black coat from the back of the dining room chair. Sharon dipped into a small, rusted coffee can on the kitchen counter to retrieve two ten dollar bills and two tokens for the bus just in case she needed them. She opened the door and Richie ran out first, a blast of cold air giving Sharon a quick hit of goose bumps. Once outside she bent down to fasten Richie’s coat and placed his yellow SpongeBob Squarepants hat on his head. She turned to lock the door and was startled to see her disheveled neighbor Mandy standing with Richie once she turned back around.

“Hey Miss Sharon!” Mandy’s gruff voice greeted her, drunk or high as she normally was.

“Hey Mandy.” Sharon barely spoke, grabbing Richie’s hand to lead him away from her. “You seen Nikki?”

“You got a couple dollars for the train Miss Sharon?” Mandy asked. “I lost my purse.”

## QUALITY TIME

Sharon looked over Mandy's wiry, unkempt appearance and made no mention to her about the tattered brown purse draped across her body.

"Merry Christmas." She mumbled, walking away with Richie's hand gripped tightly inside of hers.

"Gram who was that?" Richie asked, his voice always airy and innocuous.

Sharon ignored his question as they continued onward, walking towards Frankford Avenue to search for Nikki. The two of them strolled at a steady pace against the brisk bitter night, light snow flurries dancing across the sky in true holiday style. Multicolored Christmas lights sparkled inside of storefronts and residential windows capturing Richie's attention while Sharon kept her eyes open for Nikki. Before long they stopped in front of one of Nikki's favorite corner bars, Meegan's. Sharon peeked her head in to find six male patrons sitting inside the dimly lit bar, desperation set into their faces like it was the price of admission. Without missing a beat Sharon left to continue her search with Richie in tow. A few blocks down they found a huge crowd watching a brawl taking place outside of Junies, a popular hangout spot underneath the elevated train catering to a younger crowd. Sharon stopped short and picked Richie up to shield him from the drunken foolishness, which was a nightly occurrence at Junies. She watched in horror as two white men in their mid-twenties, one brandishing a broken beer bottle and one with blood gushing from his forehead, tried to finish their fight while a buxom Dominican woman stood in between them screaming and crying. Moments later police sirens and squad cars descended upon the scene with officers jumping out to apprehend everyone. Sharon began to walk away until she noticed one of the arresting officers.

"Hey..." She called out to him, her voice barely competing with the calamity around them. "Hey!"

He turned around, saw Sharon's face and then proceeded to walk in the opposite direction.

## QUALITY TIME

“You seen Nikki?” Sharon yelled before he disappeared into the crowd. She called out to him a few more times but her voice was finally silenced by the sirens of additional squad cars and the blare of an ambulance. Defeated, Sharon walked away to continue her search.

“Gram I’m hungry.” Richie said, his arms wrapped tightly around her as she held him. She looked into his eyes, the saddest eyes she’d ever seen on a kid, and caved in when she noticed the renowned arches of a fast food restaurant across the street. Upon entrance she was greeted by Jerry’s childhood friend Tina, a sweet, plain girl who pined for his affections but fell minuscule against his innate distaste for neighborhood girls. They hugged and engaged in small talk for a bit with Sharon inadvertently revealing the reason she was out on Christmas Eve. Tina never understood Nikki’s behavior and always had a soft spot for Sharon and her family. She decided to pay for their meal, to which Sharon hesitantly obliged.

“Is Mommy Ok?” Richie asked in between bites of his cheeseburger.

“You like your toy baby?” Sharon asked, sipping her coffee and checking her phone.

Richie smiled and nodded, his unwrapped yellow Minion toy placed next to a small half eaten bag of French fries. Sharon gave a faint laugh, finally finding a bit of joy amidst the circumstances. However she was thrown back into anger when she noticed the rugged officer from earlier walking through the door. The two of them locked eyes until Sharon broke their gaze to check her phone as he walked over towards them.

“Daddy!” Richie exclaimed with a hug as the officer sat down next to him.

He grinned and gave Richie’s hair a pitiful tousle before looking over at Sharon. “Hey.”

“Chris.” She replied without eye contact.

“So, where is she?”

## QUALITY TIME

“The hell if I know.” Sharon replied, finally looking at him. “When’s the last time *you* talked to her?”

Chris answered her question with a silent expression of guilt and indifference.

“Guess you haven’t. Can’t let your wife find out, right?”

“I’m not doin’ this with you Sharon.” Chris said, rising to dig into his pocket and place a worn twenty dollar bill on the table. He then kissed Richie on the top of his head. “Bye son.”

“Bye Daddy.” Richie said, finishing the last of his fries.

Then with apprehension he addressed Sharon once more. “If you see her-“

“Bye Chris.” Sharon dismissed him, placing the twenty in her jacket pocket. She never cared for Chris, especially after he spent years taking advantage of Nikki until he got bored and moved on without explanation. Unfortunately it was around this time Nikki discovered she was pregnant. Chris made a pathetic attempt with sporadic financial support until Richie was two, but after he became a cop he cut all ties with Nikki. News of his marriage to a pregnant stripper after abandoning Nikki and Richie didn’t help Sharon’s perception of Chris either.

After shaking off the negativity of their encounter Sharon thanked Tina for the food before she and Richie left. Fifteen minutes after their departure the snow increased to a slightly steadier pace around the time they ran into Gretchen and Leslie, two of Nikki’s close friends from the neighborhood. Once Sharon explained what was going on Gretchen informed her that she hadn’t heard from Nikki in a while, yet Sharon could tell from her tone that she was lying.

“She won’t say anything to you but they don’t really talk anymore.” Leslie revealed after Gretchen took Richie inside a nearby coffee house for a hot chocolate. “Gretch loaned Nikki a hundred bucks a while ago and she still hasn’t paid her back yet.”

## QUALITY TIME

The news made Sharon chuckle out of embarrassment, rolling her eyes towards the snowy sky. "Jesus."

"She asked me if she should give Nikki the money and I told her 'Hell No!' But, Gretch felt bad for her, especially since she's takin' care of a kid with no man around."

*She wouldn't take care of him if there was a man around* Sharon thought, but only snickered at Leslie's comment in response.

"If you hear from her-"

"I doubt she'll be calling either one of us anytime soon." Leslie cut into Sharon's request. "But she out here partyin' I'm sure. And me and Gretch will probably hit a few bars tonight before we go home. If I see her I'll get in her ass for you."

"Just...stay out of Junies." Sharon warned.

When Gretchen returned Sharon hugged them both before she and Richie continued their mission. Richie held his kid-sized cup of hot chocolate with both hands, happily telling Sharon about how 'Ant Gretch' put lots of marshmallows in it. They traipsed about for another half hour through the light snowfall until Sharon finally realized that they weren't going to find Nikki any time soon. Plus this wasn't the first time Sharon had to track Nikki down so she knew if she hadn't found her yet she wasn't going to that night. However she took comfort in the fact that Nikki wasn't a crackhead because Sharon had already been through that hell with her eldest son and knew the signs. Nikki was simply the victim of her own bad decisions and immaturity. Since Harry's passing seven years ago Sharon tried to be the best provider she could, though her children never truly appreciated the sacrifices she made. She never drank. She never dated. She didn't party. Just work and her kids. And the thanks she got came in the forms of neglect, inconsistency and lies. Harry Jr. used to steal from her. Nikki was a borderline

## QUALITY TIME

narcissist. And although Sharon wanted to be proud of everything Jerry had accomplished it always saddened her because she knew he would never give her any credit in turning out the way he did.

And that's what hurt her the most.

"Gram.." Richie's voice rescued her from her jumbled thoughts. "Can we go home?"

Sharon had long noticed Richie's sluggishness and was ready to go home as well.

"Yes baby." She answered, noticing a bus in the distance coming towards them. "We're goin' now."

Within a few minutes the R bus pulled up in front of them. Richie ran on first and as Sharon plopped her token in she was confused to see Richie run to the back until he screamed "MOMMY!!!!"

Sharon noticed Nikki in the back of the bus wearing a tight red sweater dress, white scarf, black boots and pink Santa hat snuggled in an uncomfortable embrace with a dingy, bear-like gray bearded man who appeared to be older than she was.

"God..." Nikki mumbled. "Hey Ma."

"Don't *Hey Ma* me!" Sharon's voice bellowed as she made her way to the back of the bus. "Where the hell have you been?!"

"Ma this is Earl." Nikki dismissed her, introducing the old man.

"Hi Earl." Richie greeted him grinning, but Earl was in no mood for pleasantries or family reunions.

"Who this?" Earl asked, irritated. "We still goin' down A.C.?"

"A.C.?" Sharon asked before picking Richie up and grabbing Nikki by her arm. "Come on."

Nikki broke away. "No! Ma, me an' Charles are goin' to Atlantic City--"

## QUALITY TIME

"It's Earl!" He corrected her, liquor seeping out of his pores like cheap cologne. "Is this your kid?"

"LET'S GO NICOLE!" Sharon shouted, grabbing her once again. Richie started crying as Sharon and Nikki began arguing. Suddenly they all jerked forward as the bus slammed to a stop.

"Off!" The driver yelled from his seat. "Y'all gotta go."

A rush of cold air wafted onto the bus as the back doors flung open. While holding Richie with one arm Sharon pulled Nikki off the bus with the other as Earl sat dumbfounded.

"Hey I paid you fifty bucks hoe—"were Earl's last words as the doors shut and the bus pulled off.

"Shhhh...come on Rich." Sharon said as she rocked and soothed Richie, his cries subsiding. "It's Ok."

"Ma that guy was gon' take me to A.C.!" Nikki screamed, clearly drunk.

"*Really Nicole?* On the damn R? God, why don't you think sometimes?" Sharon said, walking away from her.

Nikki stumbled trying to keep up behind her. "You're always messin' stuff up for me. I needed the money for gifts for Richie."

"And where is the money?" Sharon spun around to ask. "You still got the fifty dollars?"

Nikki gave a mystified look. "Fifty dollars? Ma, that's gone. That's why we were goin' to AC."

Sharon turned away without comment, continuing the ten minute trek back to her house with Richie now silent and on the verge of sleep in her arms. Nikki slowly followed a few feet behind them, fidgeting with her phone and mumbling curse words under her breath because she knew better than to try Sharon at that moment. After entering the house Nikki sat silently on the love seat while Sharon placed a sleeping Richie on the couch to take his jacket and hat off and cover him with a comforter. She

## QUALITY TIME

removed his glasses and placed them on the coffee table in front of Nikki before walking past her to retrieve a cold Ginger ale from the refrigerator. Sharon sat at the kitchen table, pulled out a cigarette and lit it. The long drag she took filled her with calm. Meanwhile Nikki sat in the living room watching Richie as he slept. She sighed and smiled, then perused all of the festive decorations around the house, resting her eyes on the pile of gifts underneath the tree near the television.

“Those for me?” Nikki asked, but Sharon ignored her. “Ma?”

Sharon released a painful exhale before replying “They’re for Richie.”

Nikki smirked as she struggled to get off the love seat to join Sharon in the kitchen. After she sat down across from her she slipped her hand over Sharon’s pack of Marlboro Reds and pulled out the last cigarette.

“Ma, we really were goin’ to A.C.” She said before she lit it.

“You forgot him again.” Sharon stated, taking another drag. “You promised me that *last time* was the last time.” She blew the smoke out before adding “I ran into Leslie today.”

“Was she with Gretchen?” Nikki asked almost immediately. “I owe her fifty bucks. Shoulda kept what I got from Charles an’ gave it to her.”

“Earl...” Sharon replied. “You snortin’ again?”

“What? No. Mother please.” Nikki stated. “I was out with a few friends and lost track of time.”

“School let out at noon today. Richie was sitting there waiting for three hours.”

“Oh, I thought they got outta school early tomorrow.”

## QUALITY TIME

Sharon was speechless as she looked at Nikki in awe. She took another drag and looked away before exhaling. "You stayin' here or goin' home?"

"It's too late Ma. Plus I don't know what the buses are runnin' like now. And I don't wanna wake Richie up."

Sharon put her cigarette out and rose from the table. "Fine, whatever. I'm off for the next few nights. I might cook tomorrow. Maybe invite Junior and his kids."

Nikki perked up, pleased at the idea. "Yeah, that'd be nice. I haven't seen his boys in a while. Does Donna let him see them?"

"I'll call her in the morning. I've been buggin' her to bring them by since Thanksgiving. Think it'd be nice if we were all together." Sharon said, walking over to her old coffee can and taking the eighty-seven dollars out of it before exiting the kitchen. Nikki was playing around with her phone at the time, but she noticed what Sharon did and it made her feel terrible. Sharon walked over to Richie and kissed his forehead before going upstairs. As she ascended Sharon heard Nikki say "Merry Christmas Ma" but she didn't feel like saying anything else to her that night.

Sharon retreated to her bedroom, changed into a t-shirt and sweats then slipped underneath her warm comforter to rest after the long, stressful night. The sleep was so peaceful she almost felt ashamed when she woke up at 9:46 the next morning. She emerged from her slumber to the faint aroma of breakfast permeating the air.

"Merry Christmas Gram!" Richie greeted her after she finally came downstairs. He was playing with his new toys next to the Christmas tree as Ironman engaged in an animated battle on the television.

"Merry Christmas Rich." She greeted him, bending down to give him a tight squeeze. She looked around for Nikki. "Where's Mommy?"

## QUALITY TIME

“She went to the store again.” He replied. Sharon thought nothing of it at first but was snapped back to attention when she went to hang her coat up and noticed that the twenty dollars Chris gave her the night before was missing from her jacket pocket.

Sharon rushed to the front door, hoping that Nikki had just left. But the only thing waiting for her on the other side was chilly morning air and two kids riding their new bikes up and down the block. Sharon closed the door and went into the kitchen, noticing an unopened pack of cigarettes on the table first before discovering the sink full of dirty dishes. She then opened the microwave and saw a paper plate with scrambled eggs and bacon wrapped in cellophane, a note scribbled on a pink Post-It attached.

Sorry ☹

Sharon looked up at the ceiling and sighed. She then glanced back over at Richie, who was just as happy as he could be that Christmas morning. Then, she took the note and the plastic wrap off the plate to heat her food up and said in a low voice “Merry Christmas Nikki”.