

## REUNITED

The announcement alerting passengers of the train's arrival in Wilmington surprised me. Where had the past hour gone? I stuffed my notebooks into my briefcase. I had not read nor written a word, having spent the whole trip rehearsing how I would approach Mom. Previously, when I had tried to ask her about the fire, it had not gone well. But I had to try again. I remembered my last conversation with Dad. We had been making repairs in the horse stable where some side-planks had been blown off by the wind. We had patched-up the damage enough until a repair company could come and properly fix the wall. It had been hard work but, it had felt good to work side by side. He had been unusually quiet, concentrating on what he needed to do. Before we headed back to the house, he said he and Mom needed to talk to me. It sounded urgent and I pressed him to tell me what was going on. He wouldn't. He wanted Mom to be present. Mom hadn't been home, and by the time she returned there had not been enough time. A week later, Dad had a massive heart attack. I hadn't spoken to him since that day in the stable; it was as if he had avoided me.

I hadn't seen Mom since Christmas, our first without Dad. I felt guilty but had plenty of excuses for staying away: three full-credit classes, the internship for Judge Harrison, therapy. And, then there had been Brad. I anticipated Mom's silent rebuke when she found out that I'd broken it off with him. She liked Brad, and after almost two years together, she had thought he was the one for me. I disagreed. Brad had never understood me nor my grief over Dad's death. For him, my need for therapy was a sign of weakness. My goal of becoming an immigration lawyer, silly because I would never make any money. My politics, childish and idealistic. My interest in the environment, moronic tree hugger bullshit. And, I put up with it until one day, I had enough. I was not prepared to deal with Mom's judgment.

She was waiting for me inside the terminal. We hugged, said the usual pleasantries, and made the customary inquiries while walking to her 450SL Mercedes. It was a beautiful, late spring evening, so we drove home with the top down, mostly in silence. When we got home, we were both tired and quickly retired to our rooms. The Brad conversation could wait until after the more important one we would have in the morning.

The following morning, I awoke before my 6 am alarm went off. I jumped out of bed full of energy, although I had not slept well. Whenever I visited Delaware, I liked to keep my daily routine of 20 minutes of meditation, followed by a run before Mom got up. She was an early riser, and once she was up, I could never get anything done because she always had the full day planned for me. However, I wasn't sure what to expect during this visit; Mom had changed since Dad's death. I had left everything ready the night before, not wanting to make any noise that would wake her; my yoga mat, my clothes, and running shoes by my bed. I laid out my well-worn rug, closed my eyes for a few seconds, and considered my intention for this morning's practice. *I want to feel Dad's presence. He will give me strength for the conversation I must have with Mom.*

Sufficiently grounded, I practiced breathing exercises, and some stretches for twenty minutes. Then I dressed, pulled my hair back in a ponytail, washed my teeth, and headed out the door. I was eager to leave and almost forgot to turn off the security alarm. It was still dark outside, but I knew the roads, and the neighborhood was safe. I usually ran five miles in DC, but this morning I had decided only to run two. I wanted to be back in the house before Mom got up, and the hilly route I planned to take would be more challenging than DC's flat streets.

When I returned from my run, I went to the kitchen to wait for Mom. I knew it would be her first stop when she came downstairs, after showering, and before locking herself in her home office. With some effort, I had figured out how to start the new, fancy coffee maker. The coffee was ready, but I had not served myself a cup. I felt anxious enough and didn't need coffee to make things worse.

I was determined to speak with Mom. I thought the conversation Dad had wanted to have had something to do with the fire, and I knew it would be hard for Mom to talk. I would have to stay calm and be very sensitive. Dad's sudden death had devastated Mom. He had been in great shape and had never evidenced any health issues. One morning last January, Mom was downstairs when she heard him call her. She didn't think it was urgent and continued preparing breakfast. When she finally went upstairs to see what Dad wanted, he was lying on the floor, his hand clutching his chest. She called 911.

It took the paramedics a while to get to the house. The night before, a northeaster had dropped more than four inches of snow, and the road to our house was almost impassable. By the time they arrived, it was too late. The rest was a blur for me. I remember a neighbor had called me because the doctor had had to sedate Mom. Another one picked me up at the station. Others helped us with all the arrangements and got us through the worst four days of our lives. Then, Mom and I were alone in the house that without Dad had become a suffocating museum. A wall came up between us, and what once was a warm and tender relationship turned cold and distant. Mom shut me out, and I didn't know how to reach her. I tried.

I visited her weekly for the first two months, then once a month until I stopped coming. The last visit had been in December. We celebrated Christmas alone, with no tree, no lights, no fancy dinner, no annual visit to Longwood Gardens, no cheer, and nothing to celebrate. Each of us was trapped in our sadness. We had dinner Christmas eve at Giardonos Pizza in Kennett Square and ate the leftovers Christmas Day. The following day, I went home to DC, and now I was back. Even though the weather had changed outside, everything inside the house was the same as if frozen in time.

I heard Mom walking towards the kitchen and braced myself. As soon as she walked in, I blurted, "Mom, we need to talk." I did not want to lose my nerve. I hoped she hadn't heard the anxiety in my voice.

"Sounds serious. Is everything OK?" Mom replied.

I thought, "Darn, she knows me so well." I cringed but quickly recovered.

Mom walked to the mahogany cupboard across from where I was standing. I could see her reflection on the shiny wood. As always, she looked flawless, her blond hair impeccably styled. Her French manicure was fresh as if she had just come from the nail salon. Even in slacks and a button-down shirt, she looked totally decked out.

"I want to talk about the fire," I said. Had it been my imagination, or had Mom frozen for an instant?

Mom grabbed the glass pot and slowly poured the coffee. She curled her fingers around the mug but did not raise it to her lips. "What do you mean?" Mom answered; her voice

sounded tense and severe. She stood at the kitchen counter with her back to me as if examining the steam rising from the cup.

"What happened?" I asked, trying to sound casual, but I remembered the last time we had had this conversation. We had screamed at each other, and the conversation had ended in tears and muffled apologies. I thought, "This time, I'm not going to lose my cool. She's going to have to answer my questions once and for all."

"I've told you before. There was a fire at the house, and everything burned." Mom walked to the sink wanting to create more distance between us. The large, granite kitchen island another barrier to separate us.

I followed her, getting closer to the sink. "How come I don't remember any of it?"

"You were too little."

"Mom, I must have been like six."

"You were only five," Mom replied, her tone telling me no further explanation was required.

"I've asked you before, and you've never really told me all that happened. How did it start? Were we inside the house?"

"Leave it alone, Anne. It will only make you sad." She looked at me and quickly turned her gaze out the window. She reflexively touched her pearl necklace.

"I'm already sad. That's why I need to figure out what happened." I pulled out two of the heavy counter chairs, careful not to scratch the pinewood floorboards, and motioned for Mom to sit next to me. She pretended not to notice.

Mom stayed quiet. She remained motionless by the sink gazing out the large picture window looking at the gorgeous, sunny late May day. From where I was standing, I could see the treetops swaying softly.

I tried again, "Why won't you tell me? What's the big deal?"

"It's not a big deal. I simply don't want to talk about it," Mom replied, her voice nearly a whisper.

"Mom, this is important. I feel like I didn't have a childhood. It bothers me not to have any memories, no pictures, no toys. Nothing," I raised my voice slightly. I could feel the tension building inside of me.

"You have toys. How about Brown Bear and Molly? They were your favorites." Mom tried to sound cheerful. She turned and walked towards me, her arms outstretched as if to embrace me. But, appeared to change her mind. Instead, she opened the top drawer of the island and looked through it. Not finding whatever she was looking for, she closed the drawer gently.

"Older? You were only six when you got those toys."

"But, what about before six?" I tried to look in my mother's eyes but she wouldn't look at me.

"I don't understand why you want to bring back bad memories."

"Because even if bad, it's better than nothing."

Mom finally sat next to me. She reached for my hand and gently ran her index finger over the ring on my right hand, a white gold band with tiny diamonds that Dad had given me for my 18th birthday. She noticed my chipped and bitten fingernails but did not say anything. She finally looked up and said, "I'm tired. Let's talk about something else."

I thought, "She's doing it again. What is she hiding?" I took a deep breath. "Every time I bring this up, it's the same thing. You say you're tired, or you don't feel good."

"That's not true."

"It is, and you know it."

Mom lowered her eyes. She whispered, "Please, don't be rude." She slowly got up as if she had suddenly remembered her now cold coffee. She grabbed the mug, took her first sip, and grimaced. She did not return to the counter but stood by the window guarding the cup close to her chest.

"I'm not rude. I need to know the truth," I replied. The anger caught in my throat. I swallowed hard.

"There's nothing to know."

"How could I have forgotten completely? I must be suppressing all my memories. I think my dreams are my subconscious trying to help me uncover whatever I've been trying to quell."

"You and your silly dreams," Mom said. She tried to smile, but the smile did not reach her eyes.

"They aren't silly. I'm taking a class— about dreams and have learned a lot."

"I don't believe in armchair psychology."

"There are plenty of studies to back Jung's theories and interpretations of dreams."

"Who listens to Jung?"

"I do! It's helping me understand why I act the way I do. Why I screw up all my relationships and feel anxious and depressed all the time."

"Everybody gets depressed."

"I know, but I feel it's getting worse. This constant anxiety is not normal."

"You are perfectly normal. You need to go out and have some fun. You work too hard."

"I have plenty of fun. Thank you very much. One of my most recurring dreams is that I'm in a dark square place. There are bars all around me, like the bars around a crib or a playpen. I cry and cry, but no one comes to my help. And then I hear other children crying, but it's like no one hears us, and we scream and bang our heads against the bars until it's so loud, I wake up."

"That's just a bad dream. It doesn't mean anything."

"But, there are more," I whispered and tried again. "Dad would have talked to me. I believe he wanted to talk to me about the fire the last time I saw him."

"Well, Mark's gone," Mom cried.

"I'm sorry Mom. I didn't mean to upset you." She looked defeated; no longer able to maintain her guarded facade. Her shoulders collapsed and she shook her head slowly. She held my hand a minute longer and slowly walked away. I wanted to hold her but I let her go. I felt the anticipation of finally learning a truth I had been dreading.

"Wait here. I have something to give you." Mom had gone upstairs to get whatever she wanted to give me.

I fought back the feelings and tears that always overwhelmed me every time I thought about Dad. He had been my rock, and without him, I felt lost. Mom had been the caregiver, the

problem fixer, the attendee of teachers' meetings, and the enforcer of discipline. Dad had been my protector, my confidant, my cheerleader, and my buddy. He got me as no one else could. He was the one that would read to me every night, allowed me to keep the light on so I wouldn't be afraid in the dark, and ran to my side when my frequent nightmares would awaken us. It was to his side of the bed that I would crawl in very quietly, so Mom wouldn't hear me. And, he would let me sleep with them, safe in the comfort of their big bed and the sound of their snoring.

I had been an obedient kid, always doing as I was told at home and school. I got good grades and got along with all the other kids, but I had always felt a little awkward and out of place. It had been hard for me to make friends. I preferred to spend hours studying alone in my room. Mom wanted me to be popular and encouraged me to participate in everything. Dad never forced me. He understood my need to be alone and encouraged me to pursue the solitary activities I loved, like reading and creating imaginary worlds with pictures I would cut out of magazines and spread on the game room floor. When I told him I wanted a pony, Dad built a stable in the back of the property and got me a pony and later a beautiful Andalusian mare for me to take horseback riding lessons. Later, he bought himself a Kentucky Walker quarter horse so we could ride together. We tried to get Mom to ride with us, but she didn't like horses and didn't think it was the right sport for me. Dad and I spent hours together riding and grooming the horses. I cherished those memories and missed him so much.

Those were happy days. I had the ideal family, parents who loved me, and doted on me. I lived in a grand house, attended the best schools, and had all a girl could want. And, yet something had always felt odd to me as if I did not fit in, as if one day, it would all disappear, and I should not get too comfortable. Now I would find out why.

When Mom returned, she was carrying a small wooden box. She asked me to sit down and placed the box in front of us. She slowly took out its contents. My father's last gift to me was an unfinished letter, an old photograph, a small dirty rag doll, and a small square piece of paper with a name and message engraved. With those four items, Mom destroyed my life.

I returned to DC that morning, leaving Hillary behind. I couldn't even call her Mom. She was the woman who had raised me, who had given me everything I had, who had created the

person I had become and who had evaporated in the blink of an eye. Who was I? Where had I come from? Who were my real parents? Why did they send me to a foreign country all alone with only a rag doll and a note pinned to the pocket of my dress? The message read, "My name is Ana Cristina Ruiz? I am five years old. Please take care of me." The old newspaper clipping showed a photograph of a wide-eyed little girl, her left arm raised to reach a man's hand; only the man's legs and torso are visible. The caption below the photo read, "Operation Peter Pan's youngest child arrives in Miami, Ana Cristina Ruiz, five years old." Who would I become now that I was no longer Anne Murphy? Where would I find the real Ana Cristina Ruiz? I wasn't sure if I even wanted to look for her. But I had no choice. Thus, my search for me began.

It would take me nearly five years to unravel the mystery and much longer to forgive my parents, foster and biological, and especially my birth mother. My father had been murdered in front of one of Castro's firing squads. My mother had been in an asylum for the mentally ill when I was put on a flight from Cuba to the United States as part of "Operation Peter Pan." I was one of the more than 14,000 children sent by their parents to free them from the fangs of Communism. I was one of the very few that disappeared without a trace in the complicated system of orphanages and foster homes. My foster parents, Hillary and Mark, raised me as their own; living a terrifying lie that could have been uncovered at any moment. They loved me. I was their only child. In his unfinished letter to me, Mark had tried to explain and asked for my pardon. Hillary had been too afraid to finish what he started. Besides telling me repeatedly how much she loved me and begging for forgiveness, she didn't have much information to share. She gave me all she had, the contents of the wooden box, and the name of an orphanage in Denver. That's where my search started.

After five years, I came back home to Delaware; to the loving arms of the woman who had raised me and by my side, the woman who had given me life. Reunited, we would try to create a new family, a new life.