

# Catching Stairs

I felt the wind zip past my ears. I screamed at the tension of my hairs against her fist. It echoed against the dark wall of the hallway. No one was coming through. The house was empty and the little children had gone to bed or were pretending to sleep. My scalp felt like fire. Most of all, I remember her angry face. She always had the most intense eyes. Her pupils were dilated and her dark brown iris bore into the back of my skull.

I felt like little Alice in Wonderland as I fell. ‘Oh is this when I meet the mad rabbit?’ I thought. But all that waited for me at the bottom was the crunch of bones and carpet burn. My head was pounding with adrenaline coursing through my veins. I barely felt the dark purple bruise forming on my head. I can’t decide if the stairs hurt more or the fact that my own mother would do this to me. All I could think of was one thing: ‘fuck my mom!’”

I ran out the door that was locked tightly. I wondered if my dad was watching me through the front door camera. He would see that I had no shoes on and the wind bit my cheeks making them rosy. I didn’t care though. I got in my car and drove to Standifer Gap Park. My mom called me, and I let it go to voicemail. Then she called again, and again. I set it to do not disturb. I slept in my car that night.

When I got back home, it was breaking dawn. My mom’s Subaru was gone from the parking lot. She always left early for work at the hospital. My parents worked tirelessly. They did everything they could to make sure I was fed and had my basic needs met. I never realized how dependent I was on their money until now. Hell, I didn’t even have a part time job. When I brought having a job up the day I turned fourteen, I wanted some extra money to buy sweets and a cool jacket. My mom said “ agiya, focus on school” to me in Hangul. She pressed two hundreds into my hand. Her hand was soft but worn. She had

really bad eczema and was always applying fancy creams. Her arms were smooth and hairless. Somehow blessed with genetics from gods while my arm was tan and hairy like a monkey's. I really can't say I hated my mom. Sometimes I do, but I never really say that outloud when the same feeling comes and bubbles up like eating hot, spicy Shin ramen. I learned in sabbath school not to dishonor our parents. They would line us up side to side in our best dress shoes, and we would each recite a line from the ten commandments.

I didn't talk to my mom the next day. Or the day after that. Even when she sneaks glances occasionally behind my back when making stew. Soybean soup, my favorite. I stopped talking to her about college or school. It was easy ignoring her given she only spoke broken English. I just nodded dimly or looked past her when she looked at me. I was still hurt by what she did.

I remember during children's story time in my little Korean church a guy told us how he came down on his knees to plead with God to spare him punishment. He got a B in math or something and knew his dad would be angry. Was he spared? No. His father spanked him. "Tang! Tang! Tang!" He slapped his knee and his neck flushed red as he waved his head animatedly to emphasize his dad's strength with a ruler. Most people in the room laughed. For some reason they thought it was funny hitting a little kid. Maybe it is funny, but I don't see the humor in it.

One time I drove by the CPS office. There were multiple in the city and this one had a little orange sign that had the S in service letter broken off. It was a dingy little office in a broken down market square. 'Why would anyone want to go there?', I thought. I hated change. I could imagine a cop bursting into my big, red brick house. "Put your hands in your hair!" She would yell. She would wrap me in a blanket and we would spend the day at the station. Maybe my aunt would take us in and adopt us. I hated my aunt though. She was a heavy set woman. A cook in profession and always bustling around in the kitchen. Sometimes she forgot to invite my family over for Thanksgiving. We eventually stopped showing up for Christmas too.

I didn't go to school that week. I wanted to get revenge on my mom for being a bipolar schizo. It's not like I would do great learning anyways with the condition at home. I was a senior in highschool, and most people wouldn't notice me gone. I missed Victoria. She was the only one who understood me at school. We could share our worries and hopes together. I told her I wanted to go to Dartmouth. It was an Ivy League college, the best of the best. It was small and sophisticated. Locked away in tiny Connecticut. Gosh I loved the cold. I could already hear the church bells ringing as I walked to class through the white stone Georgian hallways. It would be like in a Hallmark movie during Christmas. College application results wouldn't come out till March. I applied to schools all over the United States. My mom made me fill out an application for a Seventh Day Adventist one too. No way was I going there. I needed to stretch my wings and fly. Explore the world. I wasn't sure what major I was going to pick, so I just went ahead and chose nursing. I think I would make a nice nurse.

My mom came back late from work today. She usually came back late at night, but tonight I could tell she was especially stressed.

"It's just like Pastor Tony said," she muttered. "The end is near."

"Umma, are you okay?" I asked.

"Samantha, please go to adventist school."

"What? No way! I don't want to."

She reached out and grabbed my hand.

"Please Angel, I just got fired from my job. We don't have any money to pay for tuition. At adventist school, they give you free ride. You got 34 on the ACT?"

I tried to pull my hand free. "Stop it, you aren't yourself, - ma."

She pulled me in tighter at my resistance. Then she clung to my shirt.

"YOU ARE SATAN. SATAN, I TELL YOU! YOU ARE SATAN! STOP IT, YOU ARE KILLING ME!"

She screeched and hit her head like a banshee.

I pushed her down onto the floor and ran up to my room. She followed me but didn't come in, instead hitting my door. I dove under the covers until she passed out on the couch.

March came like a late newborn from the womb. We were all sitting in the classroom, but nobody was paying attention to the teacher. We were sick with excitement, maybe a little fear. The room was stiffer, some people went to the bathroom to throw up. Others cried. It meant we were leaving each other. I was leaving Victoria. I looked at her expectantly.

"The college admissions come out today."

"I know. You all have been badgering me about it like hell. I'm so glad I don't have to deal with that in community college."

"Boo whore, you're missing the fun." I paused.

"Think I'll get into Dartmouth? I bombed the interview. I couldn't get my mom quiet. She kept muttering about going to an Adventist school, and started screaming in the background"

Victoria was quiet for a minute. Then, she reached up and grabbed my hands. They were nervous and twitchy. I hung my head down in shame. It was hard to meet the kindness in her eyes.

"Samantha, if anyone gets in, it's gonna be you."

"I don't even know if I want to go to college. I just want to be rich and famous."

Victoria laughs, and her joy soothes my unease. "Yes. Samantha the star. You'd make a great actress" she winks.

I rolled my eyes and stared at my biology homework. Tonight. College admissions release tonight.

"We regret to inform you that..."

I did not get into Dartmouth.

The rejection was flat and simple. Unpersonalized despite all the hours I put into writing the application.

I screamed so loudly, I think I heard my neighbor's dog whine in fear. I'm gonna crash out. All the caffeine and adrenaline in my body simmered out at the rejection. I buried my head into my bed. There

were plenty of other options for me, sure. I could apply to my local hometown college, community, or even go to a Seventh Day Adventist one like my mom said. I just didn't see the point in it anymore.

When I told Victoria of my decision, she pulled me in for a hug. She held me tightly, and I crumpled in her arms. It was a bit awkward in the middle of the hallway, jostled by students in backpacks, but I didn't mind. I knew she would understand. I didn't see much point in participating in class anymore. At this point, I was an empty shell, just going through the motions. I did the bare minimum to pass, and thankfully that was enough. I was on the way to go shopping when I saw the sign that would save me. You see, I had begun the slight habit of shoplifting, and now needed the bright fluorescent lights of the Target cosmetic section and the pounding adrenaline hiding from the cameras to feel again. That's when I passed the red 'help' wanted sign staked in front of the local skate shop. When I went in and asked about the job, a big old white man told me to apply online. 'Okay, I could do that,' I thought.

A steady sense of income was a good change of pace. It didn't pay enough for me to move out, but I wasn't reliant on my mom's allowance anymore. Not that I ever declined the money she offered me. She venmoed me a weekly allowance with a little heart emoji attached. The reason why I worked there was because I liked working there. I liked to watch the adults skate round and round on the wooden rink. They reminded me of the cute little hamsters on a wheel that they sold at the pet store. I worked hard, cleaning the sweat and grime off of each shoe, and polishing the rink to blinding whiteness. I wanted to prove myself to the manager. Prove that I was a good worker.

Big Joe, or just Joe, was a nice enough manager. I can't say he treated us respectfully, as he looked at me like a downtrodden, stray dog when he first met me. However, he lights up with almost elvish joy when talking to the owner. They were long time friends and knew each other way back when from highschool. It wasn't until the new girl showed up that I stopped romanticizing my work. Her name was Sarah-Grace with two capitals. I thought about how stuck up you have to be to give your daughter two first names.

Was one not enough? She had big brown eyes and red locks woven into long, skinny pig tails. She wore a diamond studded cross on her neck. Her teeth were white and they gleamed. She dressed like a movie star to work, and I immediately didn't like her.

"You should smile more." Big Joe stated with a frown on his face. I doubled back and turned. The music blared overhead playing Fireworks by Katy Perry. Maybe I misheard him?

"Uhhh, what did you say?"

"I said maybe you should smile. You'd get more looks."

He nodded to a group of guys standing in the corner. They were hooting and laughing, making suggestive gestures to the girls on the floor.

"See Sarah-Grace? She's on the floor serving drinks. She's so good. She's a good girl."

I fought the urge to fight back. There's a million things I could say. I could tell him he should eat less. The girls like K-pop boys now. To put on some makeup and croon for us on the rink. We would all cheer and clap, like the boys on the floor.

"I hate Sarah-Grace, she's a Christian slut who only thinks she's right!" I exclaimed. I'm not sure where this anger was but it felt right. Big Joe only laughed and shook his head. He squeezed by me to put away the dingy skates he was holding.

Sarah-Grace waiting for me after work that day. She said she had something she wanted to give me according to Big Joe. When I met her outside, to my surprise, she was vaping. Her teeth seemed too white to belong to a smoker, but it suited her. Gave her an edge to her bubblegum pink perfume.

"What do you want, Sarah-Grace?" I asked.

"Here got you something."

"What lipstick? A bible?" I shot mockingly.

She stared at me, and her lip quivered.

"Why do you hate me so much?"

“What are you talking about?” I responded coolly

“Big Jo told me you called me a slut behind my back.” Her face reddened and tears filled her eyes. I could smell salt in the air and it made my nose itch.

“Oh that’s just Big Jo, you know he’s always saying rumors and ummm bullshit. Yeah that’s bull shit.” I blushed too. My words were wobbling and I wiped my hands on my jeans. I patted her on the back awkwardly and I was reminded of my mother. How she would cry for forgiveness after yelling at me. I’m not sure why though because, this time, I was in the wrong and should be crying for forgiveness.

“Okay...” Sarah-Grace paused to collect herself. “I’m glad that’s true. He’s just Big Joe.” She smiled meekly and got out a flannel from her purse.

“You left this at work.”

“Oh! Thanks. You know me. Always forgetting things”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m glad we talked.”

I smiled sheepishly back, and for some reason the air got stiffer. Maybe it was because she was such a Christian, but it was hard to talk to her. To break the wall they’ll put up.

“So do you go to school?” I asked. I was surprised I broke the moment instead of walking away.

“Oh yeah. I’m an English major here at the local university. It’s been good so far. Pretty good.”

“English, huh.” It suited her. I imagined her walking to class in her cute preppy way after grabbing a coffee for her and her professor. I felt a twang of jealousy.

“What about you? Are you in school?”

“No, I’m not. Just waiting for my life to start, so I’m just working in the meantime.”

“I get that” Sarah-grace sympathizes.

“I might go in the fall though.” I added blankly.

“Oh, you should! I think you would love it. There’s so much to do and learn.”

She looked up on the road at a maroon minivan pulling in.

“Well that’s my ride. See you around.”

When I got home, my mom was sitting on the kitchen table. The old wooden chairs creaked at her weight and she leaned back on the intricate carvings that lined the sides. The lights were on, but it was still dimly lit. My mom only screwed three out of the five lightbulbs in to save money.

“Hi, umma? Did you have a good day?”

“The hospital today was so hard, aige. Standing on my feet for 12 hours. Whooo.”

She kicked her legs on the chairs and massaged her calf.

“Today, at work, I made a friend”

Was Sarah-Grace a friend? That word might be too close, but it felt weird saying acquaintance to my mom.

She nodded, but sighed and hung her head. She thought that the skating rink was a place of the devil. The loud music, crowded room, and teenage boys was hell on Earth for her.

I felt the urge bubble up again. ‘Don’t say it!’ I thought, but it blurted out of me.

“Mom, I think I want to go to my local college.”

“You already know how I feel about that.”

She was quiet for a minute. She gazed at her fingers and rubbed them together. “But, I want you to do what you love doing. You’re the kind of person that needs that drive” she said to me in Korean.

I was surprised by her reaction, but my face didn’t show it. I sniffed and went up to get some water. My lips were cracked and it felt like I swallowed a rat. The clear drink was cold and cooled my pulsing throat.

We didn’t say much for dinner after that. My mom informed me that my dad was coming late again from work, and I nodded dimly. I didn’t feel like calling him, so I went into my room and shut the door.

I was sitting on the bed when I felt the sudden urge to look up the sororities at my local university online.

They were all lined up with big cheery smiles and matching t-shirts. “Alphi chi, Kappa Gamma”, the greek words felt weird on my tongue. I pictured myself rushing with the girls in the fall. I would wear my highest heels and best outfit. My hair will be perfectly coiled.

“Hi, girls!” I would exclaim. “Ready to party?” The girls would all exclaim and we broke out into a chant.

A knock on my door broke me out of my trance.



I quickly exited my computer screen and pulled up math homework. I grabbed a pencil and looked busy working. The answer to the derivative 49. An easy whole number and a rare answer in calculus.

“Hi, Samantha. What are you doing?”

My mom peered into my room. My laundry was on the floor. I kicked it under my bed when she turned around.

“I just want to check and make sure you're okay.”

I rolled on my bed. “Leave me alone mom. I'm doing homework.”

“Oh! Okay. Then I'll leave you to it.”

She smiled and gently closed the door. I rolled my eyes and fell deeply into a nap. My bed was warm and comfy, decorated with stuffed animals. I imagined the boys on the kpop poster were singing me a lullaby. Then a romance ballad. As my eyes drifted off to sleep, I thought about Sarah-Grace joining a sorority. She dyed her hair a bleach blonde and was wearing a popular mini dress. She would fit right in with those girls who dedicate their lives to partying and boys.