

Mommy Issues

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To Bathsheba on her 41st

“Absence speaks. Nothingness is important. We don’t know that nothing is something too.”

Chicago, Illinois, April, 2013:

“I don’t write, I work in transportation planning,” Seth told her, in answer to her question would he help her write a grant? Brenda looked at him with the kind of disdain she usually only reserved for her immediate family, for whom there was not just disdain but maybe even real hatred, although she found it difficult to admit that she hated her family. These days in her milieu it was politically incorrect. In other groups, the older Gen X (she was a Millennial) and Gen Y it was *de rigueur*—everyone hated their families, especially The Mother.

Mommy bashing was what it was all about and who could argue with that? The Mother Archetype had been the Straw Man (or Straw Woman) for every major human ill that ever existed since Medea, Medusa and probably earlier! (Brenda’s historical/literary references were vague).

“Ours is not a Matriarchal structure,” Brenda said to Seth.

“Random! What’s that got to do with anything?” he asked.

“You’re testy,” she told him.

“No doubt. It’s my BFF’s birthday today.”

Seth’s BFF, Tony, was engaged to Seth’s former girlfriend, but somehow this didn’t stop them from continuing their friendship. Seth and Tony had been

friends ever since college in Iowa—Davenport to be exact, where Seth happened to be from.

“Are you all celebrating?”

“Yes. Acadia on Wabash.”

“Why didn’t you invite me? I love Tony. I’m both your friends aren’t I?”

It was Seth’s turn to shoot a withering stare back at Brenda.

“I know that—but—you don’t know his future wife—and this is a private affair.

“Private? How so? Just the three of you?”

“The three of us plus Mimi and Bernard. They came in from Davenport.

Why are you questioning me? You’re not my mother are you?”

There it was—the dreaded Mother moniker slapping her in the face! Why did everyone project Mother onto her? What was it? Was it because she had large breasts or what?

“Is it because—“

“I gotta go Brenda. Have a great day...”

He left her sitting at the restaurant on Milwaukee with the check for both of them unpaid. *What an asshole*, she thought and paid the check.

She felt cheated and left out but what matter?

And who are Mimi and Bernard? she thought.

Walking out she saw that the local discount movie theatre was playing a midnight showing of Annie Hall. She might as well go home, take a nap (in the old days called *a disco nap*) so she could be up for the midnight show.

But, what to do with the ensuing hours between 2 p.m. and midnight? She had no desire to work out; the ringing in her left ear was disconcerting. It made her nervous, too nervous to concentrate on a work out. She had a hearing test and a possible CAT scan on Thursday, but this was Saturday and all day stretched out in front of her. She'd already done her Walgreen's shopping for the week, the groceries were bought, she had no one to call and her mother and stepfather were in Istanbul having some kind of middle-aged vacation, she reflected with a sneer on her face.

Actually, they were too old for middle age. Tom was seventy-two and mom was—what was her mom? *Oh shit. I can't even remember my mom's age! What a fucking daughter I am! Thank God I have two other sisters—Jesus—they can fill in the gap.* Her brother Ian was useless somewhere in Budapest teaching English. *What a wanker.*

OK. Ok. She wracked her brain. *Mom was born—uh—during World War II--so she was born—uh—1944! Meaning she's sixty-nine. Jesus! Sixty-nine.*

Sixty-nine struck Brenda as impossibly old, although she had to admit mom looked good. Patricia, Brenda's mother, was tall—5'10", and *statuesque* as people described her. Being tall was a boon—it covered over a multitude of "sins," so to speak, but Brenda did not inherit the height. At 5'3" with big boobs

and a skinny torso, (*probably a throwback to all those Jewish aunts that populate my genealogy*, she thought), she certainly got her share of male attention and female jealousy, neither of which she appreciated, liked or courted because she wanted to be her mother: tall, strong and impervious. Unfortunately, she was cursed with a more emotional, feeling nature. The Empath. The Intuitive. The Healer.

She was a mess.

The Mother Archetype was just too strong. And Dad—what about Dad?

Dad (Jeff) had a shack he built himself in Tombstone, Arizona. He'd started out by taking an early retirement from teaching High School in Schaumburg, where they were from and where Brenda was raised, (much to her dismay—she hated Schaumburg), bought a 1970 vintage Shasta camper, in which he lived on the acre property he bought out on Safford Street heading out of town. Once he completed the shack he sold the camper on eBay and bought a used Toyota Camry with a great sound system and a busted A.C. In Arizona what a liability! But that was her dad.

Inside the shack he was wired up for Internet and had a cheap Casio keyboard hooked up to his iMac so he could compose music; the country stuff she hated so much growing up.

He lived in his own world.

He wasn't available.

He dated a girlfriend for two weeks from Tucson younger than Brenda's oldest sister.

What was he doing with her?

Sex.

The word popped into her mind, like a pop-up balloon for a cartoon character. The thought of her father and sex did not thrill her at all. Even more than that, it disgusted her. Dad had always been nerdy dad, High school teaching nerdy optimistic terrible-basketball-playing Dad, until her Mother dumped him and ran to Tom who owned a bakery in Toronto. So now Mom was a landed immigrant, they had great health care, they traveled, she ran the bakery with Tom; they were having fun in their later years. But Dad was the fucking loser in all of this, right? He lived on his social security benefits. (\$1500 a month, max), and dated girls he met in the Casino or something, who secretly probably laughed at him. *Poor Dad.*

I won't laugh at Dad. Maybe I better call him.

His number was in the 'favorites' list on her cell phone. She got the voice mail.

"Dad," she spoke into the phone, "hi. How are you? I was thinking of maybe coming out for a visit. After I have this hearing test. I have some problems with my left ear and they want to be sure it's not a brain tumor or something. So call me. Ok? Bye."

She thought it was terrible of her to leave this kind of message. Of course he would worry and then that would bring on apologies for his inadequacy for which he was so famous and which she loathed so completely. It would have been better to not even mention the ear thing and her fears of a brain tumor, but what could she do now? The message was there and she couldn't erase it! Not much.

Dad called the next day.

"I was in Tucson for the day," he told her. "They had a memorial service for Steve Orlen, you know?"

"No. Who's that?"

"Great poet. Professor in the writing program at U. of A. Oh what a great guy and a great poet he was."

"Ok dad."

"It was sad."

She could hear him tearing up over the cell phone.

"You're not gonna cry about this are you?"

"I already cried. I'm done. So what's this about a brain tumor? You know, you need to call your mother about this—she's so much better at handling this stuff than I am."

"She and Tom are in Istanbul Dad, and you don't have to handle it."

"But—what are you doing?"

"I'm going for an MRI. After I do the hearing test. It's probably nothing."

“That’s right. It’s probably nothing. You’re only twenty-nine for Christ’s sake! You’re the baby in the family!”

“I’m not going to die Dad.”

“I hope not. I don’t need another death right now.”

His self-absorbed narcissism really bothered her, but she wouldn’t admit it to herself or him. It would be better to wait until Mom got back to Toronto and call her. By then she’d know the results anyway.

“It’s probably nothing, Dad, right?”

“Absolutely. You need to take vitamins. Are you taking vitamins?”

“No, I’ll go get some and take some. I’ll go to Walgreen’s.”

“Thatta girl! Well....is there...?”

“Nothing else Dad. Just called to say hello.”

“Hello kid. Keep in touch.”

The emptiness of the call ending frightened her in a way that she hadn’t felt since she was a small child.

There were no more calls to make. She hadn’t made too many friends in the five years since she came to Chicago. She finished her Masters in Clinical Psychology at Northwestern, got a job as officer manager at Planned Parenthood in Wicker Park. Her job was to manage the front desk and front room entirely, manage the website, answer phones, schedule patients for appointments, keep the place tidy and running smoothly, and on a daily basis clean the bathrooms. It

had nothing to do with her Masters thesis: *Meta-analysis of the Relationship Between Communication Apprehension and Cognitive Performance*.

But *whatever*.

Office relations were cordial, not tense, but not friendly either.

She lived in Logan Square and they all lived in Wicker Park so most of the staff went out after work.

She took the El and went home. Only three stops but a world away.

So here I am, she thought, a Chicago girl, a city girl at last! I can go downtown and shop at Macy's!

The thought filled her with the memory of her fantasy about city life that she held onto long after the reality of city life had eroded the dream and deconstructed it from the inside out. The thought did nothing to appease her fears, unfortunately, because she knew, while being true, that this dream though had no value in the face of death and she was sure she was facing death.

In due time she had to confront that not only could she die, but her mother was not coming back from Turkey for several weeks and her mother's life was of the tidy and busy variety—she had no time or inclination for the mess that seemed to emanate from her youngest child at every corner and junction of this kid's short but disordered life.

Why can't she get her act together! Patricia would think at least once a day, but then the thought, like many others that floated in and out of her mind, disappeared like a lovely silk scarf floating in the wind. *It's high time that the kid*

learned to stand on her own two feet, Patricia would be likely to say, *she's always going through some kind of internal crisis*.

Patricia's patience for internal crises was famously lacking.

Brenda had the brilliant idea to call her older sister Charlotte, a doctor who emailed her attached copies of the Glycemic Index monthly, seemingly forgetting that she had just sent a copy the previous month. Charlotte was a primary care physician in a Family Practice in Boston and her husband was a Cardiac surgeon at Brigham and Women's Hospital. The two made a brilliant pair and they had a little boy, Boris.

Brenda's nephew, upon whom she doted and loved to tears, was three and could already play *Gavotte* on his tiny little violin and spoke about himself in the third person; *Boris is going to be a conductor when he grows up*, he said often and of course Charlotte and Boris's daddy Paul totally agreed. Why not? Brenda had some misgivings about Boris speaking about himself in this detached way—could he be autistic? But she never brought this up to Charlotte or Paul because, after all, they were doctors and they would notice this kind of thing, wouldn't they? Boris's rapid advancement in the Suzuki system coupled with his attachment to his Nanny Hermosa made everyone happy. Brenda had nagging doubts, however, which she never expressed.

They were doctors. They would know.

Calling Charlotte always surprised her. The surprise came from the disconcerting knowledge about how things had changed so much between them.

As children, Charlotte, the eldest of the four children and destined to be successful at whatever she did, was the self-proclaimed and acknowledged *family teacher*, and as the youngest, Brenda was expected to be the obedient student. Brenda worshipped Charlotte, needed Charlotte, idolized Charlotte and probably hated Charlotte too, although it was hard to tell since Patricia never allowed that kind of negativity to be expressed anywhere in the house, her family, her life—she had developed a Rosalind Russell-type of thick armor that hid anything of that nature from herself and anyone else.

Even though she had physically left Jeff for Tom, Jeff had left the relationship mentally and emotionally many years before. He simply withdrew into himself when he came home, working at his desk on various projects of his own, grading the mountain of papers he always brought home from school, watching with avid interest television sports and behaving much like a cipher with an intelligent, ironic, bemused and silent disappearance act. To all who had ever known him in earlier years, he would've been described as having "checked out." Sitting at the dinner table night after night he never said a word until Patricia forced him to make a comment about something.

"Isn't that right, Jeff?" to which he would often mumble in a way that was ambiguous enough to confuse everyone as to whether this was a *yes* or a *no*, and in either case, his indifference was palpable. He was present by his absence.

After many years it was not a surprise that Patricia left, but by that time everyone was out of the house except Brenda who was in her last year of high school. The leaving and the divorce (Patricia took all the nice stuff and the furniture leaving Jeff an empty house with stripped beds and an old couch he dragged from the garage) were traumatic for her and she was on the phone incessantly with Charlotte, (the other sister, Megan, studying Oceanography at U.C. Santa Cruz, wouldn't return her calls and her brother Ian was biking in Alaska with friends). There was only Charlotte whose self-righteous lectures incensed her and did nothing to quell her fears.

It was then that Brenda realized: *I am alone in this world.*

She and Dad stayed in the house which felt like a tomb since Patricia (*Patrician*, Jeff snarkily referred to her), removed most of everything that meant anything and left a barren structure minus even cooking gear and all the minute touches that made the house a home. Jeff continued teaching, bought some cheap pots and pans and silverware from Target and they ate off paper plates, which Jeff dutifully recycled on garbage days. Brenda continued school and on weekends they both slept until noon or even 1:00 pm. Some Saturdays Brenda and Jeff would wander about the house like shadows of people, touching walls and various objects, turning television on and off, doing necessary tasks still in their pajamas until it was dark and they could officially turn on the lights and then turn off the lights and begin thinking about going to bed again.

It was a lonely existence and Brenda was all set to hate her mother for life when out of the blue Patricia called her in tears, saying how much she missed her baby and could she come and stay with her and Tom in Toronto?

Brenda went to Toronto for the summer after graduation. She did not attend her prom or graduation ceremony—they sent her diploma in the mail. Jeff begged her not to go, not because of her but because he was terrified of being in the house alone, however while Brenda was mulling over what she was going to do with her life in Toronto, smoking marijuana she got form somebody she met at a club and generally sinking into uncontrolled depression, Jeff sold the house and she was officially without a home.

“What about all my stuff!?”

“What stuff?”

“My stuffed animals, my bed, my clothes, my dresser, the shit I have in my room! What about it?”

“OK. I can pack it and ship it to Toronto—or put it into storage.”

“Ship it here, dad, whatever.”

Jeff sent her stuff to Toronto, all except the bed and the dresser that he put out on the lawn and sold to some neighbors for \$5.00 each.

When Brenda first arrived in Toronto all she had was a duffel bag and numerous tote bags filled with whatever she could find and carry, her laptop in

her backpack and a jacket tied around her waist. Tom and Patricia waited at the end of the long terminal walk from the plane, smiling, waiting and ready for an angry, hostile, depressed teenager to begin her life anew. They had a suitcase filled with promises and happy affirmations, including many anti-fear, anti-growth processes designed to rid her of her radiating unhappiness and self-hatred.

None of the techniques worked.

“You have to do *something!*” Patricia yelled at her one morning over eggs and Canadian bacon. Tom stayed out of these discussions.

“What? What mom?”

“You could study psychology! You had good grades in High School!”

So off she went to the Northwestern to study Psychology and did her Masters in Cognitive Therapy there as well.

In Brenda’s family success was expected.

So now we are at the present. Brenda has not only graduated and completed her Masters but found this job as office manager of Planned Parenthood in Chicago. She is allowed to sit in and sometimes even counsel the women and young girls coming in for their third, fourth and sometimes fifth abortions, about birth control, about abstinence, (not a popular topic), occasionally getting a word in about self-acceptance and empowerment, but mostly she gets yelled at by both clients and her supervisor, an African American

woman from the South side of Chicago with a great big plank on her shoulder about white people and white women in particular. She did not like Brenda at all and resented openly what she called Brenda's *entitlement* and rich white upbringing, but she couldn't argue with her qualifications. Brenda had more training in cognitive therapy than either of the social workers on staff, but no one would give her an opportunity to really get hands on with patients, or move up to a counseling position full time. She was hired on as an office manager and everyone was happy with that except her.

Brenda took the shaming and humiliation because she knew she was young enough not to have to worry that this job was her last chance at success in her field.

But then, what was her field?

At one time she thought it might be Cognitive therapy and private practice with the completion of a PhD, but she couldn't make enough money to support herself and go to school and her student loan options were tapped out. The economy seemed permanently tanked, rents were high, even in Chicago and she wasn't ready to hang a shingle out there alone anyway. She had no patience for people and wasn't all this stuff about "service" overrated anyway?

Seth had been a pal and potential boy friend and now he was just a guy who stiffed her with a check on a rainy day in April.

The day of the hearing test she took a taxi to St. Joseph Hospital on Lake Shore Drive—it was too far for the bus and train and anyway, she wasn't in the mood for public transport. Tom and Patricia had offered to buy her a car but quite honestly Brenda was too depressed to drive and it cost too much for gas anyway.

Inside the tiny examining room they gave her earphones. She could barely hear in the left ear. The right ear was better. The audiologists concluded that because of the lopsided results she would require further consultation and possible testing with a physician specializing in diseases of the ear. They sent her out into the health care system without insurance (planned parenthood had a year long wait before employees could get on insurance), to navigate the waters of American Health Care—which essentially means diving into the broiling, stormy oceanic waters of chaos to figure out how to take care of a young body that was falling apart before its time.

This was a moment when she decided to call her mother because mothers are what this kind of moment is for. Only Mother was traveling, so what could she do?

Monica, friend from a previous job agreed to meet her at Revolution Brewing over an artisanal beer. The Hibiscus Ale had a strange taste but Brenda read somewhere Hibiscus has a calming effect.

“You need an advocate, you know. Someone to help you though this—you know, be there at the hospital with you before—“

“Look—I haven't been diagnosed with anything yet!”

“Ok. Ok. I’m just trying to prepare you,” Monica said taking a large gulp of her Barrel-aged Milk Stout.

“All this attention to beer is kind of weird, don’t you think?” Brenda asked. “I mean, back in the day, didn’t people just drink Stroh’s or Miller Lite or something?”

“Oh, yuck—disgusting.”

“I don’t have an advocate, as you define it,” Brenda told her, ordering a second Hibiscus Ale.

“A parent—a mother—you know, sister?”

“I have all that but none of them are going to drop what they’re doing to come running to Chicago and sit around in a hospital with me!”

“Your support system is weak,” Monica concluded.

“You’re weak.”

“I know.”

The two so-called friends drank more beers and wove their way back down Milwaukee to the corner where Monica turned off at Logan and Brenda kept going.

“You’re not my friend,” Brenda said, half in jest.

“I know it,” Monica replied, half in jest.

They hugged one another and went their separate ways, the edge of humility, defeat and terror eased by the dullness of a beer-laden high.

The realization of her life did nothing to support Brenda's already plunging sense of self. The ground was disappearing from under her and the falling apart of her life felt like Alice's free fall into the tunnel—only in this case, no white rabbit or floating furniture. Everything was nailed down and she was floating.

“When do you see the specialist?” he Dad made a rare unsolicited phone connection.

“I have to get a referral from my primary. It's a long process all this stuff you know. Then I have to figure out how to pay.”

“I wish I could help. I can send you a little. How's \$100?”

“Can you afford it?”

“Yeah—I just got a job rebuilding this guy's storage shed in his yard.”

“Aren't you teaching?”

“I can't teach.”

“Why not, Dad?”

“I don't know. I had a nervous breakdown and I just can't teach. Repairing shit is very therapeutic for me.”

“Ok. Can you afford this \$100?”

“Yup. I'll send it right away.”

“Thanks Dad.”

“I love you pumpkin. Everything's gonna turn out just peachy keen you know that. You're young and this is just nothing to worry about.”

“OK. Thanks.”

Monica and Brenda met for coffee at the newly opened Intelligentsia.

“Do you like this place?”

“Not really, but the coffee bar idea is ok.”

“My dad’s sending me \$100.”

“Oh, that’s sweet. Can you ask your mom?”

“When she gets back. They’re in Turkey-- she texted me and said they’re going to spend some time in Eastern Europe—like Budapest and Sophia and various places—Krakow.”

Monica looked at Brenda with what she tried to create as a look of pity but it served her no good. Purpose and passion gave way to a lopsided grin and an inappropriate wink of the eye, wave of the hand—as if to wave Brenda’s troubles away like a bad coffee or something.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No!” Monica shouted, a laugh bubbling up in her throat.

“You are. You’re laughing. You think this is funny.”

“I just don’t know what to say,” Monica spoke with a bit of snarky lilt to her voice, the inflection rising at the end of the sentence. “It’s just—I’m so embarrassed. I—“

“Forget it.”

Catching people in the act of their self-righteousness was so disappointing. Wasn’t the human race better than this?

Brenda grabbed her purse, her Gap tote bag, her scarf and her sunglasses. Intelligentsia had one less person to pay for the two coffees sitting on the table, Brenda's was a full mug and Monica downed hers' in a gulp. Brenda thought leaving Monica to pay constituted justice on the fly.

Outside on Milwaukee Avenue the sun was bright. Nearly four o'clock. Some trees were sporting tiny little green buds. Nearly May. She hoped for a change of electric funky energy but all that she experienced was the incessant ringing in her left ear and the usual background radiation fear that went with her no matter where she was or what she was doing.

She walked down Milwaukee from California to Kedzie where she flopped down on a bench in the little park in front of the monument.

She stared at the monument, her mind a total blank, for nearly ten minutes.

Perhaps sitting on a bench in a little park staring at a phallic piece of stone with an eagle on top could calm her down; it was all a mystery to her. Wasn't this being in the moment like the Buddhist readings said? Wasn't it OK if the moment was perfectly awful? That was the moment, wasn't it--the one most perfectly shitty moment.

How did this all happen?

By *that* she meant life.

Her mother.

Birth.

Concrete.

Uncomfortable park benches.

A day moving on, getting colder—she walked home to her apartment house on Wrightwood and Sawyer across from the Mormon Church.

Brenda was not a Mormon.

She understood that the musical *The Book of Mormon* made fun of the crazy story the Mormon Church told about itself. How some guy named Joseph Smith had visions and the next thing you know there is a Church, and followers and persecution and all manner of religious shit. Brenda simply could not understand how a cosmic experience that many people have could translate itself into a religion with doctrine and followers and a full-time proselytizing mission. And what about that doctrine of plural marriage? She thought about that for a full minute. The last thing she wanted was to be a sister wife, although she watched the entire *Big Love* series with morbid fascination. *What drives these people, for God's sake?* On the other hand, she conceived that having plural husbands wouldn't be a bad thing—one guy for the money, one guy to cook and clean and one guy for stud services. And she would be the *only* woman on board, of course. The cooking/cleaning guy could be the maternal/mommy influence in case she was busy or something; the money guy would be a stock-broker or something and bring in piles of money so they could have three separate houses. She'd have to schedule the sexual encounters—yuck. That's where she got stuck. Who wants to fuck three guys all the time? Scratch that fantasy.

Don't all churches have crazy stories about themselves? She thought. Church, the whole concept of it, was an impossible subject for her to consider—religion had not been part of Patricia's family practice.

Letting herself into her studio, the cluttered two rooms she called home, she saw a missed call from Seth on her iPhone.

"What?" she yelled into the phone when he answered.

"Hi. Just checking in."

"I'm fine."

"That's not what Monica told me."

"Whatever."

"Whatever? You need your friends."

"I don't need you."

"You have to see a specialist. I'll go with you."

"I have to get clearance from my primary—you know—a referral."

"So get it and call me."

"No, I don't think so."

"I've got an old camper. Got it from my brother. I'm parking it outside this foreclosed property on the south side."

"That doesn't sound safe,"

"It is. No worries. You could live there rent free."

"What would I want to do that for? I've got a job! And a place, and I like my hood."

“Oh.”

“Well...”

“I’m here if you need to call me.”

“You Betcha,” she said in her best Sarah Palin voice and clicked off.

Does Seth like me? The thought put her into a downward spiral. He was a nice guy but certainly not her *dream guy*, whatever that was. He lived in a trailer and had no real job—he just floated from one loser gig to another. He had a degree, he had a *Master’s for crying out loud*, but there’s no holding down the drifter mentality if it wants to manifest itself. Turning a friend into a lover was not where she wanted to go these days. Not now. Especially if it were possible that she was going to die.

She felt more alone than ever.

The next day she went back to Intelligentsia. There were eight people behind the counter and it still took them twenty minutes to make the worst cup of green tea she’d ever had. *I hope this is healthy because it tastes like fucking boiled grass.*

Perhaps it was boiled grass—the drinking of which gave her gas.

The doctor seemed skeptical about the audiologists requiring further testing for medical clearance.

“I think all you need is hearing aids,” she said and signed the referral to Dr. Depot. (*as in train?*) somewhere in Skokie. Without a car Skokie could be Puli

Khumri, Afghanistan. Brenda liked the sound of that—*Puli Khumri* (she'd seen in a newspaper article somewhere) and riffed off into a storyline that put her square in the middle of a plot not unlike *Ishtar*, only better, with guys much younger than Dustin Hoffman and Warren Beatty, even back then. She was a lot like Angelina Jolie, except with her own breasts, wearing flowing robes, doing the thing with the *hajib*, in fact converting to Muslim and maybe becoming the third wife of some oil baron—uh oh--hadn't she already decided she wouldn't be a sister wife? Wipe that fantasy.

Skokie was far.

Didn't Seth have a car?

She wanted to take twenty-two days off from work but took two instead. Her bosses were not nice about this and her immediate boss was nasty as hell, but they didn't want her to quit just yet because none of them would do the toilets on a daily basis. They cut some slack for her medical issues.

"Okay I need your help," Brenda panted into her iPhone on the way down the steps to the train. "Can you give me a ride to the specialist?"

"When?"

"When? When? Whenever I need it! You're there for me remember?"

"I'm there for you if I don't have something to do. I'm there for you if you want to come over and hang in my trailer. You know, I am there for you, but I'm not a martyr or anything."

"Friday. I have to be in Skokie."

“Can’t. Helping Joe with an art installation at the Alprazolam Galley.”

“The what gallery?”

“They named it after this generic Xanax. Alprazolam.”

“Are they nuts?”

“Yeah, that’s why they named it after a generic drug.”

“Oh shit. I thought you were gonna be there for me!”

“I am, in spirit.”

“Seth—“

“Brenda, this is the modern age. You know—we aren’t exactly there there, you know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean. It means you’re a total asshole. It means you are totally insane. It means you need to read Nietzsche.”

“A casual stroll through the insane asylum shows that faith does not prove anything.”

“So you fucking read wiki quotes, jerk off!”

She pressed the hang up on her phone and immediately deleted Seth’s name from her contacts list. It was obvious this was all a sexual ploy. Once she went to bed with him the whole thing would reverse, but she wasn’t ready to do that yet and maybe he wasn’t worth it anyway.

The last resort was mother. There was no alternative. Sometimes the casual encounters of the hipster life became fraught with despair precisely

because of the lack of shared memory. If nothing else, family provided that. They could be disastrous memories, memories that make you cry or worse, or even those blank feelings about certain years, knowing full well they've been tucked and folded into some part of the brain she didn't have a name for. These memories had been encoded and stored but how to retrieve them? Brenda felt sure that there was a huge chunk of her childhood that was missing from retrieval. Somewhere in that past something happened, or didn't happen and Mom might be the key to that.

They were coming back from Turkey any day now.

Waiting for her mother to come back brought her back to the excitability of her babyhood—the screaming and panic she still remembered feeling waiting for mom to arrive to pick her out of the crib, or out of her playpen or high chair or wherever she was. Of the four children, she was the anxious one. Some neuronal pruning in pre-birth or infancy had taken out the complacency neuron, if there was such a thing. She was the child that screamed, that cried, that couldn't sit still or sat alone too long, or just couldn't get along with the program like her brother and sisters. The awareness of being different from others began early and never left her. The background radiation of anxiety hummed away all the time—at certain periods of her life it faded into a very distant whine, she could hardly hear it, she was not aware of it, it did not exist. Other times, like now, it was screaming at her, screaming for attention—waving a red flag in front of her face. *Pay attention to me! I am your anxiety! Feed me!* Of course Brenda would

not feed it—she abjectly refused. The refusal to feed the anxiety made it angry and it came upon her when she least expected it –odd moments of rising panic, nebulous fear; a general feeling: *all is not right on the Western Front*. Scanning the horizon of existence, her consciousness threw up a stop sign and said: *Here. Now is enough. Do something.*

Patricia and Tom came back from Turkey. There had been some uprising in the streets of Istanbul and although Patricia was fearless as usual Tom was terrified they wouldn't be able to get out of the country. He had visions of imprisonment and Kafka-esque trials and the like. They left two days early and ate the flight penalty.

In Toronto Patricia found numerous messages from Brenda; frantic, demanding, somewhat annoying.

“When is this kid ever gonna grow up?” she shouted after listening to message three of seven.

“What's you're definition of “growing up,” hon?”

“What the hell does that mean?” Patricia sneered at Tom as they both moved about their sage and rose-colored bedroom throwing things from the suitcase into the laundry chute in the hallway and throwing other articles onto the bed and dressers. Unpacking was reassuring but depressing. The anticipation brought out by packing, the excitement of a new experience, had all been used up and dissipated and the aftermath of a so-called vacation was often a return to

the original reason for leaving in the first place but with even greater trepidation. In short, there was simply no escape from life.

Patricia and Tom had settled into their married life. It was not exciting but hadn't reached acrimonious boredom either. They didn't dare go there because both of them had decided internally, separately to themselves, that this marriage was *it*. There would be no divorce, no leaving, no third chances. It must work because it had to work because neither one of them dared for it not to work. However Patricia's children, (Tom had none. His first wife died of Ovarian cancer in her forties. They had thought casually about children, but her career as HR manager for Apple and his work as a professor of Sociology took up most of their available energy and by the time they got around to the consideration of maybe having one child, it was too late for Carol who was diagnosed with Ovarian cancer at forty-three and dead before her next birthday), drove both of them somewhat crazy. Charlotte was no issue, Ian was an avid adventurer that came back periodically like a prodigal child with artifacts from his various excursions and travels, Megan was stable as an Oceanographer in Santa Cruz, it was really only Brenda that caused the trouble. "The sticky wicket," Tom would say. He was a lover of Cricket having grown up near Toronto where both Hockey and Cricket were available at the private schools he attended.

Family is destiny.

Tom lived by that motto. Patricia often failed to understand it. Jeff denied it.

Brenda managed to get a week off for “family matters” and took the flight up to Toronto. This time only Tom was there to meet her.

“Where’s mom?”

“Oh—busy with stuff.”

Brenda gauged his mood as preoccupied and dismissed any other reasons for his diffidence. He was usually quite talkative with her and often asked a lot of useless questions in order to “draw her out,” Brenda surmised, but this time he was unusually quiet from the airport and the 45-minute ride to their mansion in East York. The two of them rambling around in this huge five bedroom home baffled her but they seemed to enjoy the space. Maybe it enabled them to have separate lives in the same house, who knows?

Patricia was in the kitchen finishing a large veggie salad in a beautiful translucent blue bowl when Brenda and Tom arrived. Tom threw his keys on the counter and gave Patricia a short kiss. He then retreated to his man cave, a cavernous room off the dining room filled with a huge TV that filled one wall, a bookcase filled with games and DVDs and other things, a state-of-the-art game console, a little 3-hole putting set up, one large leather recliner and matching couch and a bookcase jam-packed with interesting books.

“After lunch we’re all going to sit down and have a talk,” Patricia said as Brenda dropped her duffel bag and other gear onto the floor.

“Where do I put my stuff?”

“In your room. You know where that is.”

“Ok. I’m hungry. Got anything else besides salad?”

“I can make you a hamburger if you want.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

Brenda dragged her bags up to “her room”, a small room next to the second floor landing (there was a third floor to this house as well as a finished basement), decorated in light blue and soft rose with a duvet on the bed of large roses with sage green petals. Brenda hated the décor but she never said anything. The dresser was big—a rough-hewn oak affair and she noticed the underwear in the top drawer she’d left from the last visit. In the small walk-in closet hung the little black cocktail dress she wore two years ago on a visit when all Patricia’s kids came at the same time—a kind of BBQ family reunion. She realized she was three sizes too big for that dress now.

Patricia came up to her room and stood outside the door. The planes of Patricia’s face, now in her late sixties, almost seventy, were angular, etched with fine lines on the cheekbones, a sharp chin, wide-set brown eyes, a heavy lid to them, with cruelty just playing in the corners of her mouth. She was not a nice or kind woman, she had a hardness and meanness about her that she hid with vivacity and overly forced enthusiasm. Her brows were heavy and dark though she colored her hair in that mixture of white, gray, tan and blond, with the underlying hair a deep brown that many older women think is attractive and youthful. Ultra short, her hair looked jaunty in the front and ran dark at the nape

of her neck. There was no fat in her face, her cheeks were sunken—it was a thin, almost feral kind of face. Her body was angular as well. Tall, almost 5’11”, Patricia carried her weight in hips and thighs. The upper body was thin, sheathed in tanned skin. Her many years of fanatic exercise, including tennis and running and fitness coaching gave her a muscular, strong, lean look and combined with her height, a formidable presence that often attracted many men and repelled most women.

In contrast, Brenda was a tiny 5’3” with rounded cheeks and a soft curvy body. She was a small-ish, a size eight, but there were no hard edges to her body and face. The tiny waist coupled with a vulnerable exterior gave Brenda her edge. She wasn’t much of a fan of physical activity although she boasted of being a crack soccer player in high school. That was long ago.

Patricia cleared her throat.

Brenda threw her duffel bag onto the bed, unzipped it, making sure to push the little baggie of marijuana and rolling papers underneath some underwear and took some clothes out for the dresser.

“Mom, I’m unpacking.”

“I see that.”

Patricia strived to overcome her toughness around Brenda because, in spite of all the years of covering feeling over with rationalization, she still retained a soft spot for her children, especially the baby. It wasn’t the kind of soft spot that produced anything. Patricia just let it be there, acknowledging at certain

moments, unknown to anyone else, that perhaps this was one area of life she could not control. Control was a big issue for Patricia. She wanted it; she needed it and many times she got it. Just not with her children, especially Brenda.

“Well,” Patricia said apropos of nothing, “So. I found some ground beef for the hamburger you just requested--and then we could all get together and— chat—you know, have a talk?”

“About what?” Brenda threw her bras into the empty top drawer of the dresser.

“Let’s eat.” Patricia said in her usual clipped voice, turned on her heel and left the room. Brenda had a brief moment when she thought she hated her, but she squelched it only because she thought hate was evil. She replaced it with ‘dislike’ instead.

Much like she did when she was a young child, Brenda, sullen and reluctant in the extreme, kept her mouth shut and followed her mother downstairs. The only thing missing from childhood was her father, but he had been missing a long time.

Tom was already sitting at the table.

“Hi! Hi!” he shouted in that desperate parental tone that he often took on when he had no idea how to handle what was coming. It was his foghorn— “storm’s a –brewing.” Brenda despised it and was grateful for it simultaneously.

“Look what we got! Salad! Hamburger!”

Brenda gave him a snarky, scornful look and sat down.

“What the hell’s going on?”

“Nothing!” Patricia shouted.

Everyone sat in silence, passing around the salad bowl, a platter of hamburger patties, buns and condiments.

“Like a picnic indoors,” Tom mumbled with his mouth full.

“Shut your mouth, Tom, when you talk.”

“I can’t talk with my mouth shut, Patricia.”

“I mean, chew with your mouth closed.”

“Then when do I talk?”

“Is this what you guys talk about all the time?”

“No. Only when you’re here.”

“Tom!”

“Sorry.”

“I don’t care,” Brenda said to make the peace.

“How’s your hamburger?”

“Rare.”

“Is it too rare?”

“No, it’s fine.”

“I can put it in for a minute if you want.”

“No mom, it’s fine. FINE. Jesus.”

Tom pushed his plate away.

“I’m done.”

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing Brenda. Don’t be paranoid.”

I’m not paranoid! I just—“

“Let’s all meet in the Great Room,” Patricia declared, collecting plates, glasses and silverware and throwing them onto the hamburger platter. “I’ll just dump these in the sink and join you.”

Brenda felt her stomach drop.

In the Great Room, (Brenda hated that name for a room—what was so great about it?) Tom’s favorite room other than his man cave, was an Eames chair placed next to a handcrafted glass-topped desk, the walls lined with bookcases filled with a thousand books, even more books than Tom’s cave had, books that stood as a testament for Tom’s twenty-five years as a professor before he took early retirement, bought the bakery and married Patricia.

Patricia hated running the bakery, she would have rather hired a manager to take her place so she could spend her days volunteering and taking cooking classes, but inevitably, she ended up in the bakery with Tom doing all the step and fetch it jobs from three a.m. (*The middle of the night, Tom!* she screamed when they first opened) until they closed at eight. Thank God she talked him into hiring a cleaning crew so they could get out of there at close.

“So,” Patricia said as she plopped into the oversized leather lounge, the ecru head chair of the library. Tom sat on one end of the Italian fabric sectional and Brenda perched uneasily on the other.

“Brenda..”

“Brenda..”

Tom and Patricia spoke together, laughter came uneasily.

“What’s going on here? Are you guys getting divorced or something?”

Patricia exploded, “Of course not!”

“No, no, no, no, no, no...”

Tom trailed off into a cascade of thought “no’s.”

“So come on you guys, spit it out. What is it?”

“Ok.” Patricia grabbed a pile of papers next to the chair.

“Brenda, let’s get down to it. You—you know you’re a bit darker than your brother and sisters, right?”

“Yeah, dad’s family had brunettes, grandma was a brunette, so what?”

“Yes, yes Brenda.” Patricia said brushing a blond strand of hair behind her ear. “But...but..well, you’re more of a kind of mocha colored skin, aren’t you?”

“I’m not that dark mom. I tan easily. So what? And dad is dark too.”

“When I married him he was a strawberry blond with freckles. Things changed over time, you know. He got darker. Especially after chemo—it changed the color of his skin.”

Brenda carefully avoided thinking about her dad's bout with prostate cancer when she was thirteen. It lasted two years and she never wanted to see cancer again in her life.

"He lives in Tombstone," Tom interjected, voice quivering, apropos of nothing.

"Yah, I know where he lives Tom. What's that got to do with anything?"

"The sun, the—"

Patricia swiveled her head around, much like the exorcist Brenda observed, to train her deep set intensely staring blue eyes on her daughter.

"Brenda, I am not your mother."

"What?"

Brenda's stomach suddenly felt weak as if the bottom half of her entire body just dropped out and fell through the floor to China or wherever the other side of the earth was.

"I don't—I don't--" tears came though she willed them not to. There was no control here.

Patricia grabbed some Kleenex from a side table next to her, handed the wad to Tom who handed it to Brenda.

"Mom?"

"Of course I love you Brenda. I am your mom to all intents and purposes and—well, I really should have told you all of this much sooner—but it took a while to get the DNA results from your father and his family—"

“My father?”

“Your biological father.”

“Where is he?”

“El Salvador.”

“He’s Mexican? I’m Mexican?”

“There’s nothing wrong with being Mexican,” Tom said, “and anyway, El Salvador is not Mexico it’s the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America. It’s a beautiful place. It borders the Pacific Ocean—“

“We don’t need a travelogue, Tom,” Patricia curtly informed him.

“So, who’s my real mother, mother?”

“I know all this is a shock for you. I’ve got all the papers here. The adoption papers and—It was semi-closed adoption meaning we—your dad and I—knew a little of your parents and their origins but we were discouraged from pursuing them in any kind of—open dialogue. Your mother—your mother was seventeen when she had you. A child really. And your father—nineteen—a laborer in a little village called Comasgua. Village by their standards maybe, 11,000 people. It’s beautiful honey. We went there to get you when you were only four months old. In 2001 an earthquake wiped out the only main road to the village so they couldn’t receive supplies. A lot of the residents disappeared—scattered all over I guess, to relatives, friends, families because obviously there was no work and no way to receive supplies and—for years I couldn’t find your parents or their families—I tried—and finally—“

“Mom!” Brenda screamed. “I’m not ready to take in all this! Just hand me the papers and let me look it over.”

Brenda’s arms were shaking, her whole body felt weak. Maybe she could pass out but she wouldn’t allow it. Something screamed inside of her with a voice she did not recognize.

“There are pictures here too. Of you as a new born—your parents—your grandparents—the village—the adoption counselor—“

“Patricia, just hand her the stuff.”

Patricia pushed the pile toward Tom’s waiting hands. He put the pile gently on Brenda’s lap.

Brenda placed her hands firmly on the pile and stared straight ahead.

“Who can I talk to?”

“Us, honey,” Patricia said in a shaky voice.

“You’re the last person I want to talk to.”

“Okay,” Patricia warbled.

“And don’t feel sorry for yourself Mom. You don’t get pity points here. And also, I don’t admire you! Not one bit!”

“I’ll talk to your dad.”

“He may not want to talk about it. After all—“

“Patricia.” Tom put his hands up. “No.”

“No what?”

“No nothing,” Tom said, “I just mean—“

“Never mind,” Brenda concluded. “This meeting is over.”

She took the pile and went up to her room, shutting the door. She had fears her mother would come up and knock on the door and of course she did.

“Brenda?” Tentative, subservient tone.

“Mom—go away!”

“Please let me—“

“No!”

The no was final. Patricia hung around the outside of the door until Tom came and pulled her away. He took his wife downstairs where both sat listless and blank in front of the window. Tom flicked on the television. Debbie Boone was smiling with her garish forced smile advertising “lifestyle lift.”

“You think I need a lifestyle lift?”

“No.”

Tom—“

“Patricia, we’ve got a crisis here.”

“It’ll blow over.”

“Blow over? Are you kidding? Her origins genetic and otherwise, her parenthood, who she is—that will not ‘blow over!’ Her total understanding of--her identity! Her complete awareness of who—who is she? Who is she? Who are you? Everything’s at stake! Or don’t you see that?”

“Nothing’s at stake. We raised her. The ‘biological parents,” Patricia spoke the word biological with a slight repugnant edge, “were sperm and egg donors, that’s it!”

“Patricia! Do I even know you? Why did you wait so long to tell her? Getting the information at her age is traumatic.”

“I didn’t marry you so you could be like my previous husband.”

“I’m nothing like him. But even if I were, so what? Haven’t you worked through that by now? I mean—“

“Tom, she’s coming down the stairs.”

Brenda came quietly down the stairs bag in hand.

“I want to go home. Take me to the airport.”

“But Brenda—I was going to take you to the Dentist and have our lady’s lunch that you love so much!”

“Mom—Patricia—whoever you are—“

“I’ll take you Brenda, no worries. Stay here Patricia.”

“No, I want to come. Brenda’s my baby—I—“

“Stay here!” Brenda had never heard Tom shout.

Patricia teared up but stood her ground in the middle of the library, unable to move. It was the first time Brenda had ever seen her mother cry.

Tom rattled the keys in his pocket.

“Ready?”

“I need to go.”

“I understand.”

“I’ll sort this out in Chicago. I mean—do my siblings know?”

“I suppose so—well—I’m not sure.”

“Mom? Do they know?”

Patricia stood stone white in the center of her own world. For once her rattling mouth with its endless stream of rational-sounding reasonableness was clamped shut. She did not turn her head to look as Tom and Brenda walked out of the library and through the kitchen to the garage.

It was a beautiful day in Toronto.

“I’ll have to pay extra for switching flights.”

“No biggie. I’ll take care of it.” They headed toward the highway.

Looking out the window Brenda saw trees and civilization whiz by.

Soundless and tired, she was grateful that Tom was keeping his thoughts to himself. Brenda knew that this was just the beginning of a new set of emotional DNA but for the time being, she pretended it was simply closure on one set of footprints and a bright, limitless sandy beach ahead free for her to make new prints. She rolled down her window and felt the air touch her face, looked down at her lap and fondled her carry on bag as if it were a child.

