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Flipped

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Author Bio

Mariah is a junior at Gettysburg College, majoring in English with a concentration in writing. She is from Atlanta, Georgia and loves traveling, reading, and hanging with her friends in her spare time - especially if those three things can be combined.

Flipped

Mariah Wirth

Winter in Ohio is a particularly bleak season. Especially a winter in Ohio spent watching someone who is ill. Especially when that person is your father. If someone were to ask me now what he was sick with, I would not be able to remember. That is not the important part, you see. It is only the background information, the stage directions.

It was Christmas break of my sophomore year of high school in 2007. I was living with my mother in Georgia at the time, and we had driven to Ohio, where my father still lived because of his illness. I love my dad, don't get me wrong, but we had never been particularly close. Rather, we had been distant in the way that a few visits a year and twelve hours driving distance can make two people. So the fact that I was spending Christmas in a hospital room did not sit too well with me. The fact that there was snow on the ground and I was freezing sat even worse.

I have never been fond of Ohio, and I think it is because my mother and I basically fled from there when I was three years old. We moved to Florida with promises that my dad would follow, but he never did. That is when it all began in my eyes. If you asked my mom, I'm sure she would have a different response. If you asked my father, he might say it never started. The "it" I am referring to is when we began the farce of calling ourselves a family.

My father was living over twelve hours away in a different state. How can three people be a family in that situation? They couldn't, not in my eyes. So I guess I was relieved when the farce ended over my Christmas break. At least we weren't pretending anymore.

There was nothing particularly striking or significant about the day this happened. It was completely ordinary, and that was almost worse. If there had been something different about that day, perhaps I would have been on guard. As it was, both my mother and I were taken completely by surprise.

Our house in Ohio—I say "our" only in the sense that my family owns it—has two living rooms. The front living room, which opens into the kitchen, is where I found myself that night. It was filled to the brim with furniture, boxes, and an odd assortment of various items that had somehow made their home in that space. Most of the stuff was from my dad's law office, which had just recently been cleared out—his furniture

moved to his home instead. After a day of visiting my father, my mom and I had gone over to the house to clean up this room and organize the various papers from the law office. I remember it was extremely late at night, and I honestly don't remember why we decided to clean then, but we did. I believe it was my mother's idea.

Before I go any farther, it is important that you understand the relationship between my father and mother. They loved each other, of that I am sure. They still love each other, but as far back as I can remember, they have fought. And since we didn't all live together, for me it already felt like they were divorced. But the thing was, they weren't. I held onto this in part because I was ashamed at the thought of my parents being divorced. So many of my friends' parents were divorced, and I held onto the fact that mine weren't, like it was some sort of life vest. Even if they fought all the time, at least they weren't divorced. Even if we didn't all live together, at least they weren't divorced. At least they weren't divorced. That was my mantra. But that night, everything changed.

I was looking through the drawers of my father's desk, which had come to reside in the living room, when I found it. The paper was a regular eight and a half by eleven page, but the information printed on it was far from normal. I read the words, trying to decipher what I was seeing. I had never seen a power of attorney before. I knew what it was, but this was the first time I had ever been confronted with identifying one. One particular word stuck out to me above all the other legal gibberish. Or rather, one particular name. Margeret Wirth. My father's ex-wife. It was then I knew things were bad.

Once I realized what this document was, I immediately took it to my mother. I didn't even think; I didn't even pause to reflect. My first thought was just, "I have to show Mom!"

Slowly I made my way across the room to where she sat on the floor, going through a box of knick-knacks. It felt like it took forever to get to her, each step heavy. When I finally stood in front of her, I held out the paper to her with shaky fingers.

"Look," I said. Mom gently took the paper from my hands and scanned the page. Then she scanned it again. I just wanted her to tell me that this wasn't what I thought it was; that it was an old document and didn't mean anything, that nothing had to change. But I could tell by the expression on her face that this was a big deal, and that things were going to change. She read that power of attorney for what seemed like forever but was probably just a few minutes.

She was speechless at first, just standing up and walking around the room aimlessly, the document loosely clutched in her right hand. Then she looked me in the eye.

“We have to get a divorce,” she said softly.

It was then that I began sobbing. The tears tore out of me like they had been dammed up. I choked and cried, and Mom cried too.

“I’m sorry,” she cried. “I’m so sorry.”

She tried to hold me, but I didn’t want comfort. Instead I walked over to my dad’s big desk: the same desk that had just produced the document that had sealed my fate. I leaned my arms against it, gripping it for the stability I so desperately wanted and would not receive from a piece of furniture. I looked up and into the mirror above the couch on the opposite wall. The scene was reflected back to me: we had just started cleaning, but the only things in the room that seemed to have changed were the people in it.

I stood at that desk going through the truth of the situation, over and over. Of course my parents had to get divorced. The paper told the whole story. My father had made Margie, his first ex-wife, his power of attorney. She was able to access all his funds in case he wasn’t able to; i.e., in extreme illness. At this point, my father was getting better, but the fact that he had done this and not told my mother, or, better yet, that he would make someone besides his wife his power of attorney, was the straw that broke the camel’s back. I think what really did it for my mom was the fact that this not only endangered her future, but that it endangered mine. I still had two and a half years of high school left at the time, not to mention college. If Margie got ahold of the money, we would have nothing. My mother had to break ties now in order to secure our futures.

“I’m so sorry, Honey,” Mom said. She was still crying. “You understand why though, don’t you? It’s for you.”

And I did. I realized the importance of this step. I honestly did. In fact, I agreed with her. Maybe that’s why I cried so hard. Maybe that’s why I was so mad. I was mad at myself for understanding. A fifteen-year-old girl shouldn’t have to understand why her parents had to get divorced. They shouldn’t know such things of their parents’ world yet. At least, I didn’t want to know. I felt like at that moment I had been thrust into adulthood without my permission. From then on my mom and I would be in it together, taking care of each other; but I wasn’t done being taken care of myself. How was I supposed to treat my father? I loved him, but at that moment I was so mad at him. He knew what he was doing when he wrote up that document. He was a lawyer! “How could he do this to me?” I thought. “Doesn’t he love me?” This was too much. I had been betrayed by my father. I thought I was daddy’s little girl, but apparently not.

I go back to this moment often. What if I hadn’t found that piece of paper? Did I rush to give it to my mother like a tattletale because I subconsciously wanted my parents to get divorced? Was it my fault? I realize

now that it wasn't my fault; it was my father's. I didn't make his ex-wife his power of attorney; he did. And if the paper hadn't ended the charade we were living, something else would have. As I said, they argued a lot and things were beginning to come to an end. Something would have precipitated this. I was only one factor among many.

At that moment in time, I knew the entire trajectory of my life had changed, and I was not convinced it was for the better. When one of your parents betrays you, it flips your entire outlook on life. It distorts your memories. It changes everything. But almost stronger than the feeling of betrayal was the relief I felt.

I was relieved that the fighting between my parents might finally stop. Even the possibility of peace was better than none at all. I was relieved that my parents would finally be calling their situation what it was: not a marriage, but a farce of one. I was relieved none of us would have to pretend anymore about our family dynamics. But most of all, I was relieved that even though I had been the one to find the power of attorney that caused my mother to divorce my father, it wasn't my fault. My mother was the one divorcing him. I could blame her and be free to still love my father. Maybe I could still be daddy's little girl.

I didn't really want to feel relieved; I wanted to feel angry and jaded and betrayed. I wanted to hate my parents and what they had done to me. But I couldn't do any of these things because the relief was so strong. I felt like I deserved a whole family, not some chopped up makeshift version, but I realized that this was the best I was going to get, and I seized control of that knowledge. I was so relieved and so close to happiness that I scared myself, so I cried tears not of grief, but of something more akin to acceptance.