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VI

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Author Bio

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VI

Claudia Pomponi

My dearest mother,

I would like to put this letter for you into a beautiful glass bottle, blue and green like the Atlantic Ocean when the sun hits it at just the right angle on one of the perfect summer days that have built my childhood. Then I would like to put it into that gorgeous body of water, watch it drift away and finally reach you, one day far in the future. I would want for it to peacefully float up to you, for it to be a beautiful sunny day, and for you to feel at ease when reading it.

I could not be near you when you read it, because it would break my heart to see the way your face would fall.

I could never tell you how bad it really was because the night I had to tell you I was going on medication for my depression I watched your face go from puzzled to devastated. You reached across the table, held my hand and said you were so *sorry*. You told me that you thought I was always your happiest child, so carefree and full of life. You said you always pictured me as being *perfect* and you were so sorry you never knew how I really felt. I looked down at our hands clasped together; yours so small, with your nails bitten right down to the skin, probably a result of all the stress I cause you.

Right then and there, when I saw your face like that and heard you blame yourself, I promised myself I would never tell you how bad it really was.

So if I had to tell you, I would tell you like this; in these letters I would send out for you into the sea.

Love you,
C

Dearest mother,

The first time was water.

I was fifteen.

I discovered the way water could become so hot to the touch that while it burned my skin, it numbed my mind; suddenly all the pain I was feeling in my head and heart went away.

One time you came home while I was upstairs in my bathroom, still in my clothes from field hockey practice, the water running so hot from my faucet the entire mirror was fogged. I stuck my wrists under the piercing stream and watched it turn my skin raw as I heard the downstairs door open and your familiar voice call up to me. I almost wished for a second that you would come upstairs and see what I was doing, find a way to help me understand why on earth I was doing it and make me stop. But you didn't. I turned the water off, sank down against the cool, tiled wall and cried.

There was something about heat, because the next twisted addictions were hair straighteners and curling irons. The first time I did it, I held it against the inside of my wrist and bit my tongue until I tasted blood. It seared the skin right off. I told you I had burned it on a pot while boiling water for pasta.

Maybe it was because you had noticed the mark that I decided to try to do it somewhere more shocking. Maybe I wanted you and others to notice so that maybe, *finally*, someone could help me stop this terrible habit. One night I took the hair straightener right to my face. Seared a patch of skin straight off my cheek and watched it bubble up into a huge blister.

I did this twice more: once on my forehead and once on my chin. The one on my chin was so bad that it bubbled and bled. It was Valentine's Day, and the next day you and I were leaving for a vacation in Puerto Rico. When I put my face under the warm, salty water it stung my chin. *That means it's healing*, you told me. Was I healing?

From then on, I stayed away from hair straighteners and curling irons. I thought that if one more of those mysterious burns popped up on my face someone might start to question. In reality, I wonder if I secretly *did* want someone to question. To help me. To stop me.

Love you,
C

Dearest mother,

The next time I was seventeen.

I took a heavy duty flashlight and smashed it against my forearm until it was red, raw, and starting to bruise. When you came home I told you I had fallen on my run. I ended up in the emergency room. It was Labor Day Weekend. I know the doctor didn't believe me because he looked at my knees and elbows and asked how I did not have any cuts or scratches from the fall. When I left in a shiny black cast I said I would never hurt myself again; it had been too close of a call.

I never did.

That's because I don't have to use a curling iron, a metal flashlight, or scalding hot water to intentionally hurt myself. Now, I hurt myself every week with all the needles I stick into my skin day after day like a pin cushion. By all the IV's that all the nurses poke into my arm. By all the mind-blowing migraines from my medication that keep me in bed for days on end. Maybe my body finally got the message. Now, because of my illness, I am forced to hurt myself almost every *single* day.

Let me take you to a moment that I will always remember crystal clear. I will tell you it like it is that exact day again, like we are both there, about to have our worlds changed for good.

I am nineteen years old as we are sitting in the small, bright, sterile room of Yale New Haven Hospital. Four doctors have preceded this visit. Two small procedures that went inside and tried to fix what they thought was wrong with me, tried to fix what was astray in my tiny, confused, and exhausted body. Both times when I awoke groggy from anesthesia I was met with a face that said *sorry, we're still not sure*. Two false diagnoses. Twenty-six allergy tests. Plenty of tears. Several months. Now we are here. It is June 20th, 2013. I have just finished my freshman year of college. I am in the pediatric specialty ward of Yale New Haven Hospital holding your hand. It is both precious and devastating.

The doctor who enters the room is bald. He is not dressed like the doctors I am used to in scrubs or a white coat. The strong scent of hand sanitizer follows him. He enters dressed in khaki pants and a navy blazer. Introduces

himself as Neil Romburg: he specializes in immunology and oncology. It is in that moment that my entire world suddenly comes crashing down around me. He has just shaken my hand one moment prior and now, with just a few words, he has taken my already fucked up nineteen-year-old life and smashed it into a million teeny, tiny pieces. It is then that I realize my body is failing me. He says words that I cannot hear or understand. A sound like rushing water fills my ears, and I stare at him. You do the same. We both seem oddly calm. We are mainly just confused.

He tells us that I have a severe immune deficiency. All of the antibodies in my body suddenly stopped working for me, which will now require a lifetime of injections of other people's to keep myself healthy and living. My body stopped fighting for me. He told us that it is serious and it is chronic. I will live with it for my entire life. The odds of me getting diagnosed with this rare disorder are about as likely as you finding these letters one day after I set them out to sea.

When he tells us this, he tells us other things too. Like how most patients go on to develop lymphoma, like how many patients with this condition eventually need a bone marrow transplant. Those words tumble and tumble around in my mind. The room is suddenly too hot and too cold at the same time. A nurse comes to get me and take me to another room for blood tests. She looks at me with a bright face and takes my hand. *You are so beautiful*, I remember her saying, *so beautiful and tall. You should be a model with all that beauty.* My mouth makes something that sounds like a laugh. I wash my hands in a metal sink and stare into the mirror. *Lymphoma. Lymphoma. Lymphoma.*

When she brings me into the next room there is another nurse waiting with the same bright face I will become too used to seeing. The face that looks at me with a smile, waiting to give me a compliment and make small talk while they stick a big needle in my arm. The face that will look at you the same way but with something else behind their eyes, something that says, 'I am so glad this is not my child sitting here.' Something that breaks your heart every time. Something that leads you to tears in the Hershey Emergency Room two years later and makes me promise to myself that I will never do or say anything that would lead you to tears. It was too painful to watch.

I squeezed your hand as I watched my blood flow into little, plastic tubes. *Three. Six. Ten.* I lost count after twelve.

Love you,
C

Dearest Mother,

It was after this hellish diagnosis that things really turned again.

I sat outside the next day on the patio with the warm sun blinding my vision. I am not sure how long I had been sitting there. Minutes? Hours? It was the middle of the afternoon. I was still in my pajamas. I heard the familiar squeak of the door opening behind me, but made no move to turn around. In a moment you were at my side, holding a small bottle. I looked at it questioningly, but did not ask. *It's holy water*, you explained. Someone at work had given you two bottles that they had lying around. After they heard the news of my diagnosis they thought they would be better in your hands than theirs. Little did we know that the second one would come in handy exactly a year later when my oldest sister grows a rare, lopsided tumor on her left knee.

You tilted my head back and I closed my eyes. Your hand smoothed my hair; a sensation so small and familiar that it almost makes me feel as if it can fix everything. Fix me. You said a small prayer, something I cannot exactly remember the words of now and poured it lightly over my forehead. The water reached my lips. It is when I tasted the saltiness of it that I realized I was crying.

This is when water started to come back to me.

Many of those days during that long, slow summer were spent sitting on an Adirondack chair at the beach, my eyes glazed over as I stared at Long Island Sound for hours on end. I sat there with bandages on my arms and legs, wanting to drift away into the middle of that sparkling blue. I wanted to leave all these problems back on dry land. I did this almost every single day. Often you would find me sitting there, book open in my lap. *What did you do today?* you would ask me, your face smiling, hopeful, trying so hard to help me. *Nothing*, I would always reply. *Nothing at all*.

Even now, I am sorry. So very sorry for the way your face would fall when you would have to watch me sit there, so isolated, physically and mentally. I wonder how many times you stood behind me, watching my still, small

figure staring out into nothing, before you actually approached me. Ten times? Zero times? Either way, I am sorry that I forced you to constantly try so hard--so hard to bring me back to life.

Love you,
C

Dearest Mother,

Now I will take you back to another moment, this one not so long ago. Again, I will place us there like we are in yet another day that is going to change so many things. I am twenty-one when they find the tear in my knee that will require surgery. Like several times before, you are at my side in the doctor's office. Once again, it is June. June seems to be the month my body finally gets the attention it *strives* for. You do not know this, but I have the number six, in roman numerals, tattooed on my side. Six for June. Six for all the hells we have gone through together. Six for strength, and six for love.

Here is the part that breaks my heart the most to imagine telling you: when you get to this part of the letter I hope you are feeling strong, feeling how thankful I am for your love and strength. I hope that you are able to take it.

It is one week before my surgery, and I sit in the bathtub. Your bathtub. You are downstairs making dinner. There is probably music playing, and there is most definitely a glass of wine at your easiest convenience. My mind is so lost. I stare ahead at my red toenails peeping above the bubbles. *Russian Roulette* is the color I just painted them.

I now think the darkest thought that has ever crossed my mind. I think of how easy it would be to go under this warm, delicious bath water and never come back up. To leave my life in the most luxurious place of this home. I keep staring at my feet and I think how sad it would be if you had to come in here and find me with my perfectly painted, bright red toenails.

I take a deep breath in.

I do not do it. Because that is when I realize what I am doing; I am playing Russian roulette with my fucking *life*. I could leave my life, leave my pain and hurting heart behind, but I would also be leaving behind a whole

group of people who would then hurt more than I ever could have. Especially you. You would always hurt the most.

The next morning I sat on your bed while you got ready for work. I have done this since I was a child. Sometimes we don't even talk. Today, I tell you that I think I need to start going back to therapy. You look at me and your mouth forms a perfect "O" as you simply say, *Okay*. No questions or inquisitions.

Days later I sit in Maryellen's office and tell her these things. I tell her about the bathtub, and as the words fall out of my mouth I feel as though I am sitting across the room watching someone else say this. Surely this cannot be me saying these awful things, *right?* But it is.

I saved myself when I did this. Maryellen saved me. Kyle saved me. My friends saved me. But more than anyone, you saved me, even if you do not know it. I could never have saved myself if you were not there all along holding my hands and telling me that it was going to be okay. Because you are my mother, you are automatically always right, so I believed you, and it saved me.

Love you,
C

Dearest Mother,

I am six years old and it is a perfect day in Rhode Island. The sun is shining, the water is sparkling, blue and stunning like the aquamarine diamond earrings you will give my sister for her twenty-first birthday. The waves are monstrous today because it is the day after a storm. *Days after storms always bring the best beach days*. These are words we have all grown to live by. I am dipping my toes near the edge while you keep a close eye on me. You do not go near the water because it scares you. It always has. It is funny that none of us have inherited that fear. We are three little fishes. I venture further in and overestimate my strength as a wave rolls towards me. It knocks me down, and I am suddenly being spun in a cloud of sand and white foam. You have thrown your fears aside and jumped in after me, pulling me out and smoothing my wet, matted hair out of my face. I cry bitter, salty tears and you tell me that it is *okay*.

You saved me. You saved me. You saved me.

I love you,
Claud.