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Not My Favorite Memory

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Author Bio

Isabelle is a senior with a major in English with a Writing Concentration and a minor in Judaic Studies. She spends the majority of her free time playing with Mimi, her four-year-old Chihuahua. She is also found watching various TV shows, staring at blank pages on her computer screen trying to write, or eating ice cream.

Not My Favorite Memory

Isabelle Punchatz

“When I was four, my brother tried to choke the nanny.”

Alex stared at me, his mouth slightly open and a large bite of steak hung off his fork. “What?” he asked, shaking his head as though he’d misheard.

I shrugged and took a sip of my water. The fork in Alex’s hand found its way back onto the blue plate and he stared at me across the table. A kid screamed for ice cream in the corner; his mom tried to quiet him as Alex waited for me to say something else. A plate fell off the waiter’s tray in the distance, a soft curse echoing through the restaurant.

“You asked what family stories I hear about constantly,” I said.

Alex rolled the wrapper from his straw into a tight ball, flicking it at my head. It bounced into my water and I scowled. “I expected something a bit more, oh I don’t know, funny.”

“He was a problem child,” I explained. “Mom’s always said he has my dad’s temper. ‘Jared just doesn’t know how to control it,’” I mimicked her voice, waving my hand in the air like her, pretending it made everything okay. Like getting sent to the principal’s office every day in elementary school. Like getting suspended for three days in middle school. Like choking the nanny when he was nine.

“He seemed nice when I met him,” Alex said, confusion coloring his voice and his eyebrows drew together. He tugged at the collar of his black t-shirt, picking off a few errant strands of blonde hair. “Didn’t seem angry at all.”

“Therapy; since he was twelve,” I said. “Everyone kind of just laughs awkwardly about it now.”

Alex shook his head and cut up another piece of steak, dipping it in too much A1 sauce and tucking it in his mouth.

“He choked someone, Erin,” he said while chewing.

I shrugged a little, playing with the fries on my plate. I dipped one in the ketchup. “My dad stopped him before he really hurt her,” I said, repeating the excuse the whole family used. Jared had had her pinned against the wall when Dad pulled him off. Chris told me about it when I was ten and finally asked why she’d only been with us for three weeks.

“Still...that’s bad,” Alex mumbled.

“Heather was fine.”

I found myself in a crowded football stadium on a Friday night in early November, sitting on cold metal bleachers that my jeans did nothing to protect against. One of my last high school football games. I leaned on the fence at the top of the stands; my left hand held Diane’s right, hidden under a maroon and white Easton High Devils fleece blanket.

“Hastings is such an idiot,” she said under her breath. It was the same comment I heard every football game, not too surprising with the team’s losing record. “So glad he’s retiring. Maybe we’ll actually have a winning team.”

“Coach Pat thinks they’ll suck next year too,” I said.

“He’s your soccer coach, Erin. What does he know about football?”

I laughed and pulled my hat down further over my ears. A groan made its way through the crowd as Alex fumbled for the third time, and I knew he’d walk into class on Monday with his head down, possessively holding onto the one strap left on his backpack if this continued.

“Take him out of the game!” a man yelled from the other side of the stands.

“He’ll be running laps at practice,” one of the boys sitting two rows down told his friend.

“Love you, Alex!” Nicole shouted as she leaned over the railing with a seemingly genuine smile.

I nudged Diane’s knee and nodded at the hot chocolate she was drinking. With a click of her tongue and an exaggerated sigh, the Styrofoam cup was handed to me. I took a long sip, letting the warm drink slowly spread through my body to help keep me warm.

A cheer burst through the crowd minutes later as Alex managed to make up for fumbling the ball repeatedly by scoring a touchdown. The people in the Student Section stood up quickly, shouting and clapping as Alex fist-pumped the air. Diane screamed, hand slipping out of my grip as she started to jump up with the rest of the crowd.

“I was molested,” I said quietly. The words escaped without any prior thought like an innocent prisoner breaking through iron bars to find somebody to finally listen.

Everyone’s cheers grew silent like they’d heard my confession, and Diane stood frozen, legs bent awkwardly, half standing. Alex was still jumping on the field, the number seven stitched across his back covered in mud stains. Coach Hastings was bent over, clipboard tucked under his arm as he clapped loudly. Our fleece blanket was half on the ground, having been pulled off when Diane moved. I couldn’t hear the sound of peoples’

screams; I just stared at Diane, blue eyes meeting hazel.

“What?” Diane asked, breaking the trance and the sounds of the stadium rushed back in; the marching band playing our fight song, Coach Hastings screaming at the team for the next play, Diane’s boots squeaking as she shuffled her feet and sat down.

I could take it back if I wanted to, pretend Diane had misheard. Her face screamed at me to do just that, the desperation in her hazel eyes shining.

“I was molested,” I said again. I glanced around briefly, but no one was paying attention to the two girls sitting at the top of a stadium, bundled under blankets and scarves with matching maroon hats that read *Easton High* across the front. Diane tucked her ankle around mine, and I let the crowd fall into a blur again.

“I was eight,” I continued.

I felt the light brush of her thumb over my knuckles, the touch dulled by the ratty leather gloves I’d stolen from my mom’s closet earlier that day.

“Who?”

I swallowed and stared down at my knees, tapping them together repeatedly. “It doesn’t matter,” I said without looking at her.

There was a soft touch to my shoulder, fingers playing with the split ends of my thin hair. “It does,” Diane said, kissing my cheek softly. “Tell me.”

I sighed. “You can’t tell anyone.”

“I would never,” she promised. Her arm wrapped around my shoulder, one finger drawing both our initials through the layers of my clothes, her typical way of comforting me.

I took a deep breath and held it for a few seconds, letting it out slowly as I continued to stare at my knees. I didn’t want to see Diane’s face.

“Jared.”

I sat at the kitchen table, glancing up to watch as Jared cut up asparagus and snap peas to cook with dinner that night. My mom was folding the piles of laundry he’d brought home from college, and my dad was upstairs watching a hockey game, his voice travelling downstairs whenever he yelled at the screen. My mom was watching the same game, television angled so my brother could see it too while I continued to flick through the magazine in front of me. Every time there was a bad play, Jared cursed and chopped the food a little harder.

After throwing a snap pea that had fallen on the tile floor into the trash, his slender hands turned the dial up on the stove. I watched the alien tattoo on his shoulder twitch as he moved on to cutting peppers. I could

see the little indents in his shirt where his shoulder dimples were; I had the same ones. I took in the almost chubby cheeks from too much alcohol and the beard that was an inch too long. My parents pretended to be ignorant of the almost unnoticeable smell of cigarettes that wafted from him, but I knew better.

There was a two-day-old hickey at the base of his neck, briefly peeking out over his collar. Most likely from his girlfriend Danielle, but after the 3am phone call a week earlier, when Jared told me about being drunk (while drunk) and a barely-there recollection of having sex in a shower with some forty-year-old, the hickey could be from anyone. I stared at him, the magazine sitting in front of me forgotten.

My therapist knows all about you.

“Erin, can you get the chicken?”

I jumped at the sound of Jared’s tenor voice, automatically moving to the refrigerator.

“What are you making anyway?” I asked as I put the chicken on the counter. He had moved on from the peppers and was now cutting up an onion, brown eyes red around the corners. I smirked at the sight.

“Chicken cacciatore.”

The front door slammed open, a burst of cool air rushing through. A suitcase fell onto the floor in the hallway, and the door closed again.

“Chris is home,” Jared mumbled.

Chris walked into the kitchen with a messenger bag slung across his chest, black jacket half zipped up, and light brown hair sticking up at odd angles from running his hands through it one too many times. There was a wide smile on his face, teeth showing and dimples piercing the corners of his mouth.

“The prodigal son has returned,” he said while holding his arms out.

Jared scoffed while I laughed, jumping into his arms. He let out a slight oomph but held me tight, kissing my cheek as he ruffled my hair. Chris barely came home unless it was the summer. This past summer he’d gone backpacking through Europe with friends. I hadn’t seen him since April on my birthday. We hadn’t even known if he would be home for Thanksgiving.

Chris let me go and walked over to Jared. “No hug?” he asked, clapping him on the back. The corner of Jared’s mouth turning down was the only response.

Our mom came into the kitchen, immediately pulling Chris into her arms. “You need to come home more often,” she scolded but there was no heat behind the words. Chris shrugged; Mom always said the same thing.

“I’m stealing Erin. I need girl advice,” he joked, grabbing my hand

and pulling me upstairs. His room was a boring yellow, old posters of bands he no longer listened to hung on the walls and *The Complete Collection of Calvin and Hobbes* sat on his bookshelf in-between broken action figures and countless CD's.

"Who are you trying to woo now?"

Chris chucked his suitcase onto the bed as I sat in his computer chair, spinning around as he poured clothes out over his bed and the floor. He took his jacket off and threw it on the pile.

"No one," he said. "Just didn't feel like listening to Mom fuss again."

I hummed in response and stood up, pushing him out of the way to grab his clothes. "You know I hate it when you do this."

He held his hands up and sat backwards in the chair I'd vacated. "Not my fault you're a little neat freak about clothes," he said, flicking through his CD's, putting one into the old boom box covered in stickers. The distinct sound of Led Zeppelin came blaring out.

"How's everything with Diane?" he asked as I sat cross-legged on his bed, folding t-shirts and jeans. I shook my head as a random bra fell out into my lap.

"Good. She'll be here on Friday, so you can once again threaten her to not hurt me then."

Chris smirked and winked at me. "Gotta keep my baby sister safe."

I rolled my eyes.

"Have you told Mom and Dad yet?" he asked.

"No. I'll tell them when I graduate and am away at college and don't have to worry about a fallout, if one comes."

Chris laid down on the floor, crossing his legs at the ankle with his hands resting on his stomach. "They'll be fine with it," he said. I chucked an old teddy bear at his head.

"You don't know that."

"Yes I do. You're just scared to tell them anything serious." Chris folded his arms over the back of his chair. "They won't argue with you about Diane. They already love her."

As the door opened, I was overcome with the familiar scent of sandalwood. Grandpa Joe's scent still lingered in his office, preserving the memories of him seated in his chair, glasses perched on his crooked nose from one too many fights, as he scrawled away on some contract.

I stared at the wooden chair his father had made. It was often easy to hear the *tap tap* of the chair wobbling downstairs while I baked with Grandma. My dad told me how she would sing, only to hear the tapping and think it was Grandpa Joe coming down to tell her to stop.

Dust had caused the original rich mahogany floor to turn ten

shades lighter. Everything else in the room was wood, except for the tattered red chair. It smelled of ink and old age, and there was a faint hint of expired perfume, as though someone had accidentally knocked over a bottle. On the middle shelf of a bookcase there was an old typewriter. I used to sit on his lap, giggling at the sounds it made while asking why anyone would use it.

"I suppose some of us are just sentimentalists," he had told me, and at seven years old I didn't know what he meant. Walking through his office now, staring at a picture on his desk (Chris, Jared, and I throwing sand at each other) and pressing the rusted keys of the typewriter, Grandpa Joe made a lot of sense.

I felt a light touch to my shoulder, glancing behind me to see Aunt Megan. She wrapped an arm around me, a gentle smile on her face creating more wrinkles in her cheeks. "He'd want you to have that," she said, nodding at the dusty typewriter.

"Do you think he remembers me?" I asked. I'd been one of the few people Grandpa Joe still recognized, but now that his Dementia had grown worse and he was in a home, I worried I was just a lost face in the sea of people to him.

"On his good days."

I smiled sadly and walked to the kitchen, Megan followed behind. Jared and Chris were outside with Dad, cleaning out the garage full of boxes for things to keep, sell, or throw out. My mom was at the nursing home with Grandma.

Megan got us both a glass bottle of water, sitting across from me with a warm gaze. "How's the first year of college going?" she asked.

"Stressful," I said, earning a soft laugh from her. "I'm glad to have a break this weekend, even if it is to pack up some of Grandpa Joe's stuff."

The bracelets on her wrist jingled as she pulled her short hair into a ponytail. I watched through the kitchen window as my dad brought out a cardboard box, placed it on the deck with two other ones, and walked back into the garage. "How are Chris and Jared?" she asked.

"Mom's worried Chris won't graduate on time as usual. Jared's got some internship and is applying for grad school." *He's also drinking every-day, but Mom doesn't want to talk about it. It's 'not a problem.'*

"I always worried about him –"

'Jared was such an emotional child, always wanted to be near your mother and threw a tantrum whenever she gave attention to you or Chris. Almost killed Chris in the backyard when he was five. If Grandpa hadn't seen him swinging the mallet back... You were still growing in your mom. And when he choked the nanny...I told Sean that he had to watch that boy.' It was the same story every time.

“He’s calmed down a lot, learned to control his anger,” I said.

She nodded, the conversation just as familiar to her. She asked about Jared, I said he was fine. She told me about him as a child, and I told her therapy had helped. She judged my dad for sitting in therapy with him for the first two years, and then mentioned how she had worried he would hurt me or Chris.

He has hurt me; I always wanted to shout at her. I’d told her what happened two years ago. She acted like she didn’t remember.

“I keep an eye on him,” I told her at the end of each conversation. “And if he ever has kids, I’ll watch out for them, too.”

I sat in my therapist’s office, legs kicked up onto the table between us while I flicked a speck of dust off my jeans. The dried dirt on my black boots left a trace behind when I crossed my legs, tapping my knee as I rested the side of my face against the balled-up fist of my left hand.

Rachel was wearing a sweater dress today, black with a turtleneck that hit just below her knees. She had black boots like mine, although hers had a slight heel and were polished. Her blonde hair was pulled into a bun, and her clipboard rested against the throw pillow in her lap, ignored by her for the past twenty minutes of our session. A few pictures were scattered about the ceiling-to-floor bookshelves that adorned the wall across from me; random books, candles, and trinkets filled up the rest of the empty white shelves. I stared at the dog calendar hanging just over her head, the date for Winter Break slowly creeping forward.

“You just have to push through the next 48 hours,” Rachel said when I stopped rambling about final papers and the stress of sophomore year. Winter Break was just over the horizon, waiting to sweep me up in a storm of watching TV for hours on end while I laid in bed and ice cream wormed its way into my mouth.

“I’ve never told my parents,” I said after a minute.

Rachel just waited for me to continue, legs crossed. When I stepped into her office for the first time four months ago, I told her about my family – about the parents who worked too hard, the oldest brother Jared who had one too many emotional problems, and the middle child, Chris, who seemed to slip under everyone’s radar until he was making you laugh at the dinner table.

“Why not?” Rachel finally asked when I kept quiet.

I shrugged, tilting my head against the stiff back of the couch and stared at the ceiling. “What if it’s just a figment of my imagination?” I said under my breath. “Why cause a rift in the family if it didn’t even happen?”

“Do you believe it’s a figment?”

I want it to be.

"I was only eight, and my parents tease me for not having the best memory."

But I remember this. The pink sequined short-sleeved shirt with black diagonal stripes I had been wearing – my favorite shirt – and the long black shirt underneath to help with the cold weather. Black velvet pants had covered my legs.

"Jared's never brought it up. And I only remember the last time it happened."

I went along with it, barely remembering the first or second or third occurrence. Wearing my favorite outfit the last time, mousy brown hair curled for student picture day at school, I ran out of his navy blue bedroom, scared and disgusted.

"I didn't remember it for years."

It was the first time he made me go down on him. One lick in and I ran out screaming.

"What if he doesn't even remember it?"

I never thought about telling my parents at eight-years-old and scared because of my brother. I tucked myself into Chris' bed that night and hugged the teddy bear Megan had given me when I was born. I forgot about it until I was fourteen.

"Sometimes I really don't know if it was a memory or not. It's all fuzzy."

Except for the last time.

Rachel tapped her pen against her clipboard but never wrote anything down. I avoided looking at her, pulling my clean glasses off and rubbing them with the bottom of my shirt.

"Is that why you don't tell them?"

A complicated mess, that's how I referred to my family, a group of emotional people who simultaneously loved and hated each other. We were like any other family. Aunts and Uncles who came to every ridiculously terrible middle school play and a sole grandmother who baked cookies and tugged on Jared's hair when I was ten and he punched me in the stomach for annoying him.

"They might not even believe me."

"You think so?"

My mom won't. Her baby boy could never do anything so terrible.

"It's been ten years. My memory isn't the best."

No reason to make my parents fight while my dad believes his baby girl and my mom defends her baby boy.

"I don't need to be the one to ruin it."

The clock on the microwave read 3:23am. My third glass of Cru-

zan Rum sat in front of me, only a quarter of the way finished. Jared sat next to me, twirling his pointer finger around the rim of his second glass. We'd been here for hours, since Chris left to go visit some old high school friends and my parents had retired to their bedroom to watch late night TV.

"Have you ever seen 'Bored to Death'?" he asked, downing the last of his drink and pouring another.

"Is that a movie?"

He laughed, the sound warm and familiar, and brought his legs up to sit cross-legged on the granite kitchen counter. We had spent the last few hours perched here, talking about *War and Peace*, currently sitting on Jared's nightstand with a bookmark placed one chapter before the first epilogue. We moved on to arguing about television and movies, looking up actors and random facts, while drinking rum and occasionally making our way outside, scarves wrapped around our necks and jackets zipped up tight, for a cigarette.

"No. It was a TV show," Jared said. "This quirky, offbeat comedy. You'd like it."

"I'll make sure to watch it sometime."

He jumped off the counter and grabbed his pack of Winston's. I followed him outside onto the deck. He handed me one and I leaned forward as he held out the light for me.

"Thanks."

"How's junior year treating you?" he asked, breathing out the smoke slowly as I watched it dissipate in the air.

"It's alright, still don't really like the town."

"It sucks being somewhere you hate," he said, echoing his words from our phone call that week. "Chris doesn't get it. He loves where he is. He doesn't understand how draining it is to live somewhere you hate day in and day out."

"Sometimes it's annoying how happy he is," I said in agreement, finishing my cigarette too fast and grabbing another one.

"Mom and Dad or Chris figure out you smoke yet?"

"No. I'm successful in keeping it a secret, unlike you."

He crushed the butt under his foot, picking it up to throw in the trash. "You had practice with Diane."

I heard the sound of police sirens in the distance, probably some robber with everyone away for the holidays. Or maybe it was an ambulance or fire truck rushing to save someone.

There was a soccer ball at my bare feet as the hot July sun slowly descended and purple colored the sky. I kicked it against the side of the

house, rolling it up my foot and bouncing it on my knee a few times. The back door opened with a whine, still slightly broken from when I'd kicked a ball too hard against it as a kid. I looked up to see my mom waving me inside. With one last kick, I let the ball bounce off the wall and roll into the yard and left it as I went inside. Mom was sitting at the kitchen table, laptop open in front of her as she answered the hundreds of e-mails she got daily.

"We're going to Concerto Fusion for dinner," she said, fingers typing rapidly and I wondered if she's the reason why I could write papers so fast.

"Again?" I groaned. "We go there all the time. You and Dad go at least once a week, even when none of us are home."

"Your brother wants to go there," she stated as though that explained everything. *Well if precious Jared wants to go...* "And your father and I like it there."

"So? I don't, I *never* do," I said. It's not just that I didn't like sushi, but I was so tired of that place. There were dozens of restaurants in our town, and yet somehow we always ended up at the same one or two.

"You don't have to come out with us."

I laughed a little, more of an unbelievable huff than finding anything funny. "Of course. Leave your daughter behind to make your son happy." *I wish Chris was here.*

"Don't be overdramatic, Erin," she said, closing her laptop harshly as she looked at me. Her jaw was clenched, a clear sign that she was frustrated. All she needed was the slight scary shriek she got in her voice sometimes to complete the look.

"I'm not. I just think it'd be nice if you didn't exclude one of your children because of *precious* Jared," I spat the words at her, arms crossed as I stood there, hip cocked to the side and eyes squinted in a glare. "Just because he's your favorite –"

"Oh shut up," my mom interrupted with a wave of her hand, dismissing me. "I'm tired of this. Both you and Chris with your comments about me favoring your brother. Just stop."

"I'll stop when you stop," I shouted. I heard the floor creak upstairs. *Great. Dad will be down here any minute.*

"I love you all equally –"

"Bullshit," I was the one to interrupt this time. "It's always Jared this or Jared that. Whatever he wants, he gets. When he stopped eating red meat, all you cooked was chicken. When he doesn't want to watch a certain movie, we watch something he wants. We go to the restaurants he wants to, listen to his music in the car, it's all about Jared!"

I felt my chest heaving, breaths coming out in harsh pants and logically I knew I should stop. I could see the anger shining heavily in my

mom's eyes and heard pounding footsteps on the stairs. My dad rounded the corner into the kitchen, taking in my mom who had stood up at some point, arms crossed and a look of annoyance on her face. My fists were clenched at my sides, arms shaking as I tried to contain myself.

"What's going on?" my dad asked, stepping into the kitchen slowly and trying to gauge the situation. I ignored him.

"Newsflash, Mother. Your precious Jared isn't perfect!" I shouted. *He choked the nanny. He's cheated on every girlfriend he's ever had. He raped your daughter!*

"Erin, you need to stop accusing me of loving him more," she said, voice eerily calm but I heard the slight shake behind it, knew how hard she was working to control it. Maybe she was wrong; maybe Jared's temper came from her and not Dad.

"YOU DO!" I screamed. My eyes were wide as I stared at her. "You do! Maybe it's because he's like...an exact replica of you, just with boy parts, I don't know. But everything is always about *him*. You're even helping him pay for a second Masters, when you won't help Chris or me when I graduate next year."

"That's different," she said, stepping forward with her hands up, face suddenly soft. *What is this? Good cop, bad cop with one person?*

"Why? Because Chris and I said it was okay when you asked our 'permission'?" I asked. It was a few months ago when we were both home for Spring Break; Jared was working and couldn't come home. We'd both said it was okay; we were both lying.

"We just didn't want to fight you," I said, throwing my hands up in the air as I walked to the opposite end of the kitchen table. My dad was still in the doorway, watching us. I could tell he wanted to intervene, but he didn't. "And let's be honest Mom, you weren't really asking."

"Erin..."

"No!" I said, not willing to let her speak. *God, you're so annoying. Jared this, Jared that. Let's go to Concerto Fusion for the billionth time because that's where Jared wants to go. Fuck what Jared wants. He's not even home right now.*

"You're ridiculous. You act like Jared is perfect, and you baby him! You've *told* me that you worry about him more than the rest of us. Because why? Because he's *you*? Because he was basically anorexic in high school and you had to put stuff in his food to fatten him up? Because he didn't get good grades like me and Chris? Because he's your first born? I don't care what your reason is. I'm fucking tired of it. Your son is a fucking MESS, and you just ignore it because you don't give two shits what he does, because he's your baby boy and can't do anything wrong!"

"ERIN!"

I jumped back at my dad's yell, a rush of cold running through my body. My mom was standing with her hands on the back of one of the kitchen chairs, head tilted down as she breathed out slowly. There was a slight shake to her breath, but I didn't care. If it made her finally listen, finally look at Jared, then I would never shut up.

"Apologize to your mother," he said, voice hard in a way I'd never heard before. I didn't say anything.

My mom looked up at me, her brown eyes soft but there was a hint of frustration hiding behind them. "Erin, we don't have to go to Concer –"

"Oh shut up," I said in the same voice she used on me earlier, dismissing her the way she'd dismissed me.

"Do not disrespect your mother like that," my dad said, and the cold chill came back at the controlled anger in his voice.

"Fuck you," I said and stormed out of the kitchen, running upstairs and slamming my door closed. I flicked the lock when I heard my dad's footsteps in the kitchen, inching closer to the stairs.

Fucking Jared. I felt a tear slide down my cheek, and I wiped it off quickly. I paced the room, energy busting through me and I grabbed the signed baseball resting between soccer trophies and chucked it at my closet door mirror. The glass shattered immediately, and I keeled over, hands resting on my knees as I just laughed. I tugged at the hair on my scalp, and fell onto my knees, hands reaching out to steady me but they landed on sharp pieces of glass instead. I felt them pierce my skin, blood dripping down my arms and off my elbows, staining the tan carpet red.

The door to my room slammed open, the doorknob hitting the wall and leaving a hole as the lock hung off the door. I looked up and fell onto my butt, the glass piercing the skin there too but I barely felt it, body numb to everything except for the fear running through me. I'd never seen my dad look so angry. His face was a deep red, hands clenched tight at his sides as his chest moved up and down rapidly.

"Erin. Elizabeth. Cole."

He stepped towards me and for the first time in my life, I was scared my dad would hurt me. I heard the crunch of glass underneath his shoe, and he looked down at me, taking in his daughter who sat on the floor in front of him, glass sticking out of her hands.

"What happened?" he asked, voice suddenly soft as the red faded from his face.

I broke a mirror because Mom doesn't care about anything Jared does wrong.

"Nothing," I mumbled. He knelt down in front of me and turned my palms up, wincing at the glass that stuck out.

"You're going to need stitches," he said.

I can't do this.

"Come on, let's get you to the doctor's."

I don't want to go.

"And then we'll talk about your outburst."

Why? You'll say it was just a tantrum or me PMSing or some other excuse.

"And you can apologize to your mother."

Sure, as soon as she listens to me.

"Are you in pain?"

No. I can't feel the glass. I can't feel anything. I'm numb and your son is the reason why.

"They'll give you something there."

All I want is for Mom to admit that her baby boy isn't a perfect angel.

"Have you ever read *The Sunflower*?"

I looked up at Rachel instead of continuing to stare at my hands, tilting my head to the side as I thought. "It doesn't sound familiar."

She nodded and tapped her pen against the clipboard. She stood up a few seconds later and grabbed a book off the shelf, one that was hidden behind several others. There was a crack in the spine, and the pages felt worn as she handed it to me.

"It's about a Holocaust Survivor who finds himself in a precarious situation when a Nazi asks him for forgiveness."

"As if that would happen," I scoffed and threw the book into my bag, knowing Rachel gave it to me to read. It didn't sound like anything to concern myself with, and it would probably lay forgotten for weeks until Rachel asked about it again and I gave it back to her.

"It's a true story."

"Are you trying to tell me I have to forgive Jared?" I asked with one eyebrow raised.

Rachel shook her head and crossed her legs, leaning further back in her chair. The throw pillow was pressed against her stomach as her arms wrapped around it. *You'd think I'd be the one to need the pillow.*

"No. You don't have to forgive him, nor am I necessarily saying you have to even try. And maybe you'll read this book and hate Simon Wiesenthal and the other people who respond to his question of forgiveness. But, I think you need to find some type of peace."

"Why?" I shot back. "Why should I grant Jared that?"

"It's not for him, Erin," Rachel said.

"So basically, I'm ultimately *forced* to accept it, maybe even forgive it, in order to stop any more emotional damage. That's just peachy."

Diane was sitting on her bed, leg bent as she leaned forward on her thigh, foot arched up. Black polish covered both her toenails and skin, and I laughed softly at the look of determination on her face, eyebrows tucked together, tongue twisted around and slightly sticking out of her mouth as she bit it gently. I was at the foot of her bed, visiting for the weekend, with my back propped against the wall and legs stretched out, eyes darting between her and my computer.

“Why can’t you just paint them?” she asked, frustrated as more nail polish made its way onto her skin.

“I have to work on this.”

“Some girlfriend,” she muttered.

I threw a piece of balled up scrap paper at her; she flinched slightly and messed up her nails even more. She glared at me, blue eyes piercing, before huffing and switching to her other foot.

The cursor on my screen mocked me as it blinked, waiting for some spectacular thought on French painters for my senior seminar. I closed the empty document and opened my e-mail, sifting through messages from various stores and professors. My computer dinged, a high-pitched charm that I haven’t figured out how to turn off, with a message from Chris; pictures from Montreal. A family vacation that summer since, according to my mom, it’d been ‘too long since the five of us did something together, Erin.’

There was a candid picture of our parents standing outside the hotel, hands laced together as my mom rested her head on my dad’s shoulders. Chris had filtered it to be black and white with the message “35 years and counting.” A picture of me on Chris’ back came across my screen, the memory still fresh. Tired after a long day of walking and ankles sore, I had made him crouch down as I climbed onto his back. He carried me to the hotel like that, ignoring the stares we got in the elevator. There was an out of focus shot, taken by my dad, of Jared and Chris arm wrestling in the hotel lobby as I stood behind them bent over in laughter.

“I forgive him,” I said as I continued to click through the pictures. Diane looked over at me, nail polish dripping off the brush and onto the duvet.

“Who?” she asked, distracted as she walked on her heels (toes pointed up to avoid ruining her hard work) into the bathroom. She came back with tissues and a wet cloth, wiping up some spilled polish.

I closed my laptop and moved to lie down on my back, legs bent up. “Jared,” I answered.

Diane raised an eyebrow. “Oh?” She sounded skeptical. The tissues were thrown into the trash and the wet cloth into the sink, and she lay down with me, head resting on my stomach. I ran my hands through her

tangled hair, watching the various shades of red dance from the overhead light. “You do?”

I sighed, focusing on the feel of her rough hair against my hands. “Yeah. I understand it.” *I try to, at least. I need to. It’s the only way to get through each day.* “He was thirteen and probably just curious. I was eight and conveniently there.”

“To forgive him though...” Diane reached up and nudged my hand away from her hair, lacing our fingers together instead. She squeezed softly but I didn’t respond.

“He stopped when I ran out of the room. It’s fine.” *It has to be fine.*

She still looked skeptical; her dark hazel eyes stared up at me, mouth pinched like she was biting the insides of her cheeks. She seemed... disappointed, and my free hand brushed over her forehead, trying to lightly flatten out the frown lines.

“It didn’t ‘ruin my childhood’ or anything like that,” I said, trying to reassure her. I still laughed, played with friends, joked with my family. *And I managed to forget about it for six years. I was okay.*

Diane still didn’t seem convinced.

“I’m fine,” I said again. A lopsided smile spread across my face, but the tilt of Diane’s head and the one eyebrow lifted told me she knew it was forced. “He was young and experimenting, it happens,” I tried to explain to the both of us. “I’m past it.” *Believe me.*

“It doesn’t bother you?” she asked, playing with my slim fingers in her hand. I pushed my glasses back up my face from where they’d slipped down.

Chris never did what Jared did. “No, it doesn’t bother me,” I said.

Diane looked at me through squinted eyes. “But you talk about it a lot.”

“What’s your point?” I sighed. *I shouldn’t have said anything.*

“Doesn’t that mean it does still bother you?”

I didn’t answer.