

WORLD
SPLIT OPEN

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World Split Open

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This story is for every woman who has walked up to me at an event, or emailed me after reading something I've written, to tell me her story sounded so shockingly similar to mine or to say, "Thank you for your honesty," or even, "Please help me."

C.S. Lewis said, "We read to know we're not alone." Turns out, I write to know I'm not alone.

And Sweet Reader, neither are you.

ONE YEAR FROM NOW



THE SANCTUARY FEELS DIFFERENT. THE light is hurting my eyes, and it's colder. I never sit in the first row. I don't look good in black. This dress is totally inappropriate. Why didn't anyone stop me from wearing this thing? And why did I agree to have everyone over at the house after this? How am I going to pull that off?

I'm not supposed to be glad that he's dead. Okay, I guess *glad* isn't the right word. Relieved maybe?

I should probably be listening to the eulogy. *Jordan, stop messing with your tie*, I glare at my son. I can't believe he wore sneakers. And Macey, well, she's crying enough for the both of us.

I want this day to be over.

No, I'm not just relieved. I *am* glad. I'm glad my husband is dead.

ONE

NOW



I WOKE UP ON THE WRONG side of the bed, again. This was happening more frequently, the first thoughts that came to my mind when I woke up were a litany of all that's not right in my world, and who would want to wake up to that over and over? I would've given anything to not have to do this day of mine, wishing again to crawl right back under the covers instead. It didn't help that I was a bit foggy about last night. I absentmindedly made eggs for the kids. My breakfast of tea steeped on the counter beside me while I looked out the window at the grey mist hanging over my backyard.

Mitch was shuffling around upstairs, more than likely getting dressed. What was I going to say to him when he came down for his coffee? How did things end last night? Was it our version of fine, which would elicit a half-hearted *g'morning*? Or was it anyone's version of bad, which would find me staring into the eggs, pretending he didn't even walk into the room?

I live about fifty percent of my life all in my head, arguing with myself more than anyone else. Replaying every conversation. Correcting myself. Second-guessing myself. Wishing I'd said such-and-such instead of what I did say. Chastising myself for saying anything at all.

I heard his footsteps coming down the stairs. Think, Jules. Did you fight last night? I stirred the eggs while racking my brain. I can't remember! I quickly decided to choose neutrality over stubbornly proving a point, since I couldn't recall if I had a point to prove today.

"Morning," I said, with a small smile, looking up from the stove to Mitch.

"Morning," he replied, as he headed for the coffee pot. He poured himself a cup and walked back out of the kitchen. And that's all that we said that day.

I don't know when I last looked Mitch in the eyes. A long time ago, I memorized where that gold fleck is in his right eye. Or is it his left? But now, I not only barely look at him when he's talking to me, but if we pass each other in the hallway or if we're both in our walk-in closet at the same time, we don't even look at each other most of the time. We can even bump into each other without any recognition.

And smiling, I do that thing where I press my lips together and push my cheeks back a bit. You can't even really call it a smile. It's more of an acknowledgement that yes, I know you're here. I'm not necessarily glad you're here, but I know that you are. And to think I used to practice signing my name as his wife. What kinds of things happen that make someone change her heart like this? Innumerable, unnameable things. When did a smile become something that I decided to withhold from him? Probably around the time I started letting Mitch take little fragments of my heart without reason, without much of a fight.

I heard the clinking of keys being grabbed and the click of the lock on the front door as he closed it behind him. I felt my body and soul unclench just knowing he was out of the house. You see, I'm more me when he's not here. And I knew it wouldn't even cross my mind to miss him.



"Good morning, Mom," Macey said with her typical big smile as she walked into the kitchen about ten minutes later. She was my twin, basically. Except I wore my slightly less dark, natural red hair just past

my chin in what I like to think is a very chic bob, compared to her strawberry blonde strands that flowed down her back. She lights up a room and causes something inside me to want to smile even when I feel I've got nothing to be happy about. I love that about her.

"Morning, girlie," I said to my seventeen-year-old daughter who was smiling back. "Hey, are those my boots?"

"Yeah, sorry I forgot to ask," she said sheepishly.

"No, it's not that, it's just that you tower over me in those things!" I replied with a half-hearted grin. "I made eggs for once. Can you sit for a minute?"

Macey poured herself some juice and sat down saying, "Thanks, Mom, sure. Hey, is Dad still here? He said he'd be able to give me a ride today."

"I think I heard him leave a few minutes ago ... I'm sorry," I said, sitting across from her at the table. The morning light bounced off her hair. *I wish I had that hair.* "You still have time to catch the bus, though," I consoled.

"Not really the point, is it?" asked Macey, annoyed. "Either he forgot, *again*, or he doesn't care that he makes promises that he doesn't keep."

"I know, Hon. I'm sorry," I said again, even though it wasn't my fault. I'm sort of known for apologizing for things that I didn't do. I'm working on that. "Well, maybe next time, remind him again in the morning or ..."

"Nope, no next time. I'm tired of this. What's that thing you say? Fool me once ..." she asked, not waiting for an answer. How sad that she's not learning to quote Scripture from me but instead learning the cynical phrases of love going bad—of people inevitably giving you the shaft. *Nice, Jules. Way to parent,* I thought, beating myself up.

"I gotta go. Oh, I've got student council today, so I'll be a little late. Love you, Mom," Macey said with a sigh, picking up her backpack and brushing my cheek with a kiss.

I sighed too. Another disappointment. I take on my kids' disappointments, especially those that are Mitch-induced, as if they happened to me. Small ones, big ones, they pile up around here like

junk mail, only I can't just toss them out and forget about them. They keep stacking up so high that I forget that I used to actually expect good things from time to time.



After getting our son, Jordan, out the door barely in time, I got on my bike to head to my father's house. *Aren't fifteen-year-olds capable of getting up and going on their own?* It was brisk and wet, the fog all but gone. I hate riding in the rain, but I do it anyway. (I do a lot of things I hate, come to think of it.)

When I was a little girl, my father would take me into the office, and I would sit under his desk and listen to the sound of the typewriters clicking away at stories for the next day's edition of the paper. I still remember his suit coat draped over my shoulders. He'd bark out orders and shoot down story ideas. I was scared of him but in awe of him all at the same time. He'd take me for bike rides, we'd go for walks. We'd go ball-hawking around the pond at the local golf course.

But when Mom died, something in him shifted, closed up maybe. Though I know he didn't stop loving me, it's like the part of him that knew how to show love evaporated. But my heart had gotten smaller too, so I almost didn't mind it that much, or even notice for that matter. At least, that's what I told my therapist all those years.

I leaned my bike up against the side of the house, just like when I was a kid. "Hey Dad," I said, knocking on the door as I opened it. He wasn't in the kitchen but the tea pot was brewing. He was expecting me. I called for him again and pulled my mug out of the cupboard. I knew where everything was because my father hadn't changed a thing. The only thing that changed is that I could reach the cupboards without the stepstool, and I didn't get to live here anymore. I had to go and grow up.

My father walked in, nodded a hello. He seemed off, fidgety maybe. "What's up, Dad?"

"Nothing," he said. He was holding a stack of mail in his hands. He looked like he was going to set it down on the table, but then turned and placed it on the counter.

“Okay,” I said, not believing him. “Are you feeling alright? Did you sleep okay last night?”

“I said I’m fine.” He hated all my questions. I hated all his answers.

“Alright, sorry.” I poured some hot water in to my cup and sat down. The chamomile scent released and helped my shoulders untense a little.

He picked up the mail and sat down across from me, holding the letters in his lap. They were wrapped in twine, the edges yellowed. “So, are you going to tell me what those are?” I bobbed my tea bag up and down. He hesitated which made me look up at him.

“Letters from your mother,” he answered sharply. “I just found them in an old box of her things.”

“You *just* found them? I thought we went through the whole house right after ... It’s been twenty-five years, Dad,” I said, not understanding.

“Twenty-six,” he corrected me, pouring himself a cup of coffee. “I guess it was a box that we hadn’t looked through thoroughly enough after ...”

“Well, what do they say?” I asked, cutting him off, staring at the stack. “That is amazing. What does she write about? Who are they for?”

“They’re for you, Jules,” he said, “The whole stack. Each envelope has your name on it. They were sealed, so I didn’t open them.”

He’s mad at me. *Hey, it’s not my fault she wrote me and not you.* “For me?” I asked, sitting up in my chair and leaning forward. I looked at my father for a moment then I shifted my focus back to the letters. I wanted to grab them and run out the door, but instead I just sat there acting like I get letters from my dead mother every day.

Letters from my dead mother. Letters from my *mother*. To me. Why now? Why did my father stumble upon letters to me from Mom twenty-six years after she died? I don’t believe in coincidences. If I ever needed the comfort of my mother, it would be now. You see, too much is falling apart around me. Jordan is running away from something, but I can’t put my finger on what, or how to bring him back. Macey is getting ready to go away to college, and I’m not ready to let her go.

And Mitch. Well, my marriage is sometimes almost more than I can bear. So, yeah, I could probably use my mom right about now.



After making small talk with my father and gulping my tea down, I thanked him, took the letters and rode back home. Thankfully, I was in between organizing charity events. The next one was six weeks away and pretty much wrapped up already, so I didn't have to spend any time in my office prepping for it. I took a quick shower, started a fire in the fireplace, and sat down on the couch with the letters.

I held the pile in my hands for a while, feeling the weight of them, trying to let the significance sink in. I imagined Mom writing my name on each one. She was the only one who called me *Julianne*, and I loved it. It made me feel grown up. I pictured her placing each letter into the envelope and sealing it. Pictured her tying and knotting the twine around them.

I carefully untied the knot, flimsy with age. And then I counted seventeen envelopes. Seventeen. One for every year I was alive before she died.

Part of me wanted to tear into each one of them, reading every single word right then and there, soaking in all of the hoped-for wisdom, all of the longed-for comfort. But part of me wanted to savor this gift. Things like this don't just happen every day. Not to me, at least. This was heavy, deep. I was already struggling under the weight of my life and this stirred up such sadness and longing. I missed my mom desperately. I needed my mother ... the real thing ... not just letters from her.

I decided to read just one. Just one today. I hadn't known they existed until a couple hours ago; I didn't need to ravenously consume each word right this minute. I would spread this out, even if it killed me. "Help me be able to handle this, God," I prayed, "Whatever they say." I carefully opened the first envelope and pulled out the stationery.

Dear Julianne,

You are one year old today. I can't believe I get to be your mother! You are such a delight to me. My plan is

to write you a letter every year on your birthday and give them to you somewhere between when you turn eighteen and when you get married. We'll see. Probably depends on what I write!

You took your first step last week, and the glee on your face when you realized you were free made me laugh out loud. You are officially a handful. But you're *my* handful.

I am trying so hard to be a good wife and mother. Loving you comes naturally to me. But your father and I ... well, my darling girl, things are not always easy. He's a good man and a good provider, and he loves you so, so much.

But we're not right. Things aren't the way they're supposed to be. I know you don't notice that now, but when you look back, I can't help but wonder how much you'll remember and realize as you grow up. Did you see my tears at night? Did you hear the hushed arguments behind our bedroom door? Did you notice that your father left sometimes after an argument and didn't come back until the middle of the night? Did you ever wonder where he went? I do.

But these are not things for you now. We can talk about these things when you're older. For now, know that I love you. Know that both of us love you, and that we're trying. Even when it may not seem like we are.

And know, sweet Julianne, God loves you and will see you through anything, no matter what your life holds.

Hugs and kisses and lots of peace,

Momma

Tears slid down my cheeks. That sweeping handwriting of hers. The faintest scent of her perfume, even after all these years. *Hugs and kisses and lots of peace* ... it's what she used to say to me every night when she put me to bed. *Hugs*, a squeeze around the neck, *and kisses*, her lips would brush my forehead, *and lots of peace*, pulling the blanket

up under my chin, and then resting her hand on the top of my head as if bestowing a silent blessing.

And her admission to such unhappiness that she never let on to me when she was alive. I had no idea about my parents. “Really?” I asked myself out loud. You’d be lying if you said you didn’t see all of the things she mentioned. She carried tissues with her around the house in case Dad said something to her that hurt her feelings. You knew something wasn’t right.

It was too much to take. What was I supposed to do with the knowledge of my mother’s pain now added on to mine? I tucked the letter back into the envelope and wrapped the string up around the bunch of letters. I held them in my lap and closed my eyes. *What does all this mean, Jesus? Why are you letting me see these now? You know how much I’m hurting right now, and now this?* I just shook my head and stood up. I put the fire out and brought the letters up to my bedroom, hiding them under my side of the bed. I washed my face and threw on a hoodie before grabbing my keys to head out. No errands, no plan of where I was going. I just needed to not be home.



I sat in Lauren’s driveway, picked up my cell phone, and dialed her number. “Hello?” she answered.

“Hey, you home?” I asked.

“Yep, what’s up?” she said.

“Well, I know you aren’t here just to help me survive my life and everything, but can I come in? I’m sitting outside,” I said sarcastically but with a quiet smile in my voice.

“Get in here,” she said. She was holding the door open before I could make it up the long walk of her two-story colonial. “What’s going on?” she asked, visibly concerned.

“My mom wrote me a letter,” I answered as I walked through the door. “Well, a bunch of them, seventeen to be exact.” I kicked off my shoes in the foyer.

“Your dead mom wrote you seventeen letters? What are you talking about?” she asked, leading me back to the kitchen. She poured me some tea without needing to ask.

“I stopped at my father’s today, and he gave me a bunch of letters that he said he just found,” I said. I took a sharp breath in, “The first one basically said her marriage sucked.”

“Oh,” Lauren said. “Wow, Honey, did you read all of them?”

“Not yet. It felt like too much. One was all I could take,” I said. “What a gift, though, right? I mean, how many people get something like this? I should be happy, right?”

“Definitely ... it’s a gift. Well, it could be. I just hope it doesn’t add to your crazy list of hard things right now,” she said thoughtfully. “Speaking of too much to take, though, anything new with Mitch’s situation?” she asked, leaning her elbows on the counter and resting her chin in her hands.

“Oh! I can’t believe I didn’t tell you this, we got word that he might be sued by both families, the pilot’s and the passenger’s,” I responded.

“Gosh, Jules, that’s horrible! How’s he doing?” she asked.

“Well, he leaves every morning as if he’s going to work, but I don’t know where he actually goes. I don’t ask him. He doesn’t tell me,” I laughed through tired eyes.

“Girlie, sit put,” Lauren said, her arm on my shoulder. “I’m going to run you a hot bath. I was just about to do that myself, but you need it way more than I do,” she insisted.

“Oh, you’re too good to me,” I said, “but I have to get back. Jordan will be home from school soon, and I haven’t even thought about dinner yet,” I said.

“Alright, but let me pray for you then,” she said. “Father, this is crazy. So much stuff all at one time. Please guide Jules. Give her your strength. She needs your peace. Amen.”

“Thanks,” I said. We didn’t say anything for a minute. I could hear the ticking of both her kitchen clock and her living room clock, not keeping time with each other. She’s the only person I can be silent with and know that it’s okay.

“It’s all going to be okay,” she said.

“I know,” I said, as we each wiped a tear away.



You’re probably wondering about the thing with Mitch. He’s been an air traffic controller for twenty-four years. He used to love his job. And he was the best of the best. But something started to slip. Either the stress of the job got to him or the stress of life got to his job, but he wasn’t always on his game anymore.

These are not my observations, because I never saw him at work, and for some reason he stopped talking about his job a few years ago. These are statements I read in the report that he accidentally left out on his desk. An investigation was conducted regarding the night of May 26. The night a plane went down on his watch. It was a small plane, carrying a pilot and a businessman returning from a quick trip to Orlando. The toxicology report showed alcohol in his system, though he wasn’t legally drunk, combined with his new antianxiety medication that I didn’t know he was taking. Well, Mitch was out of it, the report said, and the rest is history. Both men were killed. He was placed on leave, and then terminated shortly after. He’s been out of work for nine months. And now both families might be suing him. Correction: suing *us*, technically.

Mitch didn’t come home that night until after I was asleep. But that was a normal part of our routine, either because he’d be on second shift or because he’d gone out with some guys after work for drinks. So it wasn’t until the next morning that he told me what happened. Or, I should say, he told me the Mitch version of what happened. “I’ve got some good news and some bad news,” he actually said.

“What’s the good news?” I asked, wearily.

“I’ve got an extended vacation, starting today,” he said.

I could tell, at seven o’clock in the morning, that he had already started drinking. Or perhaps, hadn’t stopped since the night before. “Why?” I asked. “What’s the bad news?” *Because*, I’m thinking to myself, *you, me, home ... already sounds like bad news to me.*

“There was an accident last night. A plane went down. But I don’t want to talk about it, so please don’t ask me any more questions.” He

walked away leaving me to attempt to put a thousand-piece puzzle together with only about three pieces and no picture on the box. And until the week before the trial, I wouldn't know anything else about the accident.

Mitch leaving the house each morning and not telling me where he goes is not unusual for our relationship. We don't talk about much anymore, and, come to think of it, haven't for quite a long time. Add to that my youngest being not quite right, my daughter looking for colleges, running my new business, and you could say I'm stressed. Oh yeah, and my dead mother wanting to communicate with me all of the sudden.