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just dandy

*Living with Heartache
and Wishes*

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Tending Dandelions, and *Readings for Moms of Addicts*

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*Living with
Heartache and Wishes*

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This publication is intended to support personal growth and should not be thought of as a substitute for the advice of health care professionals. The author's advice and viewpoints are her own.

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This book is dedicated to mamas everywhere.

To my sisters of the heart.

Together we are stronger.



*Like a dandelion
up through the pavement,
I persist.*

— WENTWORTH MILLER



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Dear Mamas

NO ONE EVER SAID it was going to be easy, but no one ever said it would be this hard, either. And even if they had, I would never have believed them. *It* being life, with all its unexpected heartache piled atop crumpled dreams and wishes.

As the mom of a now-adult child who battles addiction, I know the devastating toll of this disease—the love and lies, fears and hopes, twisting the mystical umbilical connection into knots. Addiction is ruthless, breaking hearts and bonds and all the rules. Oh, how I wish there were a way to go back in time and nudge the direction of our path over a smidge, just enough to lead us anywhere but here, this place where love and addiction meet. However, as much as I wish my family could have avoided all the pain, trauma, and drama, the truth is I'm a better person now than I was even aware I could be. I have had to dig deep, feel big, see truth, and be real. Because of that, I've discovered a deeper level of patience, acceptance, kindness, and understanding of what really matters. For that, I'm grateful. I'm also grateful, of course, for all the wonderful mamas I've met along the way. The brave, strong, hurt, terrified, confused, open-armed, and open-hearted sisterhood that would otherwise not have blessed my life.

For many years, I was consumed with my son's addiction, thinking I could fix it, change him, or *somehow* manage his life and disease for him. Over time, I came to realize the only thing

I can change or control is *me*—but that has real power. Through my words and actions, I can help shed the shame and stigma, changing the way addiction is perceived within my community and within my son himself. And, through my books, blog, and MomPower website, in trying to help other moms on the same path, I have found healing. But I'm also tired. My sixty-year-old self would like to take a rest, but being the mom of an addicted child is a continuous uphill journey of learning and adapting, while carrying an unrelenting grief for what is, for what should have been, and in anticipation of what might be coming next—in addition to everything else we juggle as mothers, wives, daughters, caregivers, worker bees, and friends. Life is not one-dimensional. There's a lot of other tough stuff piling up, too—day after day, year after year, one after another on top of another.

But, as moms with addicted children, we are strong—my goodness, we continue to endure the unimaginable every single day!—and we have learned more ways to cope than we may even be aware of. Ways to think and see and respond to all the other tough stuff we're faced with, too. We may not be able to make every situation *better*, but we can behave in ways that make them *not worse*. We really can find our way to being *just dandy* (and mean it).

Several years ago, at a museum with my dad, I was drawn to a glass case displaying a partially completed piece of handwoven lace, with the dozens of delicate threads being used in this creation laid out like sunbeams from the center. Attached to the end of each thread was a wooden bobbin, giving, I assume, the weaver something of substance to hold on to while also helping to keep the multitude of threads laid out in some sort of manageable arrangement. I told my dad that the piece-of-lace-in-the-works *looks* like what it *feels* like to write a book—keeping all the indi-

vidual thought-threads separate and untangled, and keeping track of which one goes where and how to find my way back to pick up at the place I left off. That piece of bobbin lace also looks the same way my life feels: nothing happens in a straight line—neither around me nor within me; sometimes it looks impossible to figure out; it is still incomplete; and it won't look the same at the end as it did at the beginning—but I believe that even life's most chaotic jumble of threads can be woven into something beautiful.

We have the power to thrive, even while living with heartache and wishes.

*Hugs and hope,
Sandy*



Part One

Bridal Veil Falls

**A tear
carries the weight
of a lifetime.**

—WENDY MURRAY

From Point A to Point WTF

I think it's important to realize
we can miss something, but not want it back.

—PAULO COELHO

A BIT OUT OF BREATH, sweaty, and dusty from my hike through the forest up to Bridal Veil Falls, I climb onto a boulder across from the waterfall to sit for a while, taking off my shoes to dip and swirl my toes in the current below. Closing my eyes, I breathe deeply, absorbing some of summer's most gorgeous scents and sounds, and allowing myself to be lulled into some much-needed relaxation. My mind bobs and hovers like one of the bumblebees circling nearby, aimlessly landing here and there and there and here until finally, slowly, alighting on the things that have brought me to this place, so very far from where I started. The things I've been running away from. Suddenly, yet in slow motion, my gossamer blinders slip away. *The bridal veil falls*. The truths (and lies) that my life has been built upon begin to gush outward, pushing past my tightly squinched eyes in a deluge of tears. The waterfall and I become one.

The crash of water cascading over the cliff's edge is good cover for the unexpected escape of my pain. My sobs. I've come here simply to immerse myself in the peace of nature's beauty, taking a break from searching the neighborhoods of North Carolina's

Blue Ridge Mountains for a place to start my new life. But sitting here in this beautiful place, in a state where I know no one, I'm overcome by my aloneness—not just today's, but for all my tomorrows and my past several years, too. I'm overcome by the crumbling pit in my heart, soul, and life that comes with facing the compounding loss of *till death do us part* and *happily ever after*.

Twenty-six years ago, I married the man of my dreams. Josh thinks I'm kidding when I say I fell in love at first sight, but it's true. Both of us were attending the same college in Kansas—Josh was a pre-vet student from Hawaii, and I hailed from Minnesota, studying to be an elementary school teacher. The odds of our paths ever crossing were about zero until the day we landed in neighboring dorms in this far-flung state. When our eyes first met across dining hall tables and cheeseburgers—when I felt the heat of our very first spark—I owed destiny the courtesy of paying it some attention. So I got myself a part-time job at the same place where Josh had a part-time job, and within a few years we were engaged. Fun, genuine, and easy to talk to, Josh was the nicest man I had ever met—and I was the luckiest gal in the world for half of my life.

College-degree-earning potential aside, during our early years as Mr. and Mrs., we didn't have much more than shared dreams and each other to cling to. But that's all we needed for taking on life's next great adventure—whatever that might be. One year became five years, then ten, fifteen, and twenty. New jobs, new states, and new countries; new kids (!), dogs, houses, and schools. Everything that evolved was somehow, wonderfully, both expected and unexpected at the same time—everything was unfolding just as it should be. Best friends and trusted partners, two halves of the whole—we were a team, forever. A devoted husband and dad, Josh was a great provider for me and our two sons. Funny, smart, and

caring, he made it easy for us to roll with the punches and skate through the rare rough patches relatively unscathed.

Until the rough patches became minefields, and every which way we turned, something blew up.

Sitting here on my rocky perch, the splash of the waterfall and the buzzing the of bees fade away as I remember the memories. I see nothing, hear nothing, beyond the reels playing in my mind.

•

“I do.”

Finally, the part I’ve been waiting for: *I do, he does, and the kiss*. I wasn’t sure the priest was actually going to complete the ceremony after Josh and I lost our composure when the altar boy sneezed. For the last fifteen minutes, our shoulders have jiggled with silent giggles as we tried not to make eye contact or noise. We’re both twenty-four, yet behaving like two little kids . . . the giddiness of love and happiness, I guess. Several months ago, we took the required weekend-long Catholic marriage prep course and were not at all surprised that there weren’t any surprises—we talk about everything. And now it’s official: I get to spend the rest of my life with my best friend.

Our wedding reception is held nearby at my parents’ house—the place I’ve called home since kindergarten. A yellow two-story clapboard with black shutters, it’s the perfect place to celebrate with family and friends. As Josh and I arrive, newlyweds, arm in arm, strolling up the sidewalk on this sultry summer eve toward the music and laughter, I feel the warm strength of my roots—this home, these people, this neighborhood that all had a part in raising me. Not too long ago, I brought Josh here to meet my folks for the first time, whispering to my mom that he was *perfect*. Now he

FIN

returns as part of the family, and today we begin planting good, strong roots of our own.

I'm wearing the bridal veil Mom wore when she married Dad—a crown of seed pearls and layers of wispy lace—the once-in-a-lifetime symbol of tying the knot. (I might have worn her gown, too, if I could have gotten it zipped.) The bridesmaids are wrapped in rose-colored satin, and Josh and his groomsmen wear tuxedos and shiny shoes. We've never been so fancy. Happily posing for the photographer, we preserve every moment on film—cutting the three-tiered cake, tossing my bouquet of red roses, flinging the blue garter that my aunt wore to her own wedding, and chatting with my grandma, my dad's mom, my one living grandparent. A few waiters drift silently through the house, serving champagne and hors d'oeuvres, as a harpist plucks notes from the polished wooden harp my dad made with his own two hands.

Our day is a beautiful melding of memories, the promise of things everlasting, and dreams for our future.

And then, in a blink, just a few years after our big day, our family of two becomes a family of four, first with Joey, then Ricky, expanding our hearts and lives, and my full-time job becomes *Mom*. Oh, the joy and wonder of so many *firsts*. The first smiles and words, the first teetering steps, the first full-night's sleep. And the mixed blessing of that first morning when cartoons are a bigger draw for the boys than piling into our bed like squirming puppies, all arms and feet and elbows and butts.

Joey is three years old when we make our first move, from Florida to Minnesota, and Ricky is a newborn, swaddled in his soon-to-be-favorite blankie. Winter starts on Halloween, with a deep dumping of snow, and seemingly lasts until summer. So when the chance comes for us to move somewhere (anywhere) warmer, we do. And we keep on moving every few years to new

states and new countries. I had sort of assumed our little family would be like the one I grew up in, staying in one place forever. But Josh's long string of promotions keeps taking us on new adventures, opening doors and unlocking experiences I could never have imagined.

We are living the dream—not just the vague dream I'd had of us all being happy and healthy together—but one that is all of that *and* even better.

Grade school and middle school, Houston, Spain, Louisville, and El Paso. Then, when Joey is entering tenth grade and Rick the eighth, Josh's job takes us to New Delhi, India, our most exotic move yet. A place of great adventure for our family, it is also the place where things for Joey start falling apart. Not exactly sure what is going on, when Joey graduates from high school, Josh and I agree it is wise to move back to the United States so we can be closer to our college-bound son than we'd be if we stayed on the other side of the world.

A short time later, during Rick's first week as a sophomore at his new high school in Maryland—and Josh's first week at his new job—Joey attempts suicide while drunk during his first week of college in California. Josh and I fly out to be with Joey, ultimately bringing our oldest child and all his squashed dreams home, just a week after we'd been out there helping to get his dreams all set up.

Three years later, Rick is graduating from high school, and my folks and Josh's sister are here to celebrate. But Joey is in jail. Again. Just a few miles away. Although we haven't talked about it, I can tell we're all committed to keeping *happiness* slapped on our faces for the entire weekend, bright smiles beaming through the dark cloud. Most of the benchmarks over the past several years have been horrible, so Rick's accomplishment, this occasion, is a real gift. And he needs to feel it.

It's been three years of arrests, court dates, overdoses and injuries, addiction treatment, and big fat lies and fights and fears. I've been consumed with saving Joey from the drugs that consume him, as well as saving my son from himself. I've been stalking my son, trying to out-manipulate his manipulations, and working to get him into rehab and to make rehab stick. It's been a full-time job trying to keep Joey alive, which hasn't left a lot of room in my life or head for anyone else. I feel like a terrible mom for whatever I did to have caused this and for not being able to fix this, and for abandoning Rick time and again when he also needed me most.

Josh and I still stand side by side in a crisis, even if we don't always see eye-to-eye day-to-day. Rarely do we agree on how Joey is doing, so Josh doesn't like to talk about it, and he spends more and more time at the gym. He's also taken up jogging and biking . . . basically spending most of his free time getting fit. I don't blame him. I talk nonstop about every lie, every action, every missing link; obsessing over Joey is my last remaining connection to him, and I can't let go.

In just a couple of months, Rick will be heading off to college—just a few miles down the road in Washington, D.C.—and life will be back to the way it was in the beginning: just the two of us, Josh and me, best friends, taking on the next new adventure. Except it doesn't feel like that's going to be true. We need to do something to survive all the gloom hanging over our soon-to-be-empty nest. Josh and I talk about doing more things together, like taking cooking or dancing classes, and how we can make our unexpectedly long-term temporary living situation more tolerable.

Still waiting to build our dream house, we're living in the tiny, old place we purchased as a "knockdown," so things like entertaining friends, planting gardens, and getting our furnishings out of storage have been hanging in limbo until Josh's promised pro-

motion becomes a reality. We hire an architect to get the dream started on paper, at least, and Josh suggests building a patio in the backyard as an immediate, if temporary, fix. Instead, we decide to turn Rick's bedroom into a big walk-in closet, booting him out, even before he moves out, into his own walk-out "suite" in the basement. No longer do we need to climb behind chairs and rummage through puny closets all over the house in order to get dressed, which has, some days, felt like an enormous hurdle to me.

Josh's job has always involved a lot of travel, and I really never minded; since the early days, the boys and I managed to carry on and keep busy. But with Rick soon gone, the prospect of Josh's future travel looks different. It looks *lonely*. For the three years we've lived in Maryland, Rick and I have filled the after-school and homework hours together, with him teaching me how to play the card game Magic: The Gathering, or me teaching him to drive, or eating dinner while watching Jack Bauer survive the next hours in 24. We're both kind of homebodies, which is comfy and safe. It's been a time of grounding and connecting in what has become a rocky world. But there will soon be a lot of empty hours bouncing around in this house, instead.

I've been careful in making new friends since moving here, not wanting to add the judgment of strangers on top of the shame, guilt, and blame about Joey and his addiction that I'm already carrying. But I'm in a different place now—I know the truth of this disease, so I'm done with living in shame and silence. I'm done hiding my story. I'm ready to step out and be real. The truth will help me to find more of the right kind of friends. What anyone else thinks no longer matters.



This first year of being alone together again—with Rick away at

college and Joey, I don't know where—hasn't whisked Josh and me back to the days when our love started.

Last night I dreamed I was trying to get an egg from a carton. The first one I picked up had a crack, and so did the next one and the next. One was stuck to the bottom, so that when I tugged on it, it broke apart in my hand. One after another after another, some version of the same. It seems to me that my subconscious self was telling me that everything in my life is broken.

But, actually, my conscious self already knows that.

Joey has walked away from rehab. Again. Down in Florida. From the place I convinced the judge up here in Maryland to send him a few months ago. He thinks addiction treatment is a scam and says he will never go back. Spiraling out of control, in a familiar old pattern, he's been spewing anger and hatred between brief bouts of sweetness and love. The Addict and The Child, competing for the win. When Josh and I attend our most recent family program, I am a different mom than I'd been all the times before. I now understand that I cannot change or fix Joey, just *me*. But still, I try. And Joey is all I can think about. I live and breathe the fear that my son is going to die. So I'm dying inside as I wait for the inevitable to happen.

Josh has been shutting down—and gradually shutting me out—more and more since the nightmare with Joey's addiction began, but since Rick has been away, living his life as a college freshman, it's been worse. We recently had a session with a marriage counselor to help sort that out, but Josh felt like we'd joined forces against him and he won't go back. So, we're stuck. *I'm* stuck. I'm so *alone*. I don't know how to fix this. I don't know what to do or say. Josh won't talk about his feelings, or anything else, and he always seems irritated—his normally easygoing personality now has a biting edge. He keeps his headphones on or turns the radio

up loud when we're together in the car, and he turns on the TV or walks out of the room when I'm talking, even if it's just silly chit-chat, not about anything that seems like it might make him sad or mad. He works late, eats out, and forgets to call. This isn't the man I married, and this isn't the man, the partner, I've known ever since. It seems like *this* man doesn't even like me. It seems like he is hurting me intentionally in the hope that I might just go away.

I'm just trying to survive this. Putting on a phony front. Trying to be something more than dead while I am alive.

The other day, someone asked me if having an addicted child is hard on a marriage—well, *hard* doesn't begin to describe it. Addiction is a devastating disease, and it destroys everyone it touches. I can see why so many marriages—and families—don't survive.



This afternoon, Josh returned home from the gym with a jaunty bounce to his step, saying how much he loved his life, seemingly unaware that he was hours late for a much-needed, hopefully healing date. And seemingly unaware that life as we now know it is not something anyone could love. This was just. Too. Much. Rick was here with his new girlfriend, downstairs watching TV, so I cornered Josh in our newly created walk-in closet, whisper-yelling that I deserve better than this, that I won't take crumbs, and that if he doesn't get a grip on his stupid midlife crisis soon, we might end up divorced. To which he replied, "Yeah, I guess I've been running away. I'll think about what I want to do." *I didn't really mean it! I was just throwing out the D-word to wake him, shake him up.* But there was a lot of unexpected answer in his quick reply.

I told Josh he has until August to figure out whatever needs figuring out, or he can leave. I added that, although the past years

have been tough, *really tough*—with all the hopelessness and helplessness, the terror, shame, and guilt—I had meant it all those years ago when I’d agreed to “for better or worse, till death do you part,” vowing to hang in there through whatever unimaginable hell life might throw our way. Even this. And I hoped he meant it, too.

Turning, I walked out of the closet, calling Rick and his girlfriend for dinner, and I served up a load of fake happiness along with the platter of meat and potatoes.

Now, it’s the middle of the night. I cannot sleep. My heart and mind and soul are shredded. I’m sitting outside so no one inside will hear as I implode. Supposedly God doesn’t give a person more than they can handle, but tonight I’m pretty sure that is false. I want to hold my family together, but I can’t. I can’t just let it fall apart, but *I* am falling apart. My family is the only thing that really matters to me, and yet it seems like everything I have done, everything I’ve touched, has broken. I did my best, and my best sucks.

Josh and I have been married for half our lives. That has to mean something. Heading back inside, I write Josh a note, set it on his nightstand to find in the morning, and crawl back into bed. I reach out to touch him, putting my hand on his arm, hoping that my love for him will sink in while he is sleeping.

Josh,

*I don’t know how to say this without starting a fight,
or starting to cry.*

So I’m writing you this.

I don’t want our marriage to die.

When we got married it was for better or for worse.

And this has definitely been the worst.

We have lost our son, our dreams, our hope.

*We've lost the things we used to do together, the little things
we did that made us a couple and a family.*

They are all gone.

*And we have built this wall, which has gotten bigger as we've
lost more dreams and more hope and more of the things
we used to do together, the little things we did that made
us a couple and a family.*

I have been so depressed.

But I have stayed.

*And if you had gotten sick and needed to be taken care of,
which would have choked off more dreams and more hope
and more of the things we used to do together, the things
we did that made us a couple and a family,*

I would have stayed then, too.

Because as hopeless as it feels, there is love.

*And if there is love there still has to be a little hope that we
can rekindle our dreams and the things that we used to
do together, the things we did that made us a couple and
a family.*

I will not beg you to stay.

But I want you to stay.

I love you.

Me

Josh doesn't mention my note, but I think I hear him crying in the shower the next morning.

A few weeks later, as I'm in the closet changing into my PJs for the night, he moves in for a hug—not a hug for me, a hug for *him*—and I recoil. I'm not feeling very comforting since I'm in such dire need of comforting myself. Josh says he hasn't decided what he wants to do yet, is waiting for something to “hit him.” I

can't help but think that the *something to hit him* should be me. He says he's been wondering what life is all about, what all the effort is for, adding he doesn't mean to hurt me. To which I reply, "Then don't."

Now, I'm in Utah, renting an off-season ski condo for three weeks in July, the weeks leading up to Josh's make-a-decision-on-what-to-do-with-us deadline, to focus on writing *The Joey Song*, a book to help other moms with addicted children feel less alone, while absorbing the serenity of the mountains. But this afternoon, sitting out on the deck, my feet propped up on the hewn-log railing, I'm writing in my journal instead. I started keeping a journal a few years ago as a way to find perspective and sanity within the vortex that is Joey's addiction, but it's been doing double duty for quite a while as I've tried to survive Josh's midlife crisis, too. And right now, what I'm writing makes me feel sick.

Josh joined me here for the first few days—which now seems like forever ago. We hiked the mountains for hours, we sat by the pool, we ate and drank and laughed—we had the best time we've had together in a long time. I was sure we'd made it over some invisible hump. As a lark, we looked at some of the condos for sale, imagining how nice it would be to have our own place when we come every winter to ski, knowing, of course, that's impossible for so many reasons—including the on-hold promotion and rebuild of our Maryland house, and the big elephant in the middle of our lives: *us*. But Josh has been talking to a bank about mortgage rates since he returned home, which makes me think that the midlife crisis is still in full swing. And after he encouraged me to stay here for a few more weeks, things started getting weird—and he sort of disappeared.

I know the wife is always the last to know, but I *know* Josh isn't having an affair. I know this with every fiber of my being, and

yet I've learned a few things about denial and blinders and wishful thinking while dealing with Joey's addiction over the years. So I also know not to ignore all the flashing neon signs around me—and I haven't. Our marriage was built on a foundation of trust . . . and I've trusted. Now, however, for the first time ever, I'm suspicious.

Being here, I've become aware that Josh hasn't said *I love you* to me in ages—this became obvious at the end of our phone calls. The silence. When those sweet words didn't get repeated back.

Tomorrow I'm heading home—to what, I don't know.



If not for a receipt lying on the passenger seat of Josh's car, I don't know how much longer my torture would have lasted—how much longer Josh would have allowed it to last. But there it is, a strip of white paper, a receipt, sitting right where I am going to sit, once Josh has pulled his car from the garage and I go to hop in.

It was just last night that I returned from Utah, and now we're heading out to a movie and dinner, a *welcome home* date, but in the space of mere seconds, bits and pieces of the past meet the present, and the future is changed. I can see that the receipt is for cell phone minutes—something Josh's phone doesn't need—so I make a show of tossing it over the headrest and into the backseat, but really, it's crumpled up in my hand. Like a laser, my mind zeros in on a moment that barely registered when it actually occurred some months ago (or maybe even a year)—the time I heard something buzzing in our newly conjoined closet, which turned out to be a phone in Josh's gym bag. Laughingly, I took it to him, saying, *look what I found in your shoe!* And he laughingly said that in the hubbub of the gym locker room, someone's phone

must have somehow fallen in. Now, I'm horrified at my naiveté. How could I have been so stupid?

After ordering popcorn and drinks, Josh heads to the theater and I head to the restroom for a closer look at the receipt. I'm trying to think up a logical explanation besides the one I'm already thinking. When I take my seat next to Josh, my heart is both sinking and pounding. The action happening on the big screen doesn't register; I'm looking inward, planning what I'm going to say to Josh once the movie is over.

We walk to a nearby restaurant and are seated outside on the bustling cobblestone promenade at the heart of downtown Bethesda. As soon as we've placed our drink orders, I burst, asking if he's having an affair. (Because of course, he is. It's so obvious.) He replies, "I'm so glad you brought that up. I've been trying to find a way to tell you this: I'm gay."

I just sit there, my mouth open to say something, something, something, but nothing comes out. Finally, I sputter, "If you think by saying *that* you're going to get off easier, you're wrong, so just tell the truth." Josh is smiling. No, *beaming*. (Free at last.) "Really. I'm gay." His relief, his happiness, is palpable. I, on the other hand, dissolve into a blubbling mess. *This is real. Josh and me, our family. We are broken.*

Once I've cried myself out (as subtly as possible, in public) and gotten some answers, I tell Josh that the most important thing now is for us to preserve the family we made, no matter what. Already shattered by Joey's addiction, we cannot allow this to be the blow that causes our family to completely fall apart. The boys are just becoming men—they need this from us; they deserve this from us. They need to know, to see, that love can last forever. As parents, we must keep doing our job.

I will need some time before telling Rick and Joey this news—I

think it will be easier for them if they don't see me so fragile. Josh and I agree to work on building a new normal, a foundation of strength, just the two of us—a new kind of best-friend-ship—before he moves onward with his new life. By the time Rick is home for Christmas break, we should be pretty solid in our new relationship. We'll get Joey up here and have a few weeks to process this seismic shift in our world, all together.

Josh doesn't want me to tell anyone his news yet—not my friends, not my parents, not anyone. He wants to share the news himself when he's ready. I guess I understand that, since I need some time before telling our own children. But I already know that keeping this huge secret is going to be lonely.



Today, I'm fifty. A fifty-year-old phony, pulling a fast one over on my adult kids. Just one month after Josh's announcement, we're celebrating my birthday as a way to get the whole family in one place—I want us all to share one last nice memory together, just in case. Josh and I don't know how the boys will take his news or if, once it's out there, there will be any *family* left—there's only so much a family can take.

Josh, Rick, and I have come to Florida, trying to make it easier for Joey to join us since his presence at family events has been elusive for years. Sitting at the head of the table, surrounded by the three loves of my life, I'm aware of how picture perfect this celebration must look to anyone watching—and how that image couldn't be further from the truth. There's nothing about my day, my life, that is as it should be. It's a sham. Nothing is as it seems. The waiter brings out a fifty-candled cake, everyone sings, I wipe my eyes, blaming my tears on the smoky little flames. My heart

aches for Joey and Rick—they have no idea of the pending occasion we'll be bringing them together for next.

Josh is a cork, zinging through the air in jubilant celebration. His true self has been shackled for so long that he is, understandably, rejoicing in this new freedom. I think he feels safe and loved and relieved, and so he is back to being his old, nice self. But I feel alone in carrying his secret and really need some support and love and hugs.

Rationally, I understand why Josh wasn't able to embrace his truth back in the 1980s, why he pushed it down and married me instead. It would've been unimaginably difficult for a young man to enter adulthood burdened by the stigma so pervasive at that time. He would've been sentenced to a life of judgment and scorn from all corners. I get that. But, my life, *my* truth, was built on his truth—which wasn't even true—however justifiable the denials and lies. If Josh could have been honest with himself, I would have married some unknown someone else, someone for whom I wasn't simply *the only other option*. A space filler. I would be secure in the love of someone to grow old with, having strung together a lifetime of years, the meaning of which would not now be in doubt.

The rug has been pulled out from under my life. Everything that was and is and might yet be has been sent flying. Consciously or unconsciously, Josh has known for his whole life what I have known for only one month. It's going to take a while for me to collect myself and find a safe place to land.

I've been wondering why it was so hard for Josh to tell me his truth once it began to seep out. Once he realized he could no longer contain it. *Why, why, why?* He should have known the conversation would go pretty much as it did, which was nowhere near as difficult as the prolonged hell we've been living for years. *Why?*

He should have known what my reaction would be. We'd already talked about sexual identity back when we were talking through all the possibilities, the inner turmoils, that might have been driving Joey to use alcohol and drugs, so Josh should have been secure in knowing this would never affect my love. Why didn't he trust me to stand by him as he worked this out?

We've been going on long evening strolls, holding hands, talking things through, and figuring things out. I think we can do this. I think we can show our boys, the world, how to do this transition thing right.



Rick calls to tell me about a big Halloween party next week, and he's wondering if I'd like to take him out for lunch and costume shopping. He's a sophomore this year, and I'm glad his college is close enough for us to do stuff like this. Especially now; I want to sneak in as many happy times with him as possible before what's coming comes. Rick already knows he wants to dress up as Sasquatch or a yeti or something else big and furry, but he's in no rush, so we spend a few hours roaming the aisles of a sprawling Halloween store as he entertains me with his commentary and poses while trying things on.

He's never said anything, but I'm sure Rick has noticed the changes in his dad's behavior—and mine—over the past few years and is sort of assuming that the adults in charge will somehow get things back to right. We've started jogging, Rick and I—an activity we can do with his dad—weekend runs, 5K races. He probably thinks this means we're all happy again now (instead of surreptitiously building a new foundation for him to stand on once he comes to understand that the foundation he's been standing on

all along is seriously cracked). My heart pinches with sadness at what I know is blind trust.

I've been thinking about moving once Josh and I finally separate. Somewhere near the mountains. Maybe Asheville, North Carolina. Financially it makes sense, since we'll have two homes, and the D.C. area is so expensive. But mostly, then I wouldn't have to be the person people feel sorry for around here. On the other hand, if I stayed here, Josh and I would be able to establish a closer relationship. *And Rick*. I don't know if I can leave Rick. I need him in my life. And if he needs me, I don't want to be too far away, too soon.

Last night I had a dream that Rick and I were walking in the neighborhood when we came upon a group of men working on a big hole in the middle of the street. They were trying to support the sides with wooden beams in order to keep the hole from caving in, but as we watched, the ground began to crack and crumble, radiating outward. Rick and I turned and started to run toward home, looking over our shoulders to see if we were running fast enough to stay ahead of the earth trying to gobble us up. I woke myself up when I hollered out, "Rick, save yourself!"



Pointy shards of glass are exploding outward from the center of my universe. I'm trying to catch them and keep them safe. Or put them back together into something whole. Or just *something*. Anything.

A moment ago, I was standing in the kitchen, talking with Josh. Now I'm crumpled on the coir rug where our dog sits when we wipe his muddy feet after coming in from the backyard. Grabbing myself in a fierce hug, my hands are like claws, digging into the skin on my arms, drawing blood. Anything to out-pain

the pain I feel in my soul. I'm howling. Josh sits just out of sight, around the corner in the living room. Waiting, I suppose, for me to regain my composure and sanity.

It could've worked. It should've worked. Our agreement to work on building a new kind of best-friendship before he moves onward with his new life. But Josh couldn't do it. He says he didn't understand how our arrangement was supposed to work.

The bridal veil falls.

Josh still wants to keep everything a secret, but I can no longer cope on my own. I've been avoiding talking to the people who love me, feeling like a liar by living the lie I've been subjected to living. My isolation cannot go on. The hurt and confusion and loss have been unbearable. I call my mom and dad, a few friends. *And the boys.* We make arrangements for them to come home over the Halloween weekend, months before originally intended, for our first-ever pre-planned and serious Family Meeting. I'm still fragile. I'm *freshly* fragile. Again. I don't know how this will go.



Today is the day I've been dreading for months (following a lifetime of believing this day is a day that would never, ever happen). The end of our family as we've known it.

The brake lights on Josh's car flicker as he reaches the end of the driveway. He's on his way to pick up Joey from the airport—Joey hasn't been home since his one night of freedom between jail and court-ordered rehab shortly after Rick's high school graduation, well over a year ago. I wait about an hour, nervously pacing the house, before leaving to pick up Rick. He is waiting in front of his dorm when I drive up, tense and ashen. He doesn't say a word when he gets in the car. And neither do I—it's not possible for me

to speak; I can barely breathe. But a few choking sounds escape as I try to swallow some wadded-up tears.

We arrive back at the house just as Josh's car pulls in, too, and Joey greets me with a silent hug. Although I'd kept it pretty vague when arranging for the boys to come home, they know they're here to talk about something important, and they know no one is sick. It's clear from their demeanors that they know whatever we're going to talk about isn't going to be anything good.

In preparation for this day, I've been talking to a therapist. She said it's important for Joey and Rick to know that Josh wondered about his sexuality back when he was in his teens so they won't be wondering if a surprise discovery might strike when they're in their late forties—adding that it's critical that Josh be the one who tells them. Josh said he was hoping to just tell them we are getting separated and leave it at that, but I said, “No. They need to know the truth. No more secrets and lies; our family needs to be done with that. The boys need to know that being gay is nothing to be ashamed of—and they need to know that *you* believe being gay is nothing to be ashamed of. We don't know if either of them might be hiding this secret, too. And Joey needs to know he didn't cause this; addiction destroys a lot of marriages, but ours isn't one of them. If you don't tell them all the truths, I will.”

Now, plodding into the dining room, we pull out the chairs surrounding the dinged and scratched old round oak table. I hold on tight to the edge of my seat. And Josh speaks.

“So . . . I'm gay. I suspected I was gay when I was in high school but set it aside until fairly recently. Now, I've decided I need to explore this. For several months, your mom and I have been working through this. There's lots of sadness, but no animosity; we're hanging on to our history of love. We are now going to be a *non-traditional* family, but we'll always be a family.

“We’re going to do a legal separation instead of getting a divorce, and I will continue to take care of your mom financially; she’ll never have to worry about that. Mom thinks she wants to move to North Carolina, so that might happen within the next several months. It’s beautiful and centrally located to everyone, but she’ll stay with me for all future visits; nothing will change for us as a family at the holidays and special occasions. Your mom and I still *love* each other, but we are no longer *in love* with each other. We have twenty-five years of friendship, but in order to maintain that friendship, we need to live apart.

“The saddest part of all this is the hurt done to you boys. Your mom and I will always be here to talk, and we’ll always be open and honest. We promise. Mom is seeing a therapist to help sort through this, and each of you might want to talk to a professional, too. Holding stuff in isn’t healthy. Talk about this with whoever you need to.

“Just as I hope you won’t let this change in our family define you, I hope you won’t let this define me, either. But do let this define your mom; even though this has rocked her world, she has been supportive and compassionate, and she has kept you boys and the family as our main focus.”

Stunned relief. That’s what I see on Joey’s and Rick’s faces. I can finally breathe. And speak. Josh and I answer their questions—we talk and talk and talk. And then, all of a sudden, the doom cloud lifts. Rick leans back in his chair and jokes, “Well, Dad, what did you expect, running around in all that spandex?” And Joey, pushing back the hair flopped over his forehead, smiles, and says, “Whew, I’d thought I was in trouble. This is nothing!” That’s it. For now, this is no big deal. Somehow, miraculously, we—all of us—did good.

I do wonder, though, how things would have unfolded if Josh’s

and my roles had been reversed. How would Josh have reacted to me from the beginning of all this? And how would he and the boys be reacting to me now?



I call Rick to see how his Halloween party went—and to check in on how he’s doing. I want to see if he’s okay now that yesterday’s news has had a little time to sink in. He says he didn’t go to the party after all, that it no longer sounded like fun. I think about how excited he had been when we were shopping for his costume, so happy, so unsuspecting, so carefree—and how Josh and I then went and squeezed the air out of life, out of family, as he knows it. Of course, Rick is hurting, no matter how strong and supportive he acted yesterday. It pricks at my heart, imagining the shaggy Sasquatch costume all wadded up in a ball in a corner, a sad pile of reality and deflated dreams.

Rick says he’s not bothered at all that his dad is gay; there are so many gay people on campus, it’s just not a big thing. He says he and Joey had talked on the phone before our Family Meeting, and all they could guess—because all they could do was guess—was that Josh must have been having an affair and we were getting divorced. So it was a relief for him to learn that his dad hadn’t betrayed me in that way. A relief to learn there is no reason for him to be mad. But he says he feels sorry for me—he says I’m the one who drew the short end of the stick.

Last night, after we had talked everything out, everyone went their separate ways to decompress or celebrate or cry or whatever. Joey has not yet reemerged or responded, so I don’t know how things are looking or feeling to him today.



Josh has lost his job. Just weeks after our Family Meeting, and after a decades-long career climbing up the corporate ladder, for the first time ever, he has fallen off. And it hurts. I don't know how to bandage all of our family wounds.

A friend of mine said, "Well, things could be worse; at least you don't have to deal with something like surviving the earthquake crisis in Haiti." I've heard this sort of thing before, about Joey and his addiction: "At least he doesn't have cancer." I understand that people unintentionally say insensitive stuff when trying to be comforting, but dismissive comments like these hurt. Sure, things could be worse, but no one has walked in my shoes, my days, my heart, my life. Suffering isn't a competition.

With everything on hold until Josh finds a new job, we continue to stay together in our never-to-be-rebuilt old house on the hill for a couple of months, trying to work on building a new *us*. But an uncorked cork (Josh), and whatever you call a thing suspended in midair after being flung afar by a violent shake of a rug (me), cannot coexist under the same roof and remain friends. Or sane.

So tonight, we part ways.

Together, over the past few days, we found Josh a tiny furnished apartment and packed up his things, and today we got him all moved in—sock drawer organized, shirts hung in order of color, family photos on a shelf. Now, before I drive away into the night, before leaving Josh in his new place to start his new life, he gives me a little something to hang on to: Josh tells me that he realizes he wasn't very nice to me for a few years; he hadn't meant to be that way, and he's sorry. We hug. We cry. Although the love we knew is finished, it doesn't just end.

I've just said goodbye to half a lifetime together—the lifetime

that was but wasn't really. And to half a lifetime more—the lifetime that was yet to be.

Returning home, the house is so silent. So empty.

Oh my God. I am now *just me*.



It's Valentine's Day. A few months after moving out, Josh has invited me to lunch at a local restaurant to celebrate our newfangled kind of love. As I slide into the booth, he says it was difficult to find just the right card for this day. Well, he couldn't have found anything more perfect than the card he handed me, which says, "You Are My Very Greatest Earthly Blessing." I have goosebumps. Maybe that will be the title of my next book. A story of a love that is stronger than the cracks in its foundation and bigger than the boundaries of marriage. *A blessing bubble*.

Now, over pasta salad and wine, Josh is saying he's ready to start dating.

Bubble popped.

Of course, I knew this would be coming, eventually. But still, I'm not prepared. I don't want this. I don't want Josh sitting across the table from someone who is not me, giving that someone a card full of love like the one I just received—only more romantic. And I don't want to know all of his personal milestones going forward. We've been trying so hard to be friends, buddies, pals, even though we're still married. Our boundaries are blurry. And confusing. And painful. (For me.)

Josh says he is transitioning. "Well, actually," I say, "you've been transitioning for years. Now I need to do something to move forward with *my* life." I ask Josh to move back into our house—that-is-not-a-home when his lease runs out so I can get a small apartment of my own, keeping me sane until he has a new job

and I can make my permanent move to Asheville. The house we moved into as a family four years ago is not a home. It is a prison. The life we set out to build there, and everyone that was in it, is gone and changed. For too long, I've been sitting on a nest of shriveled dreams and wishes, trying to keep something warm that I know doesn't exist. I need to take a step outside of the nowhere I've been trapped.

Until these last few months, I've never lived alone. Josh and I were married right out of college, so I've never known the insecurity of setting out on my own. But I can no longer be a placeholder in someone else's life.



Bridal Veil Falls. I'm back in the here and now.

The sun's slow slide across the North Carolina sky has gone unnoticed by me until this moment, as it dips behind the waterfall's edge, casting a shadow across my foot, my knee, my thigh, gradually pulling me back to the present, to where I sit, perched on my rock, hearing again the sounds of the cascading water and buzzing of bees.

Shuffling through the layers of memories and varnished truths that brought me to this place has taken its toll; I'm emotionally exhausted.

Gathering my things, I stuff my towel and sunscreen into my backpack, then tie my sneakers into a sloppy sideways bow. I stand, sighing, rubbing the indentation that still encircles my finger where my wedding ring used to be, and take one long, last look at Bridal Veil Falls before turning to leave. I have another week of house hunting ahead of me before returning to my apartment in Maryland. I've been taking steps toward leaving the pain hovering over my life behind me. But I've got a long path ahead.



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