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A Bear Named Jerry

By Kelly Flickinger

English, Creative Writing

Rattawut Lapcharoensap

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Artist's Statement

The stories that draw me in are the ones with the flawed characters. The honest ones in which the author explores humanity and doesn't let it off the hook. One of the first books I enjoyed as a serious and critical reader was *Wuthering Heights*. Kathy and Heathcliff's love did not stop them from being terrible people and treating each other horribly, but I could still read about them and love them myself. Jane Austen wrote that Emma as a main character was someone only she expected to love. Being an English major and creative writing minor, I look for stories like these as I live my life. I notice when people don't live up to what they expect of themselves. People often don't even seem to notice their own inconsistencies or how they let down those around them. Great readers and writers have a duty to make people self-aware. To present the reader with mistakes and choices and watch as a character handles them. We learn from the mistakes of others as much as the mistakes we make ourselves.

During the time of the accident, I saw my family for what it was— a group of individual humans capable of great love and strength, but more often selfishness. Before the accident my relationship with my dad was not something I thought about very much, it was hardly even a relationship. After the crash I saw what the world expected of me in the situation and that I could not live up to it. I saw my mom completely ignore her duties as well, leaving all of us when we needed her most. When I tell people what happened to my family, they're amazed by how horrible it was. I've heard the phrase, "I thought that only happened in movies" numerous times. But I disagree. I think my story was meant to be written, not portrayed on screen. I think my being honest with myself is important and that you don't hear that voice when you watch a tragedy on screen. The internal struggle isn't there. I am not proud of how I acted with my dad. I wish I had more compassion. I wish I had been strong enough to confront my mom. But

characters in literature never know fully what to do in the moment. They are only human and must learn from their mistakes and how to live with them.

We read a short story by Jayne Anne Phillips called “Home” this year in a creative writing class. In it a woman took immaculate care of her dying mother. She said she did this so she wouldn’t have to feel guilt. That line struck me. It was honest and did not paint this woman in the best light. I realized my story could have gone differently, but if I had taken great care of my dad it would have been because of guilt or a sense of duty. Not out of love, just like the woman in the story. This story, with its fictional characters, made me feel better about my reaction to my situation. I hope that my story has the ability to strike others or impact them in the same way. Reading brings humans and their experiences together. There is no better way to share thoughts and emotions. I hope through showing my own experiences as honestly as I can people will relate to my story and see it as more than a daughter trying to make sense of her relationships with her imperfect parents.

A Bear Named Jerry

It started with a knock on my dorm room door at two in the morning. My roommate didn't move, so I clumsily climbed down from my lofted bed and opened it.

"Hey Kelly. Your sister is in the lobby. She says it's a family emergency," the RA said. She turned and walked back down the hall. I threw on a sweater, debated whether I should put on a bra, decided that was unnecessary, slid into my shower flip-flops, barely remembered to grab my room key, and made my way to the elevator.

Allison was there in the lobby. Her face was pale and her hair disheveled.

"Dad, Ben, and Anna crashed on the way back to Cody," she said. I nodded my head although her words seemed meaningless. "Mom's going to get Ben from Riverton, I guess he's fine, but Dad and Anna are being life-flighted to Casper. I'm leaving for there now, do you want to come?" I started to get the sense I should be worried. That the situation was serious. I thought about those helicopters. How you swelled with sympathy when you saw them, but stared in curiosity until the sound of their propellers disappeared. My dad and nine-year-old sister had been on one. Now they were in the hospital in Casper and not their beds in Cody relaxing after a long drive.

My first real worry was about the classes I had in the morning. I realized how wrong that was and pushed the thought away. I would have to go, but I needed a little bit of time to think.

"I'll need to get ready so I'll drive. How hurt are they?" I thought about my baby sister, who I'd last seen climbing into the very back of my dad's Jeep Cherokee. That was not the place to be in an accident.

"I don't know. Like I said, Ben's totally fine, but they didn't tell him a lot either it sounds like. And he's not really wanting to talk about it."

“Okay. I’m going to go get changed. I’ll call you when I’m heading out. Thanks for telling me,” I said, but I didn’t know why I thanked her. I was feeling slow and stupid.

I don’t really remember going back to my dorm room. Suddenly I was fully dressed and behind the wheel of my car. I needed to get gas and probably call my mom. And let people here know why I was missing. I texted my friends, but decided to try calling Justin, my boyfriend. He sounded confused and groggy yet immediately offered to drive. It never occurred to me that I shouldn’t drive, however, I noticed my hands were shaking so I agreed. When I got a hold of my mom she told me my dad and younger sister were now being taken to Denver. I didn’t want to think what kind of injuries they might have that none of the Wyoming hospitals could take them. Instead I put the directions to the new hospital in my phone. As we drove, Justin kept mentioning how well I was doing and commenting on how I hadn’t cried. I shrugged, wondering myself where the tears were and if there might just be something wrong with me.

The hospital was huge, intimidating, and had too many doors. We decided to follow the signs for the emergency room and the man behind the desk there pointed us in the direction of my family. The emergency area was a hallway of blue-green curtained rooms. I asked to be taken to Anna first. She was my pride and joy and had been my main concern all morning. I had basically raised her while my parents were constantly working. I never got homesick since going to college; I only ever missed Anna. Now she was broken and bloody on a hospital bed in front of me. I remember my first thought being that I hoped all the cuts on her right temple wouldn’t scar. Two months later I would look at them and tell her they were healing nicely, only to have her go to the mirror in distress because she hadn’t noticed they were even there. Her hair was matted and her clothes were in a clear zip-lock on the counter. I could tell they had been cut to

pieces, but knew from the amount of blood in the bag that they had been ruined well before they cut them off of her. She was in a pink hospital gown. Coming from underneath it both of Anna's thighs were wrapped thickly in white bandages. Her right leg was bleeding through the wrapping.

She was staring at the IV coming out of her arm. Her little hands opening and closing in fear.

"Hey, baby," I said as we walked in. I still hadn't cried, but at that point my throat began to tighten. She looked so tiny. Justin stopped and stood awkwardly in the doorway as I went forward.

"Hey. When did you hear?" When she turned to look at me her eyes were clear and her voice was strong. I gently grabbed one of her hands, ignoring the dried blood on it and trying not to jostle the IV.

"A few hours ago. Everyone else is on their way. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. I broke my legs." She shrugged as she said it.

The doctors came in at this point and interrupted us. They shifted her around and looked at the damage. As they moved her on the bed she let out little whimpers. I noticed how limp her legs looked under the bandages. I wished someone would come wipe the blood off her face and out of her hair. Her eyes were black like a raccoon and the color contrasted sharply with the rest of her pale face. She shut them tight. The doctor's left as quickly as they came in. Anna sighed.

"Well, this will be an interesting show-n-tell," she said. Justin and I looked at each other and let out relieved laughs. Later, when I texted Ben to tell him Anna was doing okay and what she said, he replied, *Yeah, she was making jokes while I pulled her out of the back of the car.*

At my mom's request, Justin left to get Anna a teddy bear. Something Anna could hug until she could get there. I wished he had stayed when the nurse came in to take me to my dad. I was tempted to tell her I would just stay with Anna, but got up to follow her instead.

She held back the blue-green curtain to my dad's room. The TV on the wall made muffled noises and the machines around him beeped and whirred. He lay completely still, the collar around his neck making it so he could only stare at the white ceiling tiles. I slowly approached my dad's bed and stopped at the head, not knowing where to begin.

I had never been very close to my dad. Especially for the last couple years. When he'd been demoted to assistant wrestling coach in Jackson, he'd moved to Cody rather than face that humiliation, leaving my mom and I in Jackson as I finished my senior year. He was always concerned about my grades and work ethic and little else. In middle school track I had been put in the 800 meter run. I had convinced myself it was too far, and ended up jogging the eight laps. The only face I had seen in the crowd as I slowly passed was my crush's. Someone near him yelled, "You can go faster than that!" as I was finally finishing minutes behind the other kids. When I saw the coaches put me in the same race the next week I went to my parents in tears and begged them to let me stay home. It was the first time I'd ever done such a thing. My mom pressed me until she figured out a boy was the real problem. She agreed to let me stay and asked me about him. But my dad had turned away in anger. Facing the TV screen, he said, "It seems to me she's just getting lazy. I asked her to do the dishes last week and she said 'I'd rather not.'"

I never talked to him about boys again.

Now he lay in a hospital bed before me looking out of place in his own blue gown. Blood had dried in his hair, soaked through the bandage over his eye, and trailed out of his ears. His stillness scared me most.

“Hey,” I said quietly. His head was secured in a collar, but his eyes found me.

“Is it just you?” The words made me feel like I wasn’t enough for him. I pushed away the familiar feeling.

“Yeah. Mom, Ben, and Allison are on their way.” There was a moment of silence after this. I felt like I should be doing more, like crying or holding his bloody hand, but I couldn’t move. I cleared my throat. “So... did they say what’s wrong with you?” I cringed. The words came out sounding wrong and insensitive.

“They said it’s good I can feel my hands now. I had my head stuck.”

I had no idea what that meant and didn’t know how to ask him more. I was relieved when the doctor came in shortly after and told me they were moving taking Anna my dad to surgery, but I could wait in the room they had prepared for Anna. I followed a nurse up to the PICU (Pediatric Intensive Care Unit).

I sat in Anna’s room in silence. I knew I could turn on the TV I just sat there. I felt so helpless. All I knew for sure about the accident was that Anna had broken her legs and it was good my dad could feel his hands. Allison texted me with updates on how close she was. She had been halfway to Casper before anyone thought to call her and tell her they’d been taken to Denver instead. I was also trying to text Ben. He didn’t seem to want to talk. I tried to be understanding, but confusion was setting in.

Was it horrible? I texted, looking for any information I could get.

No... it was a great time. Ben’s sarcasm bit. He wasn’t usually the type of person to use it. I set my phone aside and resolved not to text him anymore.

I felt like I should be doing something more as I sat in Anna's room in pediatrics. I stared at the butterflies painted up the wall. Justin finally came back with Anna's teddy bear, apologizing about the poor quality as Walmart was the only place that was open this early in the morning. I took the bear and held it in my lap. It felt like a stuffed animal from a claw machine and the brown fuzzy hair came off on my sweater.

They brought Anna back in, the rods now sticking straight up out of her legs. I couldn't figure out just what they were doing there, but I was glad the blanket was draped over them, shielding them from view. She was out cold so I quietly slipped the bear next to her in bed. The doctor was waiting at the door for me. She beckoned me into the hallway. My stomach tightened with nerves and I glanced back to the couch at Justin only to see he'd fallen asleep. Taking a deep breath, I went into the hallway to talk to the doctor.

She was a small lady and for some reason I found it comforting to stand above her. She introduced herself, but I immediately forgot her name.

“So you're Anna's sister?”

“Yes, my dad's here too.”

“I just came from talking to his doctor also. If you're ready I would like to update you on their conditions.” I nodded but wished more than anything that Allison had come straight to Denver. She'd been halfway to Casper before I called her to tell her they were being taken to Denver instead. I wished my mom was there holding my hand, that she would drive faster even though at that time she was driving ninety miles an hour behind two highway patrolmen escorts.

“Anna has two broken femurs, but the good news is they are very clean breaks. I am not at all worried about her surgery and would like to schedule it for later today. Given her age she should be walking shortly after and will have no long-term damage. Kids are very durable like

that.” I nodded. “Now your father is a little more serious. He damaged his C...” She continued with medical language that went straight over my head. “And he fractured his spine.” I asked her what it all meant.

“We won’t fully know until he’s out of surgery, Kelly. However, at the moment your father is technically a quadriplegic. He’s paralyzed.” I burst into tears and the small doctor pulled me in for a hug.

The doctor left as soon as the tears subsided and I made my way back into Anna’s room. I tried to text my mom the update, but only really remembered what she had said about Anna and that my dad couldn’t walk. I sat on the couch and saw that Anna was awake. Her eyes were fuzzy from the drugs and she looked exhausted. I could see the pain in the tight way she held her lips. The nurse was trying to help her find something to watch on the TV, but for the first time in her life Anna had no motivation to stare at the screen. They had placed everything they’d found of hers on the bedside table. The small pile consisted of a book, her sweatshirt and her little pink purse.

“Do you want me to read to you?” I asked. She nodded and I picked up the thick book. She’d been talking about the series for weeks. There was blood dried on the last few pages and back cover. I ignored it as I opened to her bookmark. She stared at me intently as I read, her brown eyes nearly black.

The next few days passed slowly. Most of the time was spent waiting for news of my dad’s many surgeries and watching Anna sleep. I went back up to Laramie to go to class and tell my professors I would be gone off and on. A week after the accident my mom and I were going up to the PICU. We had just been to see my dad, but he was taken off to surgery again. I was

rarely in his room and only went when my mom told me to go with her. I hated seeing the bags with the fluid coming out of his broken spine, the dried vomit on his neck collar, the pain he was constantly in. My mom was always talking about the healing powers of touch and encouraging me to hold his hand, but I still couldn't do it. The guilt ate at me in those moments. I wanted nothing more than to be away from my father. I didn't know what to say to him and could feel him waiting for words of comfort. Even the accumulation of blood and strangely thick ear wax in his ears was hard to look at. Later, when Allison would carefully clean them with a Qtip, I would wonder again what was wrong with me that I couldn't seem to help him and instead held back gags as I watched her.

My mom had taken to carrying around a little brown teddy bear she had stolen from a pile of stuffed animals Anna had been given. She claimed it as her own, telling anyone who looked at her funny that she needed the comfort too.

"So what's your bear's name?" I asked as we rode the elevator up to Anna's room.

"Jerry." My mom laughed. "You're the only one who's asked." It warmed me to have made my mom smile. I hadn't seen her do so since the accident.

"It's a cute name for a bear," I said.

In the days leading up to the accident I had gone to Cody to visit my dad and younger siblings. It was my spring break and we ended the time together by driving down to Denver for a wrestling tournament. Anna rode with me. The three wrestlers competing went with my dad and Ben in the Jeep. My little brother didn't do as well as my dad had hoped, but Dan, one of the wrestlers, walked out with a huge first place trophy. It would be in the back with Anna and my guess is that it's the reason for the scars on her face.

After the tournament we all drove back as far as Laramie, where I would be going back to classes the next day. Anna had to go in the very back of the Jeep for the rest of the drive to Cody as there weren't enough seats. We stopped at the Papa John's in town for dinner before they left. Every time I drive past that restaurant I can't help thinking to myself that that was the last place I saw my dad stand.

At one point Anna looked at me from her hospital bed and told me, "If you had just driven all the way back with me this wouldn't have happened."

Ben didn't talk about how the accident occurred and I didn't want to ask. He sat most of the first day by Anna's bed while our dad was in surgery. It took two hours for him to stop bouncing his knee, his bloodstained shorts swaying as he replayed the accident in his mind.

I would find out through overhearing my mom on the phone and news articles being published in Jackson and Cody how they had crashed. From the bits of information I came to see the accident clearly in my mind although I wasn't there and will never know fully what happened.

Here's what I imagine: The moonlight lit the empty highway and sparkled off the river beside it. As they drove through Wind River Canyon, everyone in the car was asleep except Ben behind the wheel. The quiet sense of calm that always comes when a long road trip winds to a close in the middle of the night filled the car. He drove through the three tunnels and turned the corner only to see the large boulder that had fallen off the steep canyon wall. In the split second before the car and boulder met, Ben turned the wheel to the right, insuring the car rolled into the canyon wall as opposed to the frigid, rushing river. He would be called a hero for doing this later, along with his actions afterward.

Having seen pictures of the car, I know Ben then began to pull his fellow wrestlers, my dad and Anna from what was now an unrecognizable hunk of metal. He cut his knees on the glass as he desperately tried to get everyone out. That would be the only injury he received.

One wrestler came out with a hurt shoulder and broken toe. He ran down the highway, looking for help. After finding a car and asking them drive to find cell service and call for help he returned and pulled Anna's head off the road and onto his lap. He sang to her until the ambulances and helicopter came. Now, despite his sexist-racist-homophobic-Trump-supporting Facebook posts, I still can't dislike him because of what he did for Anna that night.

Dan, the first place winner just hours ago, was unconscious. After pulling everyone else from the car Ben sat and tried to hold his friend together as Dan bled onto his shorts. The paramedic said he was probably blind. The doctors warned his mother he'd most likely be unable to walk. When he woke up, unable to move anything but his hands, he wrote his brother a note saying, *Ben saved us*. Two years later he would win the state-wrestling tournament, a scar on his face the only visible reminder of the accident. The year after he would win again.

Throughout it all, my dad laid on the road yelling and crying in fear because he couldn't move.

People I had never met before messaged me on Facebook offering to help. At one point my mom looked at me and said, "It feels like all of Wyoming is wrapping us in a big hug." Having taught and coached in Sheridan, Jackson, and Cody, my dad touched many lives in the state. The teacher that got him a job in Cody started a fundraiser on Facebook with a goal of \$5,000; he would double that amount by the next day. The town of Cody had a benefit concert; this and the account on Facebook raised 75,000 dollars to help my dad buy a new van so he

could get around in his wheelchair. People I hadn't seen in years made the drive to Denver to visit and offer their support. A family of wrestlers my dad coached bought Ben a new DS when they learned his had been lost in the canyon. One of my biggest high school crushes messaged me just to ask how I was doing and if he could do anything. It was the first time we'd ever talked.

About a month after the accident Anna was hobbling around on her walker, taking old-lady-steps around my dad's hospital room. The doctor had inserted rods and pins to hold her two broken femurs together and had her standing two days after the surgery. She never even had to wear a cast.

My dad had been moved to this room until he was ready to go to the apartments next to the rehab hospital, where he spent the rest of the summer. He was in a power chair getting used to the controls.

My mom was running around tidying up. When she passed him he lifted his hand as much as he could. My mom grabbed it and waited as he pressed it to his lips before letting her walk away. That's my last memory of them acting like a married couple.

With our dad in the hospital and Ben living with friends in Cody so he didn't miss school, Anna was stuck in the hospital for two months. She was falling behind in classes and missing her friends. Her legs were getting stronger and my dad loved having her around, but the time was wearing on her. I was sitting with her alone in the room while everyone else went to watch my dad do therapy. My mom kept encouraging me to go, but I preferred to stay with Anna.

“Did Ben go check on Beau?” Anna asked. She rarely cleaned Beau’s litter box and often neglected to feed him, but Anna loved that cat.

“Yes, he goes every other day. And you know Beau and how he loves to be outside.”

“I miss him.” In that moment Anna’s face crumbled and she burst into tears. I was scared to hug her with her legs still so sore but I awkwardly did my best as her little body shook with sobs.

It was familiar to hold her as she cried. The last time I did I had just given away my pet rabbit. No one had expected Anna to get so upset about it. I sat with her on my lap as she broke down. Mid-sob she reached over, grabbed a strand of my hair, and without thinking used it to wipe her face, including under her nose. It took us both a second to realize what she had just done, but seeing the look of disgust on my face Anna had erupted into giggles. I couldn’t help but join her.

I wasn’t sure how to help my sister this time. She missed her friends, her home, and her mobility. As she cried a huge bubble of snot came out of her nose and popped so loudly we could hear it. Anna and I froze for a second before breaking into giggles that bordered on hysterical.

I thought about the rest of my family encouraging my dad as he struggled to learn how to move again. Why was it so much easier to comfort Anna than my dad? I told myself helping Anna that was equally important, but knew I was just trying to fight the guilt.

There were strange times when it hit me what exactly had happened to my dad. I often woke up from dreams of him walking and it would take me a minute to realize why that dream had been strange. Once I was in Justin’s dorm room during all of this.

“This summer I’ll take you up to the mountains,” he said. “I’ll teach you how to fly fish. We can also go to the golf course I work at and if you don’t want to golf we can just drive the cart around.” He was trying to cheer me up as usual, but I burst into tears at his words.

“Kelly! What is it? What did I say?”

I tried to explain through gasping sobs. “My dad... a-always tried to get me to fish and golf with him. Th-that’s all he does in the summer. I never wanted to go, and now he never can.” Justin could not get me to calm down. I lost control, but even as it happened I felt relief. I really was capable of feeling sorry for my dad. I was capable of showing love for him.

“Mom just understands me so much better. It was so nice spending senior year alone with her. Like we just had so much time to talk and got so close. Dad’s always been weird with me, he never really cared about what was going on in my life, you know? And now that this has happened it’s like he thinks him being in a wheelchair suddenly makes us all a close-knit family,” I said.

“Well... maybe not.” Allison was chewing her nails and glanced at the door of the guest room to make sure it was closed. It wasn’t until then that I realized something was really bothering her. We were in Cody for Ben’s high school graduation and staying at our dad’s house. I was relieved to be away from the hospital, to finally able to talk about everything with our dad still in Denver. Anna was with us and could be heard in the kitchen playing with a friend, happy and loud now that she was free from the confines of the hospital.

“What do you mean?” Even as I asked I was scared for the answer. There had not been much good news in our family for a while.

“Last weekend Dad opened an email on mom’s phone. It said stuff like, I miss you, XOXO, and was from some guy in Jackson. Apparently she’s been having an affair for the past two years when she was supposed to be trying to sell her store to move here.” When my dad moved with Ben and Anna, my mom and I were left to pack up the house we’d lived in for ten years. She was also working on finding a buyer for the feed store she owned. Every deal she almost closed fell through, but she never seemed to be upset by the setbacks.

I didn’t know until that moment another man had been what made it so easy for her to stay.

“The guy is some rodeo clown. Dad keeps calling him mom’s ‘Cowboy Candy,’” Allison said.

“What did Dad do when he found out?”

“He asked her about it. She had the complete wrong reaction. She got really mad and said she was going to leave us.”

We didn’t want to ruin Ben’s graduation so we didn’t tell him. Allison and I were in a separate world, full of painful knowledge. After the ceremony, Ben walked around Facetiming our dad on his phone. Everyone laughed and made them pose for pictures together, our dad’s face smiling on the tiny screen for the town of Cody. The people there loved my dad and had been so generous helping Ben and sending money on the GoFundMe account. I watched them interact with his face on the screen and talk to my mom and knew neither of my parents was as perfect as the town liked to think.

Ben’s graduation party was at Dan’s house because his older brother graduated with Ben. Anna did her best to run around with the other kids, but had to come back to our table often to

catch her breath and relax her legs. She was all smiles that day though. Being home and with kids her age once again meant the world to her.

My mom brought her food over to the table, sitting next to a group of women who immediately asked about my dad.

“Oh, Chuck is doing just great, thank you for asking. He’s working so hard and always improving! We just keep giving thanks to the Lord!” I hated everything about the way she was talking, from the plural we of a married couple to her making herself sound like an upright Christian woman.

“When are you guys coming back up here?”

“We’re going to stay down in Denver for the summer. There’s a great rehab program there and we’re trying to get Chuck into this advanced walking program they have at Crane. They have an 80 percent success rate. Basically they just hook him up to a walking suit like a robot almost and it re-teaches his muscles how to move. It’s about a six month program though, so we aren’t thinking we’ll be back any time soon. They say with injuries like this you won’t know how full of a recovery they’ll make until three years down the road, so we’re just waiting to see what happens and how fast his body wants to heal.” Another lady joined the table and asked about my dad, starting the conversation over again. My mom grew more animated as she talked and I had the sense she was somehow enjoying the conversation and attention at the expense of the man she was planning to leave. I left the table under the pretense of wanting more food, but I couldn’t have eaten another bite.

It’s a weird feeling to watch the woman who raised you and realize you don’t really know her.

My dad Facetimed me the day after Ben's graduation. I was pulling into the driveway of the Cody house and stayed in the car for privacy. He kept his phone on a stand connected to the arm of his wheelchair. When I answered, the angry scar above his eye stood out on the small screen. He looked more tired than I'd ever seen him.

"Hey Kelly Cole," he said, using my middle name as he does when he tries to sound affectionate. For once, it didn't bother me. "So you know?"

"Yeah." My throat was too tight to say more. We sat and looked at each other through the screens and I knew we were both struggling to hold back tears. I looked outside the car window at the house that was never my home but that my dad loved and had left me for. When I didn't look at him I could talk easier. I sighed and continued. "I was the only one there with her. I should have seen something." The tears came then and I was surprised to see they did for my father also. It was one of the few times I ever saw my dad cry. We sat on our phones wiping away tears. His hand had nerve damage and looked more like a claw as it reached up and clumsily wiped his cheeks.

"I'm sorry I didn't take you with me," he said, forgetting I hadn't wanted to leave Jackson at all. Forgetting that he could have stayed.

That night after showering I sat on the edge of the tub and listened to my mom and Allison talking in the other room. I couldn't pick out the words, but I heard Allison crying and spent the time alone crying myself. When they had stopped talking, I figured I would be safe to get to the guest room without having to confront my mom. I found her waiting for me outside the bathroom instead.

“So, your sister told you?” she asked, though it sounded more like a statement. I couldn’t look into her eyes, just her angry pursed lips. The wrinkles made it look like she had been a smoker in the past. I knew she never had, but at that moment I doubted even that knowledge I had about my mom. How else had she gotten those wrinkles?

I got mad in that moment. I couldn’t believe the nerve of her being mad at Allison, when she was the one having the affair. My anger choked my throat and I found myself crying again. My mom pulled me to the couch and into a hug, ignoring my effort to pull away.

Her anger disappeared with my tears. “Is it just the reality of it all?” she asked. I shook my head, still unable to talk and not even knowing what I could say. How did she not understand?

“Don’t think of me as a terrible person, I’ve had months to think about this and deal with the pain. I’m not doing this because of the accident. There was so much wrong before that. I shouldn’t have made our family so perfect, I think that just makes this harder.”

I remained silent, and would see this as an act of cowardice in the years to come. I never told my mom how ridiculous she sounded. I never confronted her for never apologizing for something she told us not to do our entire lives. I remember distinctly the times she told me not to go to a member of the opposite sex for comfort when I was mad at my boyfriend. I didn’t even have a boyfriend when she told me these things. She left my family and destroyed my view of her, and made it seem like it was my fault for being upset.

When my aunts came to visit shortly after the accident they helped my dad look through his accounts. My mom, probably in an attempt to get me to feel more sympathy, told me later he instructed them not to give me any money because I would just spend it on alcohol. The MIC

(Minor in Consumption) I got earlier that year partying on Valentine's Day was never far from his thoughts. My sister would later blame it on the pain meds he had been on, but every time we left to go back to school in Laramie he would give her double the amount of "traveling money" as he gave me.

My mom made a lot of calls and was able to get my older brother, Charlie, brought home from Iraq early. By the time he got to Denver, he was returning to a broken family. Our mom was half-heartedly trying to work things out with our dad, mostly for Anna's (but looked more to me like appearance's) sake. They had gone to one session of counseling where my dad wondered out loud if my mom might be bipolar. My mom had walked out in a rage and told each of us about it, warning us that our dad was just trying to make her look worse. Allison had reasoned with her, saying our dad was just trying to figure things out for himself.

Charlie was always a "live and let live" kind of person; yet even so I found it difficult to believe how normal he acted around her and my dad. He seemed to be able to listen to and comfort both of them equally. When he was in the room with them the tension left in a way it hadn't since my dad read those emails.

At one point we were by ourselves in the elevator going up to my dad's room and I told him, "I just don't want to see her. It makes my stomach turn."

Charlie's response was to take out a small bottle of Jack from the waistline of his jeans. He took a pull out of it with me before the doors opened. Even if the shot wasn't entirely necessary and didn't do all that much, it felt like someone completely understood what I was going through. It felt like he was telling me it was okay to be upset. It was ok to be a college student that drank and didn't relate well to her injured father. It was ok to be angry with my mom

for wanting to leave us for her own happiness. The warmth from the shot was enough to carry me through the day. I went to my dad's room with the taste of alcohol in my mouth feeling for the first time in awhile that someone stood by me.

Freshman year ended and I couldn't shake the sense of dread I felt entering the summer months. Before the affair came out, I had talked to my mom about taking Anna with me to Cody for the summer. At the time she'd agreed and offered to pay me like a summer job. Now she wanted Anna in Jackson with her and my dad wanted Anna to stay in Denver. My parents' marriage was over. Both were calling lawyers.

My mom was full of advice every time I saw her when she had Anna. She would tell me to try and build a relationship with my dad because he was realizing how shallow his relationships with people were now that he sat in his chair all day. She told me not to feel obligated to take care of him, but we both knew she wasn't giving me a choice. My dad's rehab hospital had apartments connected to it and patients couldn't live there alone. Charlie was sent back to base and Allison was working on her physical therapy internship, so Ben and I had to alternate staying with him. Anna would spend the summer going from Jackson, to Cody with Ben or me, to Denver. Everyday I wished for the summer I had planned of just her and me.

The doctors had been telling us for weeks that we needed to make sure our dad was working on doing things on his own. Allison had been trying to, but our dad had decided she was too mean to him and discouraged her from visiting. He had grown more dependent on the attention he received from people taking care of him since our mom left. We all watched as he made improvements, but small ones that made his therapists exchange looks behind his

wheelchair. At one point he looked at me and said, “I hope I don’t end up walking with a gimp. I’d rather just stay in my wheelchair if I do.”

I went to Denver to move my dad into his room. He had picked up a new expression, or maybe it was old and I’d never noticed it before. He now said “let’s” every time he wanted me to do something. “Let’s bring that pillow, they just throw those away anyway,” “Let’s clean out the fridge now,” “Let’s start by moving that box.” It reminded me of the friendly, yet patronizing, way children’s TV shows tried to get kids to interact with them. I hated it every time my dad said the phrase and then watched as I did what he wanted.

Once we had moved his few belongings into the apartment, my dad asked me to get him a cheese stick. I felt another flash of hot anger toward him, knowing I was overreacting but not understanding why he didn’t even try to learn to take care of himself.

When my mom first talked about leaving and my dad had to talk to me about helping take care of him I couldn’t hide my feelings on the subject. I hated the thought of helping anyone use the bathroom or shower. I didn’t know how to deal with injuries. The thought of helping my dad was somehow even worse. I didn’t want to help him shower and I wasn’t strong enough to help him if something went wrong. Seeing my face in that moment my dad told me not to worry about it, that he’d hire someone. Talking to Allison later he would say that I had looked at him like he was a monster.

The first night in the apartment my dad couldn’t find anyone to help him. He offered me \$7.50 an hour to help him just get into bed. That amount wasn’t nearly enough to get me through the summer. I had to use my credit card just to pay for gas to get to him.

When a person is paralyzed like my dad, they are given a laxative at a certain point every day to train their bodies to poop only then. They call it the Magic Bullet and until that point my

dad had been taking his at night. Not having hired anyone to come in until the next morning, he skipped it that night. He kept worrying that he would poop when I moved him. Every time he brought it up I felt panic rise in my chest, making the work even harder. I had to clean and rinse out the bladder bag attached to his lower stomach, hook him up to the night bag, and get him into bed. I used a machine with a sling that slid under him in the chair, all the while hating the strong smell of hospital that clung to him.

I started crying when I didn't get him placed high enough on the bed. I couldn't move his dead weight no matter how he tried to tell me his nurses did it. He kept saying "Let's try..." and I was so frustrated with the whole situation that the familiar angry tears came. My dad finally looked at me with sympathy and told me he was fine and I should go to bed. I left him with his feet hanging off the end of the bed, the cushioned boots that prevented his legs from rubbing together looked strange and cartoonish as they hung in midair.

The next day when I left my dad, he sent me the longest text he had ever sent to me. I could picture him alone in the apartment, talking into his phone as it converted his words into text. The message read, *When I found out about your mom I felt like I wanted to die. If I hadn't survived the accident you would have all gotten the life insurance money and she could just go on and be happy with her Cowboy Candy. But last night you reminded me what I had to live for. When you cried over me I saw just how caring and compassionate you were and I was proud that I had raised such a great young lady. You reminded me how much the world had to offer. I love you sweetheart. I'll see you soon.*

I felt the furthest thing from the person my dad had described, especially when my first reaction was to roll my eyes.

I spent the time away from my dad with Justin in his hometown of Gillette. As Justin had promised during the school year, we went fishing and golfing. No tears were shed. The time away from my family was like a gift. I just stayed in Justin's room by myself while he worked the first couple times I visited and loved the quiet and lack of commitment. However, after awhile, Justin's parents started coming downstairs to check on me. His mom even woke me up and invited me to coffee. I went along, knowing it meant a lot to Justin, but also knowing they were all trying to fill a gap that had been left. I didn't talk much at the café and returned to Justin's room soon after we got back to the house. When Justin got off work I heard him talk with his mom before coming down to me.

"My mom said you guys went to coffee," he said.

"Yeah, it was fun."

"She said you didn't talk much."

"You know I'm shy, Justin. It takes me awhile to warm up to people," I said.

"I know. She just feels really bad about what your mom did and all that. She's trying to make you feel better." I understood what he meant. His mom wanted to stand in for my mom during this hard time. They didn't get that I still had a mom and wasn't in a rush to have two. I liked Martha, but I didn't have the room to make more people feel happy and better about themselves. I didn't want the pressure of having to be the perfect daughter to yet another person.

"I know," I said, not knowing how to put my feelings into words.

"I just wish you would try harder. It means a lot to me that you get to know her." I felt something snap and began to cry. Didn't he know how much effort this already took? He spent the next ten minutes trying to apologize, but I could feel his frustration even as he said the words.

As the summer passed I resented helping my dad more and more. Every time I saw his doctor, he expressed concern at my dad's lack of improvement and told me to make sure he was doing things on his own. Every time I reminded my dad of this his glare told me I would never understand.

I spent most of my time when I was with him watching Netflix on my computer, ignoring my dad as he made a show of doing things I had seen him do perfectly well during therapy. One day, my dad went into the bathroom to take a phone call. He spoke loudly as he talked about me. I knew he wanted me to hear and instantly regretted it when I turned down the volume to listen.

"When I was younger, I loved doing things for Pops," he said to his sister. "If I ever saw him outside mowing, I would throw on my shoes and run out to finish the job for him. I knew he worked hard every day to provide for us, so that's how I gave ba—" I turned my volume back up and sank lower into the couch.

When his therapists scheduled my dad to work on using his manual chair, my dad would ask me to wheel him over to the rehab hospital. I would take him there, pushing his dead weight up the small hill between the two buildings, go back to the apartment, and then return in two hours to push him back. One day his rehab went short, but my dad's phone was dead. He wheeled himself all the way back to the apartment and knocked on the door to be let in. He was sweating and breathing heavily, but I was proud of him for making it. He pretended it never happened.

Two years later I would go to Cody to visit him for the weekend. I had a big paper due that Monday for a summer class, but had the weekend off work so I went to see Anna. While I was there, his power chair stopped working. He asked me to drive it to Casper to be fixed and return with it the next day. I told him I needed to get my paper done and didn't have the time. He

proceeded to tell me he was stuck and would like his mobility back. He had gestured to his manual chair helplessly. I was amazed he'd lost the ability to use it completely or if he hadn't, that he would claim to have done so.

When the summer finally drew to a close, my dad was cleared to return to Cody. People donated enough time and money to make the house handicap accessible. It was decided that Ben would stay in Cody with him, taking classes at the nearby community college. My dad also won custody, although my mom would continue fighting for it. The judge decided Anna's life was in Cody. I returned to school, happy to be away from my dad and the divorce.

Thanksgiving came around and I was confronted with an issue common to children of divorce that I hadn't even considered until that time. I didn't want to spend the holiday with my mom, but I didn't want to spend it in Cody either. In the end I decided Anna's happiness was what mattered most to me, and she was going to Jackson. Ben hadn't spoken to my mom since he found out about the affair and would stay in Cody so at least my dad wouldn't be alone.

My mom was living in a tiny apartment above the feed store she still owned. She had painted the walls and showed me all the ways her boyfriend, J.C., had helped her furnish it. This included the log shelf above her bed. It held a vase of fake sunflowers, a picture with buffalo in front of the Tetons, and her little bear from the hospital.

My grandma flew in from Indiana for thanksgiving. She loved to talk about my mom's new man.

"You know, even if things don't work out between you and J.C., I'll still consider him my son," she said. I thought about how little loyalty she had towards my dad.

When the time for thanksgiving dinner came around, we went to a buffet at one of the local restaurants, the “historic Wort Hotel.” My mom loved the place and I suspected it was one of the bars she would go out to when I was living with her my senior year. She had gone out with her friends often and stayed late. I now had a better idea of what she was doing during this time.

Despite my suspicions about the place, the fact that dinner was served at 1 o’clock, and my grandma voicing her opinion several times that she wished J.C. could come, I enjoyed the buffet of prime rib and lobster. Anna went back five times, each time with a little more dessert on her plate and less “real food.” Allison had come to Jackson also, and I knew we made the right decision from all the smiles Anna gave us and the stories about her being back in school.

Because dinner was so early, by time the sun had set most of us were hungry again.

“It looks like the Wort is the only place still serving food, everything else is closed,” my mom said. We all agreed it would work despite being our second time eating there that day. We decided to get the food to go and placed our orders from the menu we found online.

“Kelly, want to come with me?” my mom asked.

Hoping this wasn’t another one of my mom’s attempts to get me alone to talk about my dad, I agreed. The ride there was pleasant enough. In my effort to make life as normal as possible for Anna, I’d been spending time with my mom and being as friendly as I could. It felt like things were almost actually normal now, just because I had been pretending they were for so long. We got to the Wort but the bar was the only place serving food. My mom went in to order and I waited by the doors in the lobby. Soon she came back out followed by four men in dusty jeans and cowboy hats.

“This is your daughter? She looks just like you!” one said. My mom beamed with pride.

“Kelly, this is Hank, William, Tim, and Jerry,” she said. She and the last man shared an excited look and my heart sank. I told myself this wasn’t the guy. The guy’s name was J.C., the rodeo clown. But I couldn’t convince myself. I knew what the “J” stood for now.

Jerry was a cute name for a bear too.

I faked a smile in front of all the men and then told my mom I was going to sit in the lobby while we waited. The last thing I expected was for Jerry to follow me and sit down on the velvet red couch beside me. His hair was a dirty blonde. His teeth were yellowed when he shot a big smile at me. I thought about my mom kissing a mouth with yellow teeth. I looked away at the taxidermy bison head on the wall in front of us.

“Hey, Kelly Cole,” he said. I was stunned by his use of the name only my family addressed me by. “How’s school going?”

“Good.”

“Your older sister’s still down there with you, right?”

I nodded.

“Well... I just came by to give you a hard time,” he said. He smiled with his imperfect teeth and mock punched my arm. Then he pulled out a twenty from his pocket. “Get yourself some lunch.” He pressed the money into my hand before I could object and walked back to his group of friends. As they walked back into the bar I was happy for the first time that I was under twenty-one and could sit outside those doors unbothered.

I sat in silence and fought tears. The last thing I wanted was to cry in such a public place. My mom came over shortly after the men disappeared. She sat down where Jerry had just been beside me. I threw the twenty into her lap and couldn’t fight the tears any more.

“I really didn’t know he’d be here,” she said, the closest she ever came to an apology. I said nothing. “He’s just a generous man, Kelly Cole. You don’t want this?”

I shook my head and hoped all the disgust I felt showed on my face. How many times had my mom and I complained that my dad only knew how to show his love through giving us money? At that moment I almost wished I was sitting in the quiet house in Cody, my dad triumphantly looking over me from his power chair because I had chosen him over my mom. I didn’t have control over the sob that came out of me. My mom forced me into a hug,

“Oh honey, is it just the reality of it all?”