

Do You Know Why
By Mary Fideli

May 21st 1996, my baby sister had just recently turned one, and February of that year I had turned seven.

I remember this birthday in particular because I had received the most magical gift I could have ever dreamt of. A satin red ball gown with white lace trim and gloves to match. When my mom and aunt took the dress out of the box, I stood there speechless for about two minutes before my mom said I could try it on. I took the dress and ran into the bathroom with my older sister. She helped me button the back and slip on the gloves. That was it. I was a real princess, I told myself. But then it hit me, this couldn't be real.

I turned to my sister and asked her quite literally, "Mel, am I dreaming?"

She laughed at me, while she was fixing her hair in the mirror. "Pinch yourself. That's how you'll know if it's real or not."

I jumped onto the bathroom counter, hiked up my dress, and pinched my right thigh so hard I left a red mark. "Yup, I'm real and this is really happening" That's all I needed to know. I jumped off the counter and ran back to the kids in the party to show off my new dress.

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That morning I woke up, I could smell spring in the air, I was so excited that the weather was nice and I begged my mom for me to wear the red dress to school.

She told me I couldn't wear the dress to school, that it wasn't appropriate. I could wear overalls instead, and if I wanted she would put a big bow in my hair. She must have noticed how upset I was and promised me that I could prance around in it after school.

My bus stop couldn't have come fast enough. As soon as the bus turned the corner, I was pushing the doors open.

I ran into my house and saw my baby sister in her swing. I called for my mom, but there was no answer. I knocked on her bedroom door (because we knew better than to enter my mother's room without her permission).

"Maxi Girl, the dress is on the couch. Keep an eye on your sister."

Okay, Mom" I thought to myself, "no problem! I could put on a show for her." I loved to perform.

As the motorized swing swayed forward, I would make a grab for her feet and she would let out a giggle. When it went back, I would spin my dress around. I did this same routine for about five

minutes straight, with my sister laughing and squeaking, before I became too dizzy. I went to sit down for a second to gather myself, but I heard a slam that brought me right back up to my feet.

I side-stepped the swing to look out of the skinny vertical windows behind my sister. A maroon van had just pulled up in front of my house. At first I didn't think anything of it; my mother usually had lots of visitors in and out of the house, but not many actually came inside. But this felt different. I knew something was wrong, but before I could make sense of it . . .

About eight or nine men came flying out of the van. They were dressed in all black vests with SWAT written on their backs. Two other cars pulled up, I turned to run and warn my mom but then a loud bang like the sound of a shot gun blew a part of the wooden front door on top of me and my baby sister's swing.

I left her, I can never forget that I left her.

I was so terrified when the door was on top of us and what seemed like a never-ending parade of officers walking right past us. My heart was racing and I feared for my life. I managed to squeeze out from underneath the door.

I left my baby sister stuck on the ground in between the door and her swing as I ran into the hallway.

I stopped at the wood stove and looked back where the front door was lying on the baby.

I couldn't breathe, I couldn't even scream. I had tried to let out a yell, anything, when I saw the doors open up on the maroon van, but I couldn't in time.

My sister Jackie came out from the backroom and rushed to pick up my baby sister. The police threw her back on to the couch believing that she was my mother.

There was a lot of yelling and screaming, but the only words I could make out were my sister yelling, "I am NOT Rose Barton!"

I was still facing the living room with my back to the woodstove; by this time my hands were clenched to the metal grips on either side of the stove's opening. I thought we were going to die and all I could do was hold onto that stove.

Three men walked past me and kicked in my mother's bedroom door. They took her out in cuffs and threw her onto the couch in the living room next to my sister.

At first her face was blank, but when she saw how frightened I was, she asked, "Can I hug my daughter?" They wouldn't un-cuff her, but allowed me to wrap my arms around my mother's shoulders.

I leaned over to look behind my mother's back, I saw the cuffs. "It's ok, Maxi Girl, Mommy is going to be home soon." I kissed her goodbye.

As they pulled my mother out of the house, the SWAT team tore apart the whole house. They started in her room, cutting up the mattress and ripping up the rug. I knew what they were looking for, but I didn't understand why they had to break everything.

We had to leave the house for the time being and my sister had to gather things for me and the baby. The police searched everything we had, including the diapers.

I was still wearing my red dress, but I no longer felt happy about it; they could have ripped that up too. My sister changed me, as a police officer stood behind her, making sure we weren't hiding anything.

I peeked over my sister's shoulder and stared at the policeman as my sister slid up each of my pant legs. How could he ruin our home and take our mother?

I whispered to my sister so he couldn't hear, "What is going to happen to us?"

~

When my sister was done dressing me and gathering stuff for the baby, we walked down the hallway and past my mother's bedroom. I peeked in to see the mess that was left behind and hopefully find a chance to spot my red dress.

I knew my mother told me I could wear it after school, but she never laid it out for me. I stopped to think when was the last time I actually saw the dress; *I don't think I have worn it since the first day I got it.*

At first I was upset and tears started to come to my eyes. I don't know if it was for the loss of the dress or my mother, who I was sure by now was on her way to the county jail.

But I know that when my mother said, "Don't worry, I'll be home soon," I believed her. This wasn't the first time my mother was arrested.

Only a year prior she had spent over two months in Riverhead, and even though I can't recall what for, I vividly remember the duration of the time spent away, because my siblings and I had to stay with my father in RVC.

The schools gave my dad a huge pile of homework for each of us, but I didn't mind as long as I got to stay home. I hated school and I hated the way I felt while away from my mother. I would walk into the classroom and instantly burst out in tears

"What's wrong this time Mary?"

"I want to go home."

"I know that, but what is the problem now?"

Mrs. Deluca was sweet, but stern. I always thought she was so beautiful, she had short blonde hair and always wore bright yellow dresses.

“My ear hurts,” I answered, I didn’t want to tell her the truth, that I was scared to leave my mother because sometimes when I was home alone with her she would tell me that she saw people coming out of the walls. And the time that she fell right in between the wood table and glass door shaking. Sometimes she would play a joke on me, other times were very real.

Mrs. Deluca sent me back to my desk and told me that I would start feeling better as the day progressed. I’m sure she was used to it by now; she had my brother Justin four years before me, leaving her with a little more insight into my family’s history than most.

But nonetheless, she made the idea of coming to school bearable, she would tell us the best stories, like how she was allergic to water and had to use gloves to wash dishes. That blew my mind. How did she shower? I would ask myself.

One day she brought in a fish tank filled with water and stones and placed it right in the front of the classroom. The class asked, “What is that Mrs. Deluca?”

“We are going to raise tadpoles into frogs”

That was it. I couldn’t wait to get to class now, instead of crying and dreading the day, I would rush off the bus and into the classroom to check on the progress of the baby frogs. I started to enjoy school, but Mrs. Deluca was becoming frustrated with me and I didn’t understand why.

Every day she would say to me “Mary, you can’t carry your books to class. There are too many and you are so little, you need a backpack.”

The anxiety started to kick back in, and I tried sneaking into class so she couldn’t tell that I didn’t have a backpack yet, I hoped she would just leave it alone, I didn’t want to tell her that I told my mom what she said and nothing came of it.

A few weeks passed and still no backpack, I was sure Mrs. Deluca was going to be angry with me and I thought of ways I could get out of it. I’ll say I left it on the bus and that will get her off my back.

I walked into class fully prepared to tell another lie, just to avoid the embarrassment, but this time was different. In front of the chalk board lay a big pink backpack that had my first and last name in permanent marker, “MARY FIDELI” in all caps.

I scanned the classroom for my teacher and I found her standing by her desk, smiling from ear to ear. I wondered how long she waited there to see my reaction. At first I was embarrassed, but excitement quickly took over.

At the end of the day, she helped me put my books into the bag and walked me to the bus.

The suspense was killing me, I couldn't wait to show my mother, she's going to be so happy I thought.

When I got into the house I rushed to my mother who was standing by the bathroom mirror with a cigarette in her hand, while applying mascara.

"Look Mom, Mrs. Deluca got me a bag and it's pink."

She turns to look at it . . . while taking another drag of her cigarette. I patiently wait for my mother's face to show approval, instead my mother becomes enraged.

"Maxi Girl, do you know what this is?"

"Yes, a backpack for me, my teacher got it for me."

"Wrong, this is a way for strangers to know your name."

I knew what she was going to say, I don't know why I didn't think of it myself, my mother always taught me about "uh oh feeling" and how strangers will use trickery to take you away or get you to go with them.

She called for my sister, "Jackie Rose, come take this and do something with it."

"But mom, that's my backpack."

"Don't worry, your sister is going to cover it up."

As my sister grabs a black permanent marker and attempts to create a Nike symbol to cover the four-inch lettering, my mother goes over her signature story.

"Maxi Girl, what would you do if some man, or woman (my mother always made sure I knew that bad people could be of any gender) came up to you and said Mary your mother sent me to get you, she is in the hospital and needs you to come with me."

I knew the answer she was looking for, "I'd ask them what the code was?"

My mother gave me and my siblings a family code, for my sister it was Dolphin, for me it was Belly Button, these codes were meant to be a secret between us and our mother, and would be the only way we could decipher whether it was someone my mother sent to help us or someone who was trying to take us.

"Good now, go to class and tell your teacher that scenario, and maybe she will think twice about putting your full name on a backpack."

I assured my mother I would tell my teacher, mostly because I didn't want her going up to the school and telling her herself.

The days following, I would do whatever I could to hide the lopsided Nike symbol that my sister drew on my backpack, not because it embarrassed me, but I didn't want to hurt Mrs. Deluca's feelings. She had done something nice for me and I didn't want her to think what she did was wrong.

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When my mother was released after her first stint in Riverhead, I was relieved that we could return home, not because I was in a rush to return to school, but that I was going to see my mother again. I was worried about her, two months away felt more like a year.

I wanted to know what happened to her, where she was, what it was like, and most importantly why she had to leave. I never really thought about her being in jail until that night my father dropped us back off at the house.

When we pulled up to the house my mother was waiting by the front door, I was excited and couldn't wait to hop out the van, but my siblings beat me to it. They were already halfway inside as my father turned to grab all of our bags from the back seat. He brought them to the steps, but never came inside. He bent down to kiss me on my cheek and as he looked up to my mother, I could see a strange look on his face almost as if he wanted to say something but at the last minute decided not to.

As he stood up, my mother said, "Thank you, you'll pick the kids up next week?"

He shrugged and said, "Don't I always?" He turned away and walked back to the van. As he pulled out of the driveway, my mother looked down at me with a smile, and said, "Get inside," as she pushed my head toward the door. I could tell she was in a good mood, I was too and I could imagine my siblings were as well.

She sent us to bed early that night, but I couldn't sleep. I wanted to ask her about jail and what she did while she was there. I tried to imagine what it was like, and the only thing I could think of was my mother's friend John Romeo. We called him "Banana Head." He was a short, round Italian man with dark hair and a mustache like Luigi from Mario Brothers. He would stop by the house from time to time, and he would always bring me and my brother Justin something sweet, like laffy taffy or candy cigarettes from Joann's smoke shop. He was a silly guy and tried hard to make us laugh.

I didn't notice that he stopped coming around, until one day my mother asked me to get the mail. I didn't mind, it was one of my favorite tasks. Not only did it make me feel important, but I had the coolest mailbox on the block. It was made out of all wood and shaped exactly like our house with shingles on the roof and a flappy door for the opening. My father made it himself and cut out tiny pieces of wood that formed the shape of a rose for my mother. Whenever I got bored, I would take my Barbies outside and use it as a doll house.

That morning, however, was strictly business. My mom asked me to check the mail. So, I grabbed my plastic yellow playschool chair and dragged it all the way down the deck and into the street, I was too short to actually reach the mailbox so I placed the chair steady, being careful not to slip on the sand underneath. I pushed the door open and peaked in to see a large envelope inside, I grabbed it and yelled for my mother.

Rushing inside I blurted out, “We got mail” and handed it to my mother

She smiled and said, “It’s a letter from Banana Head. Let’s open it.” She tore one end open and handed me the envelope, while taking out the letter. She started reading it.

“He’s in jail and won’t be around for a while, but its okay. Look inside the package; he sent a gift for you.”

I put my hand in and pulled out six different square pieces of cloth. At first I didn’t realize how it was a gift; it looked like yellow-stained ripped-up fabric.

My mother noticed the weird expression on my face. “Turn it over, silly.” On the other side of each square was a drawing of a Disney character with each of my brothers’ and sisters’ names in colorful lettering. I quickly sifted through the pile and found the one made especially for me. It was a picture of Minnie Mouse with Maxi Girl written in purple lettering at the bottom.

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When I woke up that morning, I walked down the hallway towards my mother’s room, her door was cracked open, but I stood outside of it, until she noticed. “Come in I want to show you something”

I pushed the door open more and saw something odd in her hand.

“Can you guess what this is?”

I looked hard, but I couldn’t make out what it was.

“No,” I said “What is it?”

“A friend made it for me”

“A friend from jail?”

“Yes, a friend from jail, she made it for me to use while I was in there and I brought it home to show you, because I thought you would like it.”

“But I don’t know what it is.”

“It’s a toilet bowl cover.”

“Huh?”

She held it up and now I could see that it was some kind of material woven together in the shape of an actual toilet bowl lid.

She took a piece of it apart to show me. “Look, it’s made out of newspaper, isn’t that neat?”

I never saw anything like it before, I guess it was cool, but I still thought it was kind of odd.

“Why would you need a toilet cover, Mom?”

She laughed, “Because in jail the toilets don’t have seats on them, so my friend made me a cover so I didn’t have to sit directly on the cold dirty metal.”

“Are we going to use it for here now?”

This time she laughed really hard, “No way, we have our own lid, I just wanted to show you.”

While my mom continued talking, I thought about the pieces of cloth that Banana Head had sent us.

“Mom, why are people in jail when they have so many talents?”

She paused before answering my question.

“Because they make mistakes, Baby, they make mistakes”

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Going back to school after two months away, I felt as if I was walking into a new class, or that I was a new student. But the treatment I anticipated didn’t happen; there was no big announcement, or introduction. I didn’t have to go up to the front of the class to tell the students my name or where I was from. In fact, there was no big commotion at all.

When I walked into class, I hung my bag up like the rest of the kids and walked over to where my desk used to be, but the room had been moved around and the desks were grouped in fours instead of the usual singular rows.

Mrs. Deluca saw my confusion and came right over.

“Oh Mary, this is your desk right here, we rearranged them so that you all can work in teams for the math lesson today.”

I sat down and reached my hands inside my desk to pull out my black marble composition book, I opened it up and turned to the back. I ran my fingers along the remnants of a ripped page and my heart began racing, my face started to flush and I looked up to see if anyone could notice, but they were all too busy getting ready for the lesson and gathering their supplies.

I tried to stay focused, but my mind kept bringing me back to that page, I shook my head to try and physically throw the memory out, but there was no use, my mind had already taken me back to the first six weeks of the school year when Mrs. Deluca had a teacher's aide named Gary

The students called him Mr. Gary, because he wasn't a real teacher yet; he was just training to become one.

Gary was tall and had dark brown hair. From what I could tell, he was definitely younger than Mrs. Deluca. Sometimes he would read the class a book during story time when we all lined up on the circle rug to listen. To me he looked like a Disney prince, and all the other girls in class had a crush on him too, but only I was foolish enough to write it down.

Yup, in the back of that black marble composition book, I wrote in big letters *I Heart Mr. Gary!*

I regretted it every day, the whole six weeks I had to walk into that classroom and look him in the face.

It was Megan Taylor who outed me. She was always mean to me. She had long curly blond hair and her mother must have bought her a million sweaters with earrings to match. She wore a new one every day to class.

The day I made the mistake of writing down those words, *I Heart Mr. Gary*, Megan was directly behind me and, before I knew it, snatched the notebook right from me.

"Look everyone, Mary loves Mr. Gary. She wrote it right here in the back of her book."

The class started laughing, and all I could do was sit there and look straight. My heart felt as if it was going to fall out of my chest and my hands got clammy,

I was embarrassed and angry. I wanted to scream "No I don't!" I wanted to grab the book from her hands and push her onto the ground, or at the very least throw my head inside the desk, so no one could see me. But all I could do was look down. I couldn't look up; I didn't want to see Mrs. Deluca's face, and I especially didn't want to see Gary's.

Mrs. Deluca walked over and grabbed the book from her hand. "That's enough Megan, go back to your desk."

I finally glanced up when she sat back in her seat, and I saw Mr. Gary's face. I didn't know what to expect. Would he be angry with me, disappointed? Instead, when I looked towards him I saw a face that I knew too well, a look of embarrassment, except this was the worst kind, not when

you're embarrassed for yourself, but that awful feeling when you are embarrassed for someone else.

Mr. Gary felt bad for me and it made me feel like never coming to class again, or never listening to him read during story time. When I found out he was leaving after the six weeks, a weight was lifted off of my shoulders. I would no longer have to face him and relive that awkward moment again.

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I shut the book, and came back to reality. By now all the kids had grabbed some of the wooden value blocks from the plastic bin in the middle of the desk and started matching them to the pictures on the worksheet that Mrs. Deluca handed out during my unwanted daydream of a memory I tried hard to forget.

I caught on quickly, even though I had yet to learn decimals and the tenth's or hundredth's place.

I watched the other kids, and copied what they were doing, hoping that it would just come to me. When I struggled I asked one of the kids, because I didn't want to call any attention to me on my first day back.

While I was trying to concentrate on the lesson and lining the blocks up correctly in the right spaces, a para came to the opening of the classroom and stopped just short of entering.

I recognized her; she was a heavy-set woman with short red hair. She usually walked around from classroom to classroom, taking kids for an hour or so and bringing them back after we finished our readings. Someone told me once that she only took bad kids and made them do extra work. I didn't know if that was true, but I knew I never wanted to get called to go with her.

"Okay, we are now moving on to the hundredth's place, time to take out the small singular cubes."

While I'm trying to count out the cubes to match the worksheet, I notice that my teacher and the para have been in conversation the entire time, with the red-haired woman still standing by the entrance and Mrs. Deluca on the other side of the classroom. I couldn't make out what they were saying and I knew I shouldn't be listening to adult conversations anyway.

I put my eyes back onto my paper to continue my work.

"I know Karen, I know it's ridiculous; I have a student that was out for over 60 days this year."

I felt a sharp pain in my chest and my body instantly got hot. I dropped my pencil and looked up at my teacher.

It can't be me. She couldn't be talking about me, it's normal to be out for 60 days, right? Other students have been absent a lot, she can't be talking about me.

I stared at her as her left arm extended outward and pointed directly at me

“Sixty days” she repeated. “Sixty days.”

At first I felt the same embarrassed feeling as when Megan Taylor grabbed my book and showed the class what I wrote about Mr. Gary.

A strong desire to disappear. I looked around frantically, to see if any of my classmates were paying attention. For the most part everyone seemed to be doing their work, except for the tall kid in the back who was building little houses with the blocks instead of counting them.

It's ok, maybe they didn't hear? I thought at first.

What are you kidding me? Of-course they heard! How could you be so blind! I said to myself.

They know that you have been gone this whole time. Maybe a few kids even asked about you while you were gone. Maybe someone told them why? Maybe they spent a whole day talking about you and your family and jail.

The panic made my body shake uncontrollably, I tried to stop it by grabbing both my legs and pressing them down. I pressed as hard as I could but nothing worked. I just wanted them to stop talking, couldn't they see what it was doing to me.

Once the red-haired woman left, Mrs. Deluca sat back down in her chair.

Finally, I thought I could escape the moment. But the shaking feeling in my legs was quickly replaced by a pounding in my heart and tightening of my stomach. A feeling of betrayal consumed me and tunneled my vision.

I could no longer see the kids sitting next to me or the progress they made on their worksheets, nor did I care. All that mattered was me and Mrs. Deluca. I focused in on her sitting at her desk, while writing next week's assignments.

I hated her, I hated everything about her, her stories, her tadpoles, her little yellow dresses, and her stupid pink backpack with my name on the front! *Doesn't she know a stranger could take me!*

I wanted to throw a million tubs of water on to her, just to see what would happen. maybe nothing, or maybe she'd turn red and her skin would feel like crawling off her body.

Good! I thought, then she'd know how I feel right now.

By this time my blood felt like fire and the pounding of my heart only made it worse. All I did was stare at her. I wanted her to read my mind. I wanted to speak with my eyes.

Why? Why would you say that Mrs. Deluca? Everyone is going to know, they're all going to know!

I break my stare to glance around the classroom. The other kids are still unaware of the intensity building up between me and the teacher.

She might not have been aware herself, but I was, I felt it. I looked back at Mrs. Deluca. My eyes started to speak again, but this time they were screaming.

Everyone's going to know it was me, look! They all know it was me! They know that I'm not normal, they know that my mom was in jail.

~

I decided not to tell my mother about what happened in class with Mrs. Deluca pointing out my absences in front of everyone. I wanted to just let it go; maybe if I put it out of my mind no one would remember.

But the next day in class, I couldn't help thinking about the other kids. I wasn't so much concerned about them knowing that I was the absent one anymore. Instead I was curious about them and what their stories were like: What did their mothers do and if they went to jail sometimes too.

I looked back towards Megan Taylor with her new outfits and matching earrings.

There's no way her mother could afford all of that, I thought to myself. How did she have a new pair every day? She must have stolen them, yea that makes sense, her mother probably stole them, and if she had gotten caught then she'd be in jail too. Just like my mom, there's no difference. Except of course that time that my mother got caught.

~

My mother usually took me up to the local shopping plaza during the week when I played hooky from school. Sometimes we would walk, but on this day, we took a cab. As we pulled up to shopping center I could see the big red Caldor sign out of the window. I knew the cab driver was going to stop there, because that was my mother's favorite store. My mom reached into her pocket book and pulled out a couple of crumbled up singles.

"Here this is for now. Wait out front. I won't be long"

"Your gonna have to pay for round trip," the cab man replied. "The longer you take, the more it will cost you."

"That's fine" my mom said. "We'll be quick."

She grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the cab barely shutting the door behind her. First, we went into “Three Roads,” the cosmetic store right next to Caldor.

“But Mom, I thought we were going into the big store.”

“We will honey, but I have to grab something here first, then we will shoot right over.”

She wasn’t lying; we were out of there so fast I don’t think my mom even bought anything. They must have not have had what she wanted, I thought. My mom can be picky. We hopped next door, and as soon as we got in my mother headed straight for the jewelry section, not the expensive jewelry that the fancy ladies sell you behind the counter, the ones that hang on the hooks and on the metal racks.

My mother took her time, picking up necklaces and holding them across her chest. She had so many she could barely hold them all. I guess she doesn’t know which ones she wants to buy.

My mother was so preoccupied with the mirror, and I wanted to try stuff on too. I walked down the opposite aisle. The walls were filled with earrings, bracelets and necklaces so tall that I couldn’t see to the top. I ran my hands along the racks of earrings, as I skipped down the aisle. I dropped a pair on the floor. A big gold pair of hoop earrings. I picked them up and held them next to my ear while looking in the mirror.

Nope these are for big girls, like my sisters. I put them back on the shelf. *Besides, my ears aren’t pierced anyway.*

I looked down the aisle more, and I noticed a kids’ section with a sign that said “clip-ons.” I walked over and saw that they were cartoon characters.

There’s Bugs Bunny, Tweety Bird. They even had some Disney characters like Flounder from The Little Mermaid and Cinderella’s glass slippers. I spun the stand around that the earrings hung from, and I started shuffling through the characters.

“Casper!” I yelled loud, “Mom come look!” I yelled so loud that I startled my mom. She came running towards me with her hands full.

“What honey, what’s the matter? You can’t yell like that unless something is wrong.”

“But look Ma, it’s Casper! Dad bought me the movie. It’s my favorite. It’s a boy who is a ghost and is stuck in the ghost world. He can’t cross over with his mom because he has unfinished business.”

“What?” she said. “Here, put this back.” Then she grabbed them from my hand.

“But Ma, I want them. Can I have them?”

“No honey, we don’t have the money.”

“But Mom,” I said knowing I should have stopped when she said no the first time, I knew we didn’t have the money to spend on unnecessary things

“But its Casper the friendly ghost”

“Maybe next time, Sweetie”

“Okay,” I said, but I wasn’t okay. *I never wanted something so much in my life; why does she have to be so mean. Does she even really love me?* I asked myself

I sat on the floor as my mom continued shopping, I had no desire to look around anymore. *If we don’t have the money for them, then why is she buying all this stuff for herself?*

My mother walked down towards the next aisle until she was out of sight. I went to get up to find her but before I could she turned the corner in a hurry and grabbed my hand leading me towards the front of the store.

“Time to go, Maxi Girl, the cab’s waiting.”

As we got closer to the front, my mother squatted down and picked me up. She shifted me over to the left side of her body and used her right hand to push the door open.

“Stop!” we heard, before we made it out of the door.

I looked to the left and noticed two large women with red vest charging towards me and my mother.

“Mom, what’s happening?”

She didn’t answer. Instead she raised her right fist and hit one of the women coming towards us, the other one pulled on my mother’s arm, the one that was holding me. I held onto my mother’s neck and closed my eyes tight.

My mother yelled, “Get the fuck off of my daughter”

“Ma-am, you have to come back with us, you have stolen merchandise!”

“Let me put my daughter down, you are frightening her, and then we can go in the back.”

My mother put me down and grabbed my hand, “Come on Maxi Girl,” as we followed behind the one woman, the other walked right behind us. so close you could feel her breath. She walked us directly into the back of the store where a man stood next to a white door half way pushed open.

“Step right in here,” he said, as he pointed towards the door.

Once we got inside, the man told my mom to sit down, she grabbed me and placed me on her lap, he walked around the black desk and sat behind 5 different TV screens

“Ma-am, we need your license and the bag you are carrying.”

Why do they want her bag? I looked at the man and back towards my mom. I wanted to ask her if we were in trouble and if we were going to be okay. The two women who jumped on us were standing right outside the door. *Are we trapped? Do we have to stay here?*

I finally mustered up the courage to speak.

“Ma, can we go home?”

“Everything is okay, Baby.”

From the look on my mom’s face, it didn’t seem like anything was wrong at all. In fact, my mother even laughed a few times. The man asked for her bag again, my mom picked it up and turned it upside down.

“Here you go sir, have fun.”

I watched the items fall from her bag like a waterfall. The whole desk was covered with the contents of my mother’s purse; you could no longer see the paperwork underneath.

Why does he want my mom’s stuff?

He began picking up each item one by one,

As he shifted through I saw something familiar.

“What is that?”

I wanted to reach out and turn it over. I knew I’ve seen it before.

“Where is this from?” the man asked, holding up an eyeliner stick.

“That’s from next-door,” my mother answered, “Actually quite a few products are from Three Roads. You guys aren’t the only ones I stole from.”

“Okay, Ma-am, I think you better call someone to come pick up your daughter.”

When he handed my mom the phone, I remembered that the cab was waiting outside.

“Mom, the cab, shouldn’t we go back to the cab now?”

She hung up the phone, “No honey, the cab is gone. Do you understand why we are here?”

I shook my head no.

“Because I stole, Honey. I stole all this stuff from here.”

The man continued marking down each item, its cost and where it came from. When he got to the familiar piece, I sat up straight to watch him turn it over. He held it in his hand for what seemed like forever, I wanted to yell at him, *turn it over already!* When he finished writing down the item numbers on the back he flicked it over tapping his nails across the two little white tails and bobbly round heads.

It was Casper the Friendly Ghost

I looked up at my mom. How could I be so angry at her? We didn't even have the money.

I heard a loud knock on the door.

“Come in,” the man said.

The women from earlier peeked her head in. “The girl's father is here for her.”

“Okay, good” the man replied.

My mom kissed me.

“I love you, Maxi Girl”

I said nothing, the lady pushed the door open more. I looked at my mom.

“It's ok, you can go.”

As soon as I stepped out of the door, my dad was waiting for me. He picked me up, I put my head on his shoulder and he started walking towards the exit.

“She got them for me, Dad”

“What's that, Honey?”

“She did it for me.”

~

Seven years, they said. Seven years is all everyone kept saying.

Really seven years, could they keep my mom away from us for seven years?

Everyone had gathered outside my house, on the front lawn and the side deck. It was a beautiful summer day and the tall tree in the front lawn had already shed its flowers and started to grow little tiny cherries.

“Didn’t matter,” I said. “We’ll never get to them once they ripen, plus the squirrels usually take them at the first sight of red.” My mother was the only one who could actually get to them before the squirrels did. My mother used to joke that she and those damn squirrels were at war. I believed her too, because every time she stepped outside the glass door she’d get hit with a handful of acorns.

“Hey Mom, they must know that you’re gonna beat them to the cherries this year.”

“That’s right, I always do!”

One year she even used a ladder to get to the top of the tree.

I heard rustling in the backyard, and when I walked towards the back to check it out, my mother popped her head out of the shed.

“Hey! Maxi Girl come grab this bucket.”

“Ma, what are you doing?”

“Those sneaky bastards, they thought they were gonna beat me this year, but I got them! The cherries just turned red and we have to pick them soon. Now grab that bucket!”

I picked up the bucket and waited for my mom to drag the ladder out of the shed. She was barefoot and had on a white cotton flowy dress. Her hair was different, a short blond pixie cut. That didn’t surprise me; my mother liked to change her hairstyle at least once a week.

As she carried the ladder past the side glass door, she yelled for my brothers. “Justin lee, Johnny Won . . . let’s go, we don’t have time to waste.”

My brothers met us in the front yard. My mom had already set the ladder against the tree. All three of us were excited, but I got the bucket.

“Hey, I’m holding the bucket. You’re too little,” Justin said to me as he yanked it from my hand.

“But Mommy told me to get the bucket!” I grabbed for it back, but my mom interrupted.

“No one is getting the damn bucket. You guys will use your hands to catch the ones that drop, now be careful. The squirrels will beat you to it, so be quick! Now Justin, hand the bucket to me once I get onto this branch. Okay?”

The tree was so big; my mother had to jump from the highest step to toss herself over the branch. She jumped so fast, the ladder almost fell backwards. Justin handed her the bucket, but begged my mom to climb the tree.

“No Justin, I need you on the ground with your siblings if we are going to fill this bucket up and be alert. They are watching.”

She straddled the branch, and with the bucket in her left arm began pulling the cherries off the leaves.

“Hey,” Justin said, “this is no fun! You get to climb the tree and get the cherries, we just watch.”

My mother looked back down at us and yelled, “Look! Over there in that tree-- a squirrel!” she pointed towards the backyard, but I couldn’t see anything.

“Are you guys ready? Remember what I told you. They are sneaky and they are probably going to bring their whole family to take these cherries from us. Are you ready?”

The excitement hit my body like a shot of adrenalin.

“Look!” my mom yelled again, “Some birds are coming too! This is going to be the toughest fight yet, are you sure you guys are ready.”

“We’re ready, Mom? We’re ready!” all three of us yelled.

She dropped the bucket to the floor and hopped to her feet, standing on the branch with one hand gripping the base of the tree and the other frantically ripping at the leaves and cherries. Looking up, I could no longer see my mother. I felt leaves and sticks and cherries hitting my face and then the floor. Justin grabbed the bucket and held it out, running around collecting whatever fell. Me and Johnny used our shirts, catching what we could and sweeping up the ones that fell onto the ground. My mom started laughing and smiling, hopping around the tree effortlessly. For a moment she reminded me of a fairy, so beautiful and filled with magic.

When I looked around, my brothers were still picking up the remnants, Justin with the bucket and Johnny with his shirt. I looked down, but I only had two handfuls.

“Mom, I didn’t get enough!”

“Sure, you did Baby, and you did a great job, and most of all you kept them away. Did you see any come near us?”

“Nope,” I said with pride, “but they tried.”

My mother climbed back down. “We did it guys!” She grabbed the bucket and sifted through, sorting them into three different piles.

“These are for us,” she said, handing the bucket to Johnny, “and these are no good.”

“Whose pile is that, Mom?”

“Those are for the birds and squirrels.”

“What!” Justin yelled angrily, “but those little bastards take them from us every year!”

“Watch your mouth!” My mother said, Justin looked to the ground and folded his arms across his chest.

“We always give to those in need. Don’t we have enough here to share?”

“But Mom, they are our enemies”

“They are not our enemies, they are our competition for one moment once a year, and even our competition has to eat too. Now go leave these on the stump in the backyard.”

~

Seven years, I thought, but that’s like forever. I sat down on the cement bench, kicking at the pebbles beneath me. Most of my siblings were scattered around the house, and both of my mother’s sisters were sitting in the front yard. I looked down the deck towards the front yard and noticed Justin sitting in the swing my father built between the two oak trees. But Justin wasn’t swinging, he looked sad. I wondered why we were all waiting outside.

I heard my sister arguing with someone on the phone.

“I am 18! I will take them all if I have to!” I didn’t know who she was talking to, but she sounded angry.

Take them all, was she talking about us? Why does anyone have to take us?

My aunt walked over to Mel. “Honey, there are seven of you. It’s too much for anyone, especially a teenager.”

My sister dropped the phone. “I don’t care. I won’t let them split us up. Where the fuck is Grandma? How come she’s not here?”

My aunt looked down. “She’s not coming. She told them no.”

I wanted to ask who grandma said no to, but I pretended not to hear. I still didn’t understand why we were waiting outside.

My aunt walked over to me and bent down. “You know that Mommy is going to be away for a while, right?”

I shook my head yes.

“Do you know why?”

I replied with a simple “No.”

My aunt grabbed my shoulder and paused for minute before standing up and walking away. I didn't want to tell my aunt the truth, that I knew why the cops came into the house. I've known ever since that day I fought with the kid across the street.

Brandon, he was a tall lanky kid who always wore baseball caps and rode bikes with my brother Justin. His sister was my closest friend and sometime we would all play jump rope or hopscotch in the street together. One time he and a few other kids were in the road making jokes about each other's mothers,

“Hey, Mary,” one of the kids called to me, “Come over here.”

“No thanks, I don't know any jokes.”

“Come on. It's easy,” Brandon said. “Watch, I'll go first.”

He turned to one of the kids. “Your house is so small, you walk in the front door and out the back... See not so bad, your turn.”

“I really don't have a joke,” I said nervously.

“Fine, I'll go again... Mary your mom is a crack head!”

“Hey!” I said pissed off. “That's not even a joke!”

“Exactly,” Brandon said smiling. “That's the truth.”

I was so upset I blurted out the first thing that came to my mind.

“At least my mom is getting help, something your mom needs”

I thought that was so clever, I snapped my fingers and turned back towards my yard. But when I started for my front door I felt a knot in my stomach and instant feeling of nausea. When I got inside, I stood in my living room deciding whether or not I was going to tell my mom, but as soon as she walked out of her room, I screamed, “Mom! Brandon says that you are a crackhead!”

I don't know why I yelled it so loud and as soon as my mouth shut I regretted that I even said it. I was scared. I thought my mother was going to hate me! But she just stopped, stared at me and started walking towards me.

This is it, I thought, I really did it. Now she's going to slap my face.

She dropped down to my level and put her hands on either side of my shoulders. She smirked.

“You tell that boy that your Momma doesn't smoke crack. She's a Heroin addict.”