

Unloader: How Wal-Mart Saved My Life

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Abstract

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*Unloader: How Wal-Mart Saved My Life* is a self-reflective journey through loss, trauma, identity, and the significance of self-worth. This revealing memoir challenges the definitions of love and family as it expounds the inner workings of daily life as a truck unloader for the retail giant. Told with raw and unflinching honesty, this nonfiction piece takes the reader on an emotional ride which traverses the complicated landscapes of domestic violence and gender stereotypes in the workplace. This narrative shows both the resiliency of the human spirit as well as the determination of preserving one's own identity, all while shown through a gentle veil of compassion and forgiveness. Ultimately, *Unloader* is a tender story of support and most importantly, survival.

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Artist's/Poetics Statement

## Chapter 1

~Store #2594 and a Man Named Blaine~

It was the end of October 1999 when I found out about my dad. I was doing some computer training when two women came into the personnel office and tapped me on the shoulder. They said that my mother was up front and needed to speak to me. I remember feeling that this was out of character for my mom, one of the hardest working women I had ever known. She had trudged through the workforce since she was 14 and this type of resolute work ethic made it out of the ordinary for her to have come to my workplace. The two women, whom I later found out were human resource heads, led me to the front vestibule; since the store was not yet open, no one besides employees were allowed past the check-in desk. The second I saw my mother's face, I knew there was something wrong. It was like stone.

“Mom? What's wrong?”

She wrapped her cold hands around one of mine and looked at Human Resources. “I'm going to take her outside.”

“What is it? Is it Shelby?” Shelby was my girlfriend and to this day I still feel guilty that she was the first person that popped into my head.

The two of us passed through the glass vestibule, taped with butcher paper so that those from the outside could not see in. I saw the doors of my mom's 1997 Oldsmobile slowly open. My two sisters emerged from the car, their faces red, puffy, and scrunched.

I looked at my mom. “What's going on?”

My mom wrapped her aging, shaking hands around my fist. “Honey, your daddy died.”

My insides crumbled. My sisters were immediately by my side and the three of us wrapped our arms around each other, all of us sobbing uncontrollably. It didn't seem real. I felt

the grief, anger, guilt, but also a stifling regret that I couldn't wrap my head around. My dad would never see that I had accomplished anything; I wouldn't ever be able to see the joy in his eyes that would come from being proud of me. I had never made my father proud.

My first day at Wal-Mart was on September 20, 1999. An unloader is an associate who physically unloads the boxes from truck trailers, palletizes the merchandise according to department and later takes the freight to the floor to be stocked. Physically the job is demanding but it's pretty easy on the cognitive faculties. For the right person, at the right time in their lives, this job can be transformative.

Wal-Mart likes to use the word 'associate' instead of employee; they think it conveys a more cohesive/equal environment. I started as what was then called an ICS associate. An Inventory Control Specialist was part of both the receiving area as well as the floor crew. Although I didn't much care what the actual job entailed, (I was more focused on the fact that it paid me \$1.25 more than minimum wage and gave me two 15 minute breaks and an hour lunch) I appreciated the fact that I wasn't required to talk a lot. We worked from eleven in the morning until eight at night. The first part of our shift was to take 'pick-lists' generated by department managers to get items the computer said were in the backroom and stock them on the shelves, and also to work any unworked freight from the night before. Before going to lunch at three, we would clear up the receiving area and set up for the unloaders (who would come in from four in the afternoon and work until one in the morning). The unloaders would put consumable departments (food, chemicals, paper goods, etc.) onto carts and the ICS crew would take it to the floor immediately and stock these items. It was a simple enough system and when we had two full crews, it actually worked very well.

At twenty-seven, my resume was a hodge-podge of crappy jobs, none of which I had held for more than three months. I had moved in with my girlfriend and after about a year of her paying all the bills, she had threatened to leave me if I didn't get a job. Wal-Mart had advertised that they were opening a new store near me and were holding open interviews, so I went and before the week was out, I had a job. I hadn't anticipated the freedom I would feel holding down a job. What I didn't know back then was that I have General Anxiety Disorder and severe social anxiety; these affected every single thing in my life, but the Wal-Mart job was different. In other jobs, I would get so nervous that by the second or third day I would either be vomiting in the bathroom or crouching in a dark corner crying uncontrollably. I used to think this was normal. I thought everyone experienced panic attacks and I was just someone who couldn't handle it. My Wal-Mart job was unique; I was allowed to warm up to the position by taking a long list of CBLs (computer based learning), and got extensive training and support both in the backroom and on the floor. It also helped that we weren't open to the public yet so I wasn't forced to deal with customers right off the bat. After a couple of months... I realized that I was good at something. This was remarkable, and at that point in my life, it meant absolutely everything.

One evening before the store opening, as I was walking towards the back to clock out, I heard my name called.

“Donna.”

I twirled around. It was the store manager, Blaine. I hadn't realized that he even knew my name. “Yes?” I answered.

“Come here for a minute,” he said with a wry smile and wave of his hand. He was a portly man, in a jolly Santa-esque way, in his late thirties/early forties, with thinning blonde hair and quiet confidence.

I shuffled toward him and as I approached, he gently put his hand on my shoulder and turned me so that we were standing side-by-side. In one of the main aisles, Blaine and I stood there looking at the huge furniture display, brand new pieces of merchandise setting on top of the shiny, non-scuffed metal.

Blaine took his stout pointer finger and gestured back and forth. “Take this all in...” he began.

My eyes followed his finger as I felt the corners of my eyes raise; I could feel myself smiling. I helped build what this man’s proud eyes were gazing on. I was part of it all. I had never felt that before.

“...because it will never look like this again,” he said while letting out a small chuckle.

I looked at him and smiled.

His eyes sparkled and I couldn’t help but be reminded of my dad.

Blaine would become the father figure I wanted to make proud, and my job became the thing that I was determined not to fail at.

After coming back from my father’s funeral, when fellow teammate Daniel and I were taking our trash back to the receiving area, Blaine stopped us and asked if we would like to make a dollar more an hour. We looked at each other for guidance, dumbfounded.

“Doing what?” I asked.

“Unloading crew,” he replied bluntly. He looked extremely worried, panicked even.

Daniel and I looked at each other again.

“\$1.50 more,” Blaine spouted.

My eyes widened.

“I’ll do it,” said Daniel immediately.

I do not make hasty decisions. I've actually been known to paralyze myself when faced with multiple options. I looked at Daniel for another quick second. "I'll do it too." I would like to say my decision was based on my wanting to challenge myself or my newfound confidence, but it had more to do with a change in my home situation.

Just a few short months after beginning my job at Wal-Mart, the situation between Shelby and I had transposed; she was now unemployed and I was now the sole breadwinner. We needed the money, badly.

"Good," replied Blaine. "I want both of you to clock out and go home now. You start tomorrow at four pm."

I was scared. But the money was tied to everything: it meant keeping my apartment, keeping my girlfriend, keeping my newfound autonomy, and my determination to not fail at yet another job. The next day as Daniel and I clocked in, Blaine was there to meet us.

"Come with me," he said. His stride was more of a waddle as he attempted to quicken his pace.

As I watched the bottom of Blaine's pants drag on the floor, I heard my mother's voice in my head describing what my father looked like when he ran. "He looked like a penguin," she used to joke. I smiled. As we entered the backroom, I felt my stomach tighten.

"This is Travis," said Blaine. "He's the support manager back here. He's going to show you what to do. Thank you both for making the switch." And with that, our store manager disappeared back into the consumer-side of the retail world that Daniel and I had just left behind.

Daniel and I looked at each other and then settled our eyes on our new boss. Travis was a cowboy. He wore his Dallas Cowboys cap backwards and sported a large belt buckle and a pair of well-worn wrangler jeans. Although only about five-foot-eight, his broad chest and tree-trunk

thighs projected a larger stature. He walked with a bow in his legs and had an abrupt, take-charge attitude. He wasted no time.

“This is the backroom,” he barked. “And this is the crew.”

Daniel and I took a look around and were quickly able to deduce why Blaine was so eager to have us change teams. Though the wooden pallets we had seen before littered both sides of the shiny metal conveyor line, and the trailer was backed up to the bay door—opened and ready to go—the one thing that was blatantly absent were the hands needed to move the freight.

“Where is everyone?” asked Daniel.

“Well,” Travis began. “I have one guy off but other than that, this is it,” he said. He pointed around the room. “That’s Naranjan.”

Naranjan was a slim, Indian man who looked to be in his mid-forties. He had a long, salt-and-pepper beard, and piled on top of his head was an immaculately kept turban. There was always a slight scent of flowers every time he walked past and he was always grinning. I later found out that his name means ‘supreme being of light’.

Travis’s finger kept moving around the right-hand side of the line. “That’s Rhonda.” He kept going. “That’s Danielle.”

One was blonde and extremely pale and the other was Hispanic with long, black hair. They both wore caked-on make-up, giggled profusely, and checked their nails more than they moved any freight. I have to admit, I never figured out which name went to which girl. They didn’t work there for very long.

“Hey!?”

Travis’s voice startled me and I jumped a bit.

An extremely short, surly woman with glasses emerged from the trailer.

“And that’s Rachel,” said Travis. “We’ve got one more guy, Jake, who’s off today and will be back tomorrow.”

Daniel and I both listened attentively and nodded our heads.

In the following days Daniel and I would come to find out that though the store had fully staffed a fifteen-person unloading crew, nine had quit a week after the store had opened and the original support manager had transferred to the overnight-stocking crew. The unloading crew had not just turned short-handed, it was downright anemic. Back then, there wasn’t a Wal-Mart in every town; this was the first store to open within a forty-mile radius so the freight flow was considerable. It was also a month and a half before Christmas so we were averaging about three trucks a night carrying roughly sixteen hundred packages each. Even with the addition of me and Daniel, seven crew people were just not going to cut it.

Travis continued with his gruff teaching exercise, grabbed a box that was sitting on the line and flipped it over. The shine from the brand new rollers flickered the light back and forth. He slammed a thick, dirt-under-the-nails finger on top of it. “This is a shipping label. It tells you everything you need to know about what freight is yours and where you’re supposed to put it.”

Daniel was looking around; I assumed he was taking in the enormity of both the situation as well as the receiving area.

“Hey!” Travis yelled. “Hey! You paying attention?”

Daniel, although annoyed, nodded his head.

“Good,” the support manager said as he moved his pudgy finger around. “Here is the department number. This is the first thing you need to look for.” He then looked over to Rhonda or Danielle. “Throw me a piece of chalk from that box!”

One of them retrieved the item and tossed it back to him.

Travis then walked up and down each side of the line, writing different numbers on the concrete floor in front of the empty pallets. After he was finished, he came back to where we were standing and tossed the chalk onto a long counter next to the office door. His attention returned to the box sitting on the line. “You see this yellow box right here?”

We both nodded.

“Most of the time this box is empty, like it is here,” he said. “Now if you see a box that has stars... wait, no not stars... what the hell are those things?” With his brow furrowed and eyes scrunched, he looked up to the ceiling in frustration. He then banged his fist on the box and yelled to the short woman, “Hey, not stars. What the fuck do they call those things in the box?!”

My heart began to race. My eyes blinked rapidly and I swallowed hard. “Asterisk,” I said meekly.

Travis swung his head around. “What?”

I began to sweat. “I-I *think* they call them asterisks.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said. “Anyway, if they’re right here in this yellow area, that means they’re part of a feature and need to go over there on the feature pallets.”

I breathed a sigh of relief that I wasn’t wrong to speak.

“Now come over here,” he said and the three of us walked to the empty spots on the line. “I’m going to work the corner here, I’m going to push the freight down the line and take these departments here that I’ll be working. Then I’m going to push the rest to you guys.” He looked down at the nice and clean blue smocks that Daniel and I were wearing. “You don’t have to wear those things back here and take your name badges off or you’re going to lose them.”

The two of us did what we were told and took off our vests and shoved our badges into our pockets.

“Okay, now you,” he said, pointing to me and then down at the floor. “You’re going to work these three departments here. And you,” he then pointed to Daniel. “You work the rest of the pallets to the end. Try to stack from the back of the pallet to the front, keep it level, look for twos of the same box, try to stack them together, and put any box with an arrow on it going arrow up...got it?”

We both nodded but I was scared to death. I knew I wasn’t going to remember everything. The words *please don’t screw up, please don’t screw up, please don’t screw up* kept running like a ticker-tape in my head. Without the help of our name badges, Daniel and I were going to be known as ‘Hey You’ for a while. I needed to be hyper-vigilant at figuring out which ‘You’ my new boss was addressing. I was able to keep the anxiety just below the surface and although my mind was whirling with information, a few interesting details stood out to me. I noticed that while I had been given three pallets to work, Travis had given Daniel five to keep track of and would be taking on eight of them himself. I felt small.

“All right, here we go!” Travis yelled.

Thus began my first day of being an unloader.

## Chapter 2

~Travis~

When I woke up the next morning, every single part of my body hurt. I swear I remember even the tips of my fingers throbbing. I'd gotten home at one-thirty in the morning and slept until two-thirty pm the next day, but I woke up exhausted. I was twenty-seven but my work experience—which only consisted of several short-lived jobs—was minimal. I didn't have much familiarity with the workforce, let alone such a physically laborious one. Also, at five foot six inches, I was about sixty-five pounds overweight and hadn't done any type of physical activity since high school. I sat on the edge of the bed, trying my hardest to get my eyes to stay open. I looked behind me to see that Shelby was already up even though she slept in most days. Sleeping in till two-thirty pm was different than just sleeping in; I began to recognize that working a swing-shift would be an adjustment. Stretching, I took a deep breath and exhaled loudly. My arms hurt so bad. The thought of a hot shower urged the rest of my tired body forward. I tried to stand up. My body dropped immediately onto the hardwood. "Ow! Shit!!"

Shelby heard me and came into the bedroom from the living room. "Are you okay?" she said.

I looked up at her, embarrassed. "Yeah, I guess I just didn't anticipate my feet hurting this bad." I rolled onto my knees and with one foot, attempted to rise again. A searing pain tore through my foot. My mouth made an *ith* sound as I sucked in the air around me.

"Do you need help?" she said as she went to grab my arm to help me up.

"No, no, let me do this."

"It's just because you've never been on your feet like this before, they'll get used to it," she said.

I nodded and very stubbornly crawled to the bathroom and ran the water in the bath tub. The white ceramic felt good on the back of my legs, cold and soothing, as I sat on the side of the tub and soaked my feet in the warm water. I sat there wondering what I had gotten myself into. I was almost thirty and was just now experiencing what hard work was. I had been raised by two of the hardest-working people I have ever known. At that moment, my ego felt tiny.

The next few weeks were physically grueling and filled with bouts of recurrent self-doubt. But within all that were tiny spurts of pride that I had made it through yet another day. I had come to expect the roller-coaster of my self-esteem but I was able to find a little comfort in the regularity of my ups and downs. What I hadn't anticipated was the connection and camaraderie that was beginning to develop within our backroom crew. Travis was an absolute ball-buster. He had a huge temper and no patience for those who made mistakes. One particular incident seemed to highlight these traits, instantly searing it into my memory. He had been called in on one of his few days off. Our typical "uniform" consisted of blue jeans and any t-shirt we wanted (as long as it didn't have any logos on it) and Travis always ALWAYS came in wearing his wrangler jeans; so when he came stomping into the receiving area dressed in grey sweat pants with his trademark cowboy hat, all felt a strange shift in the universe. It was a two-truck night and we were behind. Though we may have not been quite as diligent and focused as we might have been with our support manager there breathing down our necks, our crew was perpetually short-handed and the dedicated among us knew we were doing our best. The way it used to work was that every area was designated a pallet (or two depending on the department. Housewares was given one for larger, Rubbermaid items and one for small appliances) and when that pallet was full, one person would pull the pallet out and place it in a line along the steel and replace it with an empty one. This system is really predicated on the design that there are enough people to

have one person cover another's section so that the flow of the freight doesn't stop. However, we were working with four people that day. When Travis had come in, every area was crowded with full pallets; none of us had the time nor the help to stop and pull the full ones. Travis had come in yelling and screaming. He bellowed about how we were so incompetent that he had to be called in and that he couldn't trust us to get the job done without him there. He flailed his arms about, gesturing to all of our full pallets, demanding that we all grab jacks and move them. Without hesitating, we all did as we were told and since all of the space along the steel was taken, we back-loaded our pallets in a single line down the aisle that led to the back. Travis calmed down and we finished the truck and went to lunch. Thinking that was the end of the tirade, I calmed down a bit too. I didn't just hate it when I got something wrong, it made me physically ill. My stomach would cramp up and I would feel like either crying or vomiting so the thought that the worst of the day was over felt like a comfort. When we had come back from lunch however, I realized that my relief was premature. We knew that we were to immediately begin pulling the freight to the floor to be staged when we got back and as we made our way back to the backroom, or more to the point, the beginning of our line of pallets, Daniel, Jake, Rachel and I looked to grab jacks to start pulling.

“You have got to be kidding me?” Travis's voice came from behind us in a very low, gravely serious tone.

The four of us looked at each other, uncertain of what the problem was.

Our support manager barreled past us, squeezing himself through the gap we had left between the pallets and the steel to get to the back.

None of us wanted to follow him.

“Get back here! All of you!!”

Single-file, we all made our way back to the bowels of receiving to see Travis, face flushed red with anger, leaning on a pallet jack.

“Oh look! What is this?!” said Travis.

Daniel and I looked at each other, neither of us sure of whether or not it was wise to answer.

“It’s a jack,” said Jake in a monotone, slightly irritated voice. Jake was never intimidated by anyone.

This seemed to piss Travis off even more. “Yes, yes it is!” He began swinging his finger around. “Look! One, two, three, four, five...can anyone tell me what the problem is here?!”

No one said anything.

I felt inadequate because I wasn’t seeing it.

Travis grabbed the handle of one of the jacks, pulled it back and slammed it up again. “How are we supposed to pull the freight out when all the jacks are back here!?”

I felt small. Why didn’t I think of that?

Travis yanked the keys out of his pocket and went to the receiving door. “Everyone grab a jack and pull them around! Jake, piggyback one for me, I’ll meet you guys down there.”

It was raining pretty hard but I don’t remember anyone complaining. We had to correct our mistake. I grabbed a metal handle and ran out the door and into the rain, short-sleeves and all. When we came in the front door of the store, all sopping with our heads hung low, I couldn’t help but notice all of the eyes staring at the sight in front of them. On my way around the building, I actually thought that I would feel embarrassed upon entering; I thought that everyone would be able to see that I had made a mistake and my subsequent punishment for screwing up. To my surprise it didn’t feel like that at all. The looks that came my way seemed to be of curious

admiration; it looked as if people were wondering who on earth would be crazy enough to traipse through the rain in short sleeves, or that it must be something important for this person to act so crazy. *Important*, I thought to myself. Up until this point in my life, I had never felt as though my existence in this world was relevant. For a brief moment as I walked in out of that rain, I saw in the eyes of others a small reflection of acknowledgment. I felt important.

The back rooms and hallways at Wal-Mart always had pictures of Sam Walton along with quotes meant for inspiration. One of them was, “To push responsibility down in your organization, and to force good ideas to bubble up within it, you must listen to what your associates are trying to tell you – Sam Walton.” This was the type of leadership that Travis always tried to employ. He may have been a hard ass, but he always seemed to bring out the best in someone’s productivity; and once he did, reinforced it with praise. I had kept my head down and worked hard to learn the unloading process. I had yet to “throw” a truck and was perfectly content with allowing that fact to go unnoticed. One day however, my number came up.

“Donna!” shouted Travis.

“Yeah?”

“You’re up!”

I felt a shudder go through my body as I tried to feign ignorance. “Up for what?”

“The truck,” he said. “You’re going to throw the truck today!”

My sweaty palms gripped the wooden pallet I held in my hands. “I am?” I squeaked out.

“Yep!”

“I don’t know if I’m-“

“Everybody’s gotta start sometime, today’s your lucky day!” he said, summoning me over with a wave of his clipboard.

I swallowed hard as my heart began to beat wildly. I slowly slid the empty pallet into place, then wiped my hands on my jeans as I made my way over to the open mouth of the trailer.

Travis laid his clipboard down on the floor and pulled the metal rollers up to the waiting wall of freight. He grabbed one of the boxes. “Try to keep the boxes label up and in the center of the rollers, that way they have a better chance at not falling off the line.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Move as fast as you can. If you need a buddy-lift, call for one, and if you see a pallet, move the rollers to the side of it and shout “PALLET”! Got it?”

“I think so.”

“Okay, good, go!” He started to walk away.

I wiped my wet hands on my pants and looked up at the boxes, stacked from the floor of the trailer to a good three feet above my head.

“Oh!” barked Travis.

I jumped.

“Don’t break anything.”

I nodded my head and took a deep breath. I felt like throwing up but turned toward the wall of cardboard and dug in.

The first fifteen minutes I was in there seemed like an hour. I was dripping with sweat and my arms felt like they were on fire. I was just beginning a new wall when I pulled down a box of laundry detergent and saw the familiar crease in the metal on the side of the truck. I had made it through an entire panel, but knew that I had five more to go. I reached my arms up over my head and let my forehead fall against my bicep. I tried to catch my breath.

“How’s it going in there?!” bellowed Travis.

I quickly wiped my forehead and gripped a box tightly with my fingers. “Good!” I kept throwing the freight onto the line and after a few minutes began to see a small piece of light reflecting out from between two boxes. It was plastic shrink wrap. *Crap* I thought. I peeled the rest of the boxes away from the pallet of Sam’s Cola and yanked the rollers to the right-hand side of the truck. “Pallet!”

Travis grabbed the pallet jack he had waiting just beside him and came barreling in. He pushed the jack into the pallet and began to jack it up.

I turned and was watching him.

“Don’t stop!” he said. “Keep going!”

I returned my attention to the freight.

“And if I pull this out and there’s another one behind it, you better have it cleared off by the time I get back.”

I looked over my shoulder and gave a weak nod. As soon as I knew he was out of the truck I immediately picked up the pace. I frantically grabbed and swung. I panted hard and my chest burned so bad I thought it was going to explode, but I kept going. Then there it was: another pallet, this time, bottled water. I had finished putting the loose boxes at my feet up onto the rollers and looked up. The freight was not only stacked to the ceiling of the truck but I could see it was it wasn’t teetering at all. I tried to jump up to dislodge the top box, but it wouldn’t move. After a couple more tries I began to get nervous. I looked to see if Travis was back yet, which he wasn’t. This was the last wall of boxes I needed to remove to uncover the pallet and knew I had to figure out a way to bring it down. I found some space on the side of one of the boxes in the middle of the stack. I shoved my fingers in and looked at the top of the stack, then gripped, and yanked. I put my head down and winced, thinking the whole stack would fall, but it

stayed perfectly in place. I kept tugging out box after box until I began to hear a faint “shhh” sound. The wall was finally coming down and was sliding against the side of the truck. The boxes began to topple onto the top of the pallet of Arrowhead.

“Ready?!” barked Travis.

I saved my breath for breathing rather than giving him an answer and quickly picked the last of the boxes off the pallet and onto the line.

Travis already had his jack shoved in and was jacking it up.

I tried to grab the rest of the boxes but he started pulling the pallet forward. I was able to get all but one before Travis started picking up speed. I saw a slight smirk peeking out from the side of his mouth. I squinted my eyes at him and lunged forward. I grabbed that last box and slammed it down onto the rollers. I thought I heard a faint chuckle.

Travis rolled the pallet out and disappeared around the corner.

I ripped through the rest of the truck, but now with attitude. Every time I felt like giving up, I would think of that smirk and pushed myself on. As I went to pull down the top of another wall, I caught a flicker of something out of the corner of my eye. I continued to pull the boxes down and then I saw it: a wall of metal. I knew I was at the back of the trailer and almost cried. I couldn't believe I made it all the way through. My hands kept grabbing; then I picked up the last two boxes off the truck floor. I gave the line of freight one last shove, then backed up and leaned against the back of the trailer. The cold metal felt good. I put the palms of my hands on my knees and slowly slid down to sit. I was utterly exhausted.

Travis came in and pushed the freight down.

I felt like I should probably get up, but my body wouldn't move.

He came up and handed me a bottle of water.

I grabbed it, twisted the cap hard, and began gulping.

“How’d that feel?” he asked.

“Like I was going to die,” I said through the pants.

He laughed. “It’ll get easier.” He turned from me, grabbed the rollers, and started to push them down. “Good job,” he said over his shoulder.

I sat there and felt accomplished. I had proven myself.

## Chapter 3

### ~Thing One and Thing Two~

I didn't have much self-worth at the time. My relationship with my girlfriend had become tenuous, dangerous. Shelby was five years younger than me and extremely smart and quick-witted. She had the kind of personality that would immediately disarm whomever she was talking to and the ability to win over just about anyone. Shelby had recently been discharged from the Navy for misconduct having to do with alcohol and drugs but had gone through rehab and was looking for a fresh start in life. She was my first serious relationship; I was young, gullible, and smitten by a sense of humor equal to my own.

A few months after I started my unloading job at Wal-Mart, Shelby lost—or gave up—hers. I was working extremely long hours, sometimes not getting home until three or four in the morning and working six days every week. On my day off I would clean the two laundry rooms in our apartment complex because our landlord would take a hundred dollars off the rent if we did. It would make sense that the person who didn't have a job would be the one to do this but I could never rely on Shelby to do it. Very often she would say that she didn't feel well. Most often she would not be home at all. I began to notice a lot of empty bottles of cough syrup around the house. Over time her behavior became more and more hostile and everything I did seemed to make her angry. Pretty soon a confrontation about anything would result in her becoming defensive and slinging nasty insults. It started with her being upset that I made more money than she did; she had said that it injured her self-esteem as a self-perceived butch woman. She then made me feel guilty about the good relationship I had with my family; she said that it tore her up to see it because she didn't have anything like that with her own. She accused me of cheating on her, that my late-night hours were really an excuse for me to make her look like a

fool while having seedy hook-ups. She was able to get into my head and convince me that I was the one doing irreparable damage. I no longer hear her voice but it's hard to erase some of her words.

I remember one particular night it all started with a simple question.

"Have you been drinking?" I asked.

Shelby had been sitting in the living room with the lights off.

I could smell the alcohol.

She stood up from the couch, staggered over to me, and put her face up to mine. She butted her head against my forehead and glared into directly into my eyes. "What if I have?"

I lowered my eyes and took a step back.

Shelby was never intimidating when she was in a good mood or hadn't been drinking. Her anger changed her; the body turned from laid back to looming and aggressive. Her blue eyes became icy daggers.

I was always afraid when she looked at me like that. "Y- you," I stammered. "You always said that you shouldn't drink."

"Are you my mom?!" she barked.

It made me jump. "No, I-"

"No! No you're not!"

"Why are you upset?"

Shelby let out a small chuckle as she sat down in the chair at the computer desk. "Hmph. Why am I upset?"

"Did I do something wrong?"

She had her head in her hands; her taut fingers rubbed her face, and then darted through her short, spiked, blonde hair. Then she looked up. “You?” she asked sarcastically, half-smiling. “Of course not...you do everything right.”

I was confused. “What does that mean?”

She jumped out of the chair, waving her arms around. “God Donna! It means you’re good!”

By now I was crying.

“You see?! Look! Now you’re crying!” She swung her back to me and put her hands on her hips. “Jesus Christ!

“I don’t understand,” I said, trying desperately to wipe away my tears.

Shelby slumped down into the chair again and whirled it around to look at me. “Don’t you see? You’re the good one. And I’m the bad one.”

My forehead began to crinkle up and I shook my head no.

Shelby sighed hard. “You’re good. And I’m bad.” She paused for a minute. “It’s like we’re walking down a beach somewhere and I look over and the sun is just SHINING on you. I look at you and I just want to walk into the ocean. Don’t you get it?!”

I stayed still, looking down at the floor, and didn’t say anything.

“I hate you,” she said. “I hate you because you’re so good...because it constantly reminds me that I’m not.”

The two of us sat in that silence for what seemed like forever.

After about five or six minutes, Shelby lifted herself from the computer chair and slowly crossed the room, heading towards the bedroom. She stopped briefly at my side and leaned in. “How do you think that makes me feel?” she growled into my ear.

I felt my soul crushing. I had no idea what had just happened, but I had felt it was my fault. The next day I woke up to find Shelby gone again. I went out to the living room and sat down on the couch, and rubbed my eyes which now burned with exhaustion. When my vision adjusted to the light I noticed a bowl of water on a stand over by the computer. It had a note on it.

*“I’m sorry and I love you. Out looking for a job. These guys needed a home, I hope you can keep them company. Love, Shelby.”*

Swimming around the hexagon-shaped bowl were two shiny goldfish. Shelby knew that although I wasn’t fond of animals, I would often go to pet stores so that I could stare at the fish. They were always so peaceful. I felt conflicted. They were so beautiful, and I quickly named them Thing One and Thing Two.

You never know you’re in an abusive relationship until you’re in so deep that you’re unable to see a way out. It happens so slowly that before you realize what’s going on, the abuser has wrapped their talons around you, and you feel helpless. The negativity seeps into every aspect of your life; your self-esteem, work, your relationships with friends and family, all are poisoned. Money started to disappear from our bank account and the phone at home would go unanswered for hours. I didn’t have much money to eat with nor did my stomach—perpetually upset from nerves—allow for much consumption. I popped Tums obsessively and went from weighing close to two hundred pounds when I began working at Wal-Mart, to just a hundred and twelve, all in just a little over nine months.

At work I was focused and quiet. I had done a fairly good job at hiding what I was experiencing at home, but I was unable to hide how emaciated I had become. My coworkers began to notice. So did Blaine.

“Donna!” yelled Travis one day as I came into the receiving area. He had his clipboard in his hand and his eyes were glued to the paper he was scribbling on.

“Yeah?”

“Blaine wants to see you in his office,” he said without looking up.

“Oh, um okay,” I said. “Did I do something wrong?”

“I don’t think so,” he said gruffly. “Why don’t you go see?”

“Okay,” I said and turned to walk out of the backroom.

“Hurry up, we have three trucks today.”

I nodded and picked up the pace. The management office was all the way in the front of the store and on the trek up there I contemplated my supposed misdeeds. I knew that there were times that I hadn’t worked as hard as I could; sometimes I took a few extra minutes on breaks or dawdled getting to the backroom after lunch. I didn’t think that any of these infractions would result in a coaching, but my paranoia was getting the better of me; not only did I need the money desperately, but I was starting to—for the first time in my life—like and feel comfortable at a job. And now here I was, standing before the huge, ominous door, thinking it was all going to come crashing down. I lightly tapped on the it.

“Come in,” said the familiar baritone voice.

I slowly opened the door and poked my head in.

Blaine lifted his eyes from his paperwork towards the door, and me. “Ah, Donna, come in for a second.”

I crept in like a child who was about to get punished.

“Have a seat,” Blaine said, motioning to the chair adjacent to his desk. “Go ahead and close the door behind you.”

I swallowed so hard I thought he might've heard it, shut the door behind me, and made my way over to the chair. I sunk into it and began to wring my hands together.

Blaine swiveled his chair to face me. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm okay," I said without looking up.

"How do you like working unloading so far?"

The question perked me up a little and my eyes rose slightly. "I like it very much." I answered.

"You know Donna," he began. "Wal-Mart is like a family, but at this store especially, I really like to think of us all as the kind of family who looks out for each other."

I nodded my head.

"And as family members, we notice things about each other," he said and then paused for a moment. "Things like when clothes have become so baggy that they look like they're almost falling off."

My eyes, after scanning my t-shirt and jeans, slowly rose to look at Blaine. "What do you mean?"

Blaine chuckled. "What do I mean? You have a zip tie holding your pants up."

I felt embarrassed. "I-I don't have a belt."

He leaned forward a bit. "Look, you've lost an incredible amount of weight. I'm not the only one to notice, and we're just a little concerned."

"You are?" I said sheepishly.

"Are you anorexic?"

The question shocked me and I looked up at him with wide eyes, my mouth slightly open.

"I have to ask," he said.

“No!” I said. “No no, not at all.”

He looked skeptical. “You’re not just saying this are you?”

I shook my head. “No, I really like food, trust me. It’s just—“ I hesitated for a moment.

“What?”

I was embarrassed again. “I don’t have a whole lot of money.”

“Is that it?” he asked.

I shook my head again.

“Well?”

“I’ve been dealing with some stress at home,” I said. “But it’s okay, I’m dealing with it.”

Blaine squinted at me. “Alright,” he said and leaned back in his chair. “But if you need anything, you come and talk to me okay?”

I nodded my head and put my hands on both arms of the chair. “Is that it?” I asked nervously.

He nodded.

I pushed myself out of the chair and headed towards the door. I wrapped my hand around the handle, tugged it open—just enough to squeeze my tiny frame out—and slipped through. I wanted a quick getaway. I needed to escape before he remembered anything else, just in case.

“Do me a favor,” said Blaine.

I gulped and stopped. I poked my head back into his office.

“If you find yourself without money for lunch, will you come see me please?”

I smiled and nodded once more.

“Good,” he said. “Now get outta here.”

I shut the door and walked back to the backroom. I remember feeling so relieved; there was the reassurance of not losing my job but there was also a feeling of consolation, by the idea that I was not in fact, invisible. By the time I returned to the back, the unloading process was in full swing.

Travis was by the counter organizing some photo center merchandise.

“Where do you want me?” I asked.

“Inside corner,” he said.

“Got it,” I said and started to make my way over.

“Everything okay?” he asked, still not looking at me.

“Yeah,” I responded. “Everything’s fine.”

He tilted his head forward once and kept on organizing.

I smiled and went on to my spot.

While things at work were solidifying, things at home were falling apart. A lot of times Shelby wouldn’t be there when I got home from work—she would say she was out with friends—and when she was she would either be asleep or up and waiting to pick a fight with me. No matter how hard I tried, I could never figure out why she was so angry or what I had done to trigger it. I would stay at work later and later; I was avoiding the anger and I felt safe there. On my days off she would make up some excuse to go out—picking up something “really quick” at the grocery store usually—and would be gone for hours. I was of course suspicious, but another part of me was relieved. Even within the absence from each other, I could feel the tension building. I just wondered, and dreaded, when it would break.

## Chapter 4

### ~The Other Woman~

It was a typical day at work. We had two trucks and they were done by lunch. This being a time before cell phones, I used one of the payphones out front to call the house. Part of me was hoping that Shelby wouldn't pick up the phone, that this pit in my stomach would be somehow validated in knowing she was not at home but out doing something, with someone. There was no answer. I clocked back in from lunch and began pulling pallets to the floor; with each trip to the back I felt this burning sensation growing in the bottom of my chest. At first I thought it was heartburn but after awhile, as it seemed to grow and travel up my neck and into my face, I realized it was anger. After the last pallet was pulled out it was time for last break. Normally I would sit in the breakroom and, if I had the change, drink a soda. But this feeling pushed me to get some fresh, cool air so I headed out the front of the store. The unloaders who smoked were already out there and called me over.

"Hey girl," said Daniel. "Come to hang with the lowly?"

I flashed a half-grin. "I heard this is where the cool kids hang out."

"Damn straight!" yelled Josh. "I'm hangin' out right now!"

Everyone laughed.

"Yeah?" I said looking down at his jeans. "Must not be big enough to see."

Everyone laughed louder, including Josh who then threw his cigarette on the pavement and smashed it with his grubby tennis shoe.

"You know what?" he said. "I like you."

I smiled back at him.

Josh was what I would call a Pacific Northwest redneck. An unemployed logger of about twenty-seven, tall, pale, and skinny, he was the kind of guy who pissed in public and would use superglue to hold together both the cuts on his hands and the rips in his shoes. With his short, greasy, dark-brown hair smeared up under a mangled trucker cap, he perpetually dressed in torn flannel shirts and dirty jeans; he always looked like he had just wandered out of the woods after camping for months, and made no apologies for it. Even though he had a couple of vindictive ex-wives and was continually going to jail for not paying his child-support, he had a surprisingly upbeat attitude about life. He would always be telling inappropriate jokes and letting out a “yuk-yuk” belly laugh, slapping everyone on the back in the process. His teeth were yellowed and extremely crooked, and yet his smile was infectious. I had never met a more politically and socially incorrect, crass individual; and yet somehow he always came across as endearing. He certainly had a field day with me after finding out I was a lesbian; he was the only person who would ever call me a dyke to my face and it was because of that frankness that I let him.

“Alright everyone, break’s over,” said Travis.

They all moved toward the front door.

I sat on the bench.

“You comin’?” Travis asked.

“I gotta couple more minutes left.”

Travis nodded and headed inside.

I sat on the bench and let the cold invade my jeans. I looked up at the dark sky, the stars hidden by the grey blanket of clouds, and saw that it was beginning to sprinkle. I closed my eyes and allowed the small slivers of moisture to fall onto my face. The coldness of the night was helping. The anger inside was slowly turning icy and I felt my heart starting to cool. I remember

wondering if it would ever become completely numb. I looked at the front door and for some reason it didn't feel real. I couldn't feel anything, I didn't care about anything, and I was suddenly tired. I wanted to crawl into my bed and sleep for days. I wanted peace. As my hands lay in my lap, I felt my keys in my pants pocket, just underneath my right wrist. I looked down and then up to see if I could see my car out in the parking lot; I could. Without thinking about any of the ramifications, I stood up from the cold bench, crossed over to my car, got in and drove home. I was so exhausted.

Whenever Shelby went out, the house was dark and quiet when I walked into it, but this time was different. I saw several of the lights on and remember thinking for a moment that she was actually home, getting ready for bed or perhaps taking a shower.

“Honey?” I called out timidly.

There was no answer. I quickly looked into both the bedroom and bathroom before returning to the kitchen to get something to drink. I gulped down some grape juice and sat down at the computer. It was on so I wiggled the mouse so that I could check my email. As the screen lit up I could see the internet page was already up and opened to aol. The email account that stared back at me wasn't mine however, it was Shelby's. My first instinct was not to read it, but I couldn't help myself. What I saw was a back-and-forth conversation between my girlfriend and another woman named Kathleen. This woman talked about how hard it was to be apart from Shelby and asked when she was going to tell me about the two of them. My heart sunk. Even though I had the inklings nagging at me for quite awhile, I chose not to acknowledge them. Here was the truth, staring me right in the face. I started to cry.

For an hour I sat at the computer and rode the waves of sobs as they came and went. The room that surrounded me felt cramped and bright so I went around turned off all the lights and

sat in the dark on the couch. The only light was that of the computer screen that laughed at me from across the room. I could see the cursor blink over and over and wondered how long it would take for the screen to go to sleep. The minutes felt excruciatingly long but the glow finally doused itself and I hung my head in relief. I can't remember how long I sat in the dark. My head felt hazy and as I heard keys in the lock I felt nothing.

It took her a couple of minutes to realize that I was sitting there. As she shook the computer mouse and the glow reappeared, the outline of my form became noticeable to her. "Holy shit!" she yelped. "What the hell are you doing sitting there in the dark?!"

I didn't respond right away, just sat there.

"What are you doing home from work?"

I didn't answer.

She seemed irritated. "You didn't get fired did you?"

"No," I said coldly.

"Oh, well are you sick or something?"

"No."

Her forehead crinkled. "What's going on?"

"I read it," I said.

"Read what?"

I pointed at the computer. "I read it," I repeated.

It was only then that she realized that she had left her email up on the screen. Her expression immediately changed; the irritation was gone and the wrinkles on her brow softened.

"Oh honey," she said sweetly. "It isn't what you think."

"Of course it isn't," I said. "It never is."

She hurried across the room and knelt down on her knees in front of me. She put her hand on my leg.

I shoved her hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

She began to look worried.

I began to cry again.

“It really isn’t what you think,” she said.

“So you didn’t sleep with her?” I said between sobs.

“You look so tired baby,” she said. “How about I draw you a bubble bath and then we can talk okay?”

Her overly-sweetened gentleness confused me. It was what I longed so many months for and here she was, her words full of compassion and her touch filled with kindness. I wasn’t used to her being nice to me and in that moment felt so conflicted because I had craved, and went without, it for so long. She was right about one thing...I was tired.

As I sat in the water, knees clutched to my chest and sobbing uncontrollably, Shelby crouched beside the tub, gently pulling the warm washcloth back and forth across my back. She was so soft and gentle with me. I couldn’t remember the last time she was so kind to me. I had become so isolated from family and friends, and had craved such kind tenderness for so long, that I had just sat there, long after the water had turned cold, absorbing every last ounce of it.

## Chapter 5

~Me~

As I walked into work the next day I felt shaken. The talk with Shelby never happened and I hardly slept. I ended up staring into the dark, with Shelby sleeping peacefully beside me. When I left that cold and drizzly parking lot the night before, I wasn't thinking about any repercussions. I wasn't worried about what I would find when I got home or losing my job; I was feeling the weight of the stress in my life. I felt ill, I was tired, and I wanted to go home. When the next morning came however, my head was whirling with those thoughts and more. I woke up to find myself alone. I didn't know where Shelby had gone—I'm sure I could guess—but I didn't really care. I sat there thinking that I had lost my friends, my family, and now my girlfriend; the only thing I had left (and even that was in question) was my shift that was supposed to start at four pm. I felt the intensity of the silence in my room, and I slowly got dressed and went to work.

I swiped my name badge and headed to the backroom. Everything seemed to be whizzing by me in a blur while my mind and body moved in slow motion. I felt cold and numb. When I got back to the bay I set my sweatshirt on the counter and started to wrap my back-brace around my mid-section. Then I heard Travis's voice.

“Donna,” he said. It wasn't a yell or abrasive in any way, uttered just above a whisper.

I slowly lifted my head.

“In here,” he said as he walked past me while pointing to the tiny office in the back.

I followed.

“The rest of you get going on the truck!” he yelled over his shoulder.

About the size of a large cubicle the office had only one chair which Travis scooted towards me as he hopped onto the desk.

Somewhere inside me I knew I should be scared; a trip to any office usually generated anxiety-filled shaking and sweat, but I felt nothing. I sat and leaned forward, placing my elbows onto my knees. My eyes, glazed over, focused on the floor.

“What happened yesterday?” Travis asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t bullshit me, you disappeared after last break.” His voice, though still not raised, was firm.

I began to wring my hands together. “I started not to feel good,” I said.

“And you just left?”

As I sat there, I could feel the coldness inside me begin to warm. I sat there thinking that my silence was again allowing Shelby to get the better of me; I wondered if this was what she wanted, for me to lose my job, for her to be right, for me to be helpless. I didn’t want to lose the one thing that actually meant something to me in my life. Suddenly, I wasn’t numb any longer; I felt a burning welling up inside. I began to feel panicked because now I was scared; I couldn’t lose my job. I guess that’s why I lied.

“It was my girlfriend,” I said.

“Your girlfriend?” Travis responded. I could hear a growing irritation in his voice.

I nodded, still wringing my hands, still looking down at the floor. “The relationship is bad,” I said.

His tone softened a bit. “How bad?”

I don’t know why I was surprised at his asking, but I was. “She’s really controlling and, well, not very nice to me.” I figured there was no need to lie about that part.

He nodded his head in acknowledgment.

“She showed up while I was on break,” I started. “She was angry, and wanted me to go home with her...so I did.” My stomach started to turn as I felt the words seep out of my mouth.

“Why?” he asked.

“She doesn’t like the fact that I have a job,” I said, feeling better knowing that wasn’t a lie. “She keeps accusing me of cheating on her.”

“*Are* you cheating on her?” asked Travis.

“No,” I said and took a deep breath. “But I found out when I got home that she has been cheating on me.” A tiny tear had managed to escape from the corner of my eye and run down my cheekbone. I was quick to angrily wipe it away, hoping that he didn’t see. I could feel my insides begin to bubble and I gripped both of my knees tightly with my hands.

“Shit,” he said and folded his arms against his barreled chest. “You afraid of her?” he asked.

I nodded my head, embarrassed.

His voice became soft but firm and deep. “She ever put her hands on you?”

I lied again as I shook my head.

“Good, and you can tell her that if she ever does, I’ll kick her fucking ass...I don’t care if she’s a fucking chick.”

Those words made me feel both good and bad; although I felt remorse for lying, I can’t say that I entirely regret it. It felt good to tell someone about what had been happening, and it was certainly nice to not feel so alone.

“How do you feel about it?” he asked.

“Mad,” I responded without hesitation.

With that Travis hopped off the desk and went to go grab the doorknob. “Come on,” he said. “You’re going to throw the truck.”

“You mean I’m not fired?”

“No.” He turned and pointed at me. “I covered for your ass,” he said. “Don’t make me regret it.”

I nodded rapidly. Every ounce of my body was filled with appreciation. I followed him out of the quiet of the office and into the clamor of receiving. We walked over to the opening of the truck.

“Jake!” yelled Travis. “Come out here!”

Jake appeared from the darkness. “What’s up?”

“Donna’s going to throw.”

“What?” objected Jake. Throwing the truck was something unloaders either loved or hated. It was either easier because all you had to do was throw the boxes up onto the line, not much thinking involved. Others despised being in there; not only was it physically harder, but some would prefer picking up a fraction of the boxes rather than every single one.

“She needs it,” said Travis. This seemed like some sort of code that in that moment, I didn’t understand. But I soon would.

Jake looked over at me and then back at Travis. He nodded his head.

My boss looked over at me and waved his hand. “Get in there,” he said. “Take it out on the truck.”

I tightened my back brace and walked into the dark trailer. I remember being tentative at first, trying to place the boxes gently and precisely; but as I got a couple of walls in things changed as I encountered a stubborn flat of cat food wedged up against the side of the truck. I

yanked and yanked, my fingers digging into the plastic that surrounded the cans. I could feel the heat inside me beginning to grow and, as I became more and more angry, so did my determination. I wrenched the obstinate 9Lives from its position, my fingers ripping the wrapper to shreds in the process, and I watched the individual cans—bouncing against the line and sides of the truck—as they flew every which way. I tried to keep my anger in check and squeezed out a large huff from my mouth as I kicked the cans to the side and returned to the wall of freight. I was able to dislodge a few more boxes before the wall began to crumble. A could sense some movement from the top of the heap and I looked up just in time to see a box of shampoo come hurling towards my face. It was tiny, no bigger than a box of pop-tarts, but the corner hit me squarely in the eye. “FUCK!!!” I yelled and promptly picked up my attacker and threw it against the wall. The box busted open and shampoo went everywhere. I watched the white strips of goo flinging itself onto the walls, the other boxes, me; and then, I lost it.

My entire body turned white-hot and I felt my face flush red with anger. I grabbed everything within my grasp. Cans of 9Lives skidded across the concrete floor as I heaved them out of the truck and boxes were tossed with fervor towards the line. Tears streamed down my face as I crunched my way through the fifty-three-foot trailer. Some of the boxes stayed on the line, others bounced off; those that tumbled down at me were kicked to the side and those that were stubborn were met with tenacious fury. By the time I got to the end, the floor of the trailer was littered with miscellaneous merchandise carnage. Sweat had soaked my t-shirt and as I leaned against the back of the truck I could feel the coldness of the metal chilling my hot skin. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and tried to catch my breath.

Travis had entered and was slowly making his way towards me, picking boxes, shaking them for damage, and setting them on the line.

I took a cue from my boss and after taking another swipe at my eyes and nose, began picking them up from my end. After a few minutes we met somewhere in the middle.

“Feel better?” he asked.

I nodded.

“Good.”

I motioned to the few boxes he had set over by the smashed shampoo. “Sorry about that.” I was actually surprised that there weren’t more to be turned in to claims.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said.

I grinned sheepishly.

“Go ahead and go to break.”

I nodded and made my way past him and out of the truck.

“Oh hey!” Travis yelled after me.

“Yeah?”

“Make sure you pick up all those cans of cat food out there. It’ll make one helluva mess if they get run over with a jack.”

I nodded my head and began to locate and retrieve them one by one.

“Nice arm by the way.”

I smiled back at him. “Thanks.”

I had experienced a lot of anger in my life and until then and had always been ashamed of it. It was always seen as something unacceptable, ill-mannered, and weak. Travis allowed me to deal with what was happening to me in a healthy way, and in a safe space where I wouldn’t be judged for it. I also experienced a sense of strength, and sported a nice shiner, thanks to the

shampoo box, for a week. But to me it felt like a badge of honor. After that incident I didn't feel alone and for the first time in a very long time, I felt like I belonged.

## Chapter 6

~Jake~

The next couple of months were relatively calm. Things were quiet as Shelby was at home more, trying desperately to make up, she said, for her transgression, and attempting to convince me that I was the one she really wanted. Work was a mixture of long hours and goofing off. Some of the crewmates came and went but the longer those of us who stuck it out got to know each other, the more fun we had. The one-truck days were opportunities for crazy antics and one-up-manship. I can still see Travis clearly, big butt atop a half-pallet of soda, barreling out of the truck at top speed, steering the jack with one hand, swinging his cowboy hat in circles with the other. “YAAAAAAAHOOOOOOOOO!!” he’d be whooping like a drunk rodeo clown, forgetting that the turn radius of a pallet jack is very wide, particularly with the weight of a several cases of soda behind it. It was a good thing that his cowboy skills were intact as he was able to dismount his carbonated horse just before it side-swiped the steel and rammed into another pallet. For years after people would see that particular bottom piece of steel, mangled and twisted, and wonder how on earth it got that way. I would always smile.

I had also gotten to know Jake a lot better. Jake was constantly cracking jokes. It wouldn’t be abnormal to see him attempting to hurdle a six-foot pallet of dog food (not once had I seen him be successful) or placing a piece of cardboard on top of the metal rollers and then running and throwing himself onto the line, just to see how far he could get. When I first met Jake, he was a lot older than he looked. He was about five foot eight, with his dark-brown hair buzzed short and a long, scraggly chin-only beard that came down to his mid-chest. He wore faded jeans and t-shirts and a trucker hat; I had thought he was at least in his late twenties but I came to find out that he was only nineteen. That assessment was in vision only when, as any time

was spent around Jake, his real age would be outed by his behavior. His renditions of Britney Spears songs, “[Lick] Me Baby One More Time” and “Oops I Did [You] Again” will remain legendary, as will his way of ordering food at the local diner—he would ball up his fist and hit it repeatedly on the underside of the table, feigning masturbation, trying to illicit an embarrassed response from the waitress. His look would change many times over the years, going from an aged trucker who liked country music, to a 2000’s hard-rock loving junkie with spiked-hair and tattoos, to an emo-clad listener of My Chemical Romance with dyed black hair and attitude.

Jake was trying to find his place in the world. Looking back it feels like we were growing up at the same time; even after years of not really having any contact, I still think of him as a brother. When he was made a support manager on overnights, I was the lead on the unloading crew. We both had walkie-talkies (at the time a sign of being someone important) and one year I threw a huge birthday party at my house. He had to work but we all pestered him to come. Since I lived down the street from the store it was easy for him to come down on the first break he had. We plied him with alcohol and then used our walkies to get different Assistant Managers to go to different parts of the store. Halfway through the party he disappeared and we heard that he had in fact gone back to work. At the time I thought he was crazy but looking back I could relate to the connection to loyalty and responsibility that he felt. Even though Jake and I were never particularly close, I always admired how he made me laugh until my sides hurt.

I felt like I was starting to become ‘one of the guys’. Jake and Travis began to come over to my house after work. We did stupid things like drink beer and look up anti-Wal-Mart websites on the internet; the three of us laughed a lot. Travis and Jake had been bosom buddies since the day I came to the crew. They were constantly laughing and palling around together; it was generally known that Jake was Travis’s right-hand man and whenever Travis wasn’t there, Jake

was in charge. They were both good at their jobs, but had very different ways of dealing with problems and fellow associates. Where Travis was an absolute hard ass with a propensity to step in and do things himself, Jake was more apt to deal with things with humor and a forgiving manner. Both thought they were always right and unfortunately had a tendency to let their anger get the better of them and would blow up at whoever was around them. One could probably see that those two personalities were bound to collide but at the time, the only thing that I picked up on was a growing inclination for grumpiness among my coworkers. Everything at that moment, both at work and at home, seeped a calm but quiet tension.

Things between Jake and Travis had been simmering for awhile but I didn't pay much attention. Due to my attendance transgressions I had been working diligently, with my head down, trying to redeem myself. That self-isolation would not last long. One day as I was clocking in there was a strain that could be felt throughout the entire back room. The receiving bay was silent; there was no set-up in progress and both bay doors were still closed and locked. The crew was scattered about; some were leaning up against the various metal racks that lined the back wall but most had hopped up onto the long counter to take a seat.

"What's going on?" I said, scanning the bored-looking faces.

Josh immediately shrugged. "Don't fuckin know."

"Assistant Manager Sandy said that Blaine wanted to talk to us, told us to wait here," said Daniel.

I kept looking around. "Where's Travis?"

Josh chimed in again, "Not fuckin here."

Daniel shrugged.

I walked over to a half-stack of empty pallets and just as I sat down, another unloader named Brad came walking in. “Hey, isn’t it your day off?” I asked.

Brad nodded.

“Then what are you doing here?”

“They called me in, said there was a mandatory meeting.”

“Some serious shit goin down if you ask me,” said Josh.

It wasn’t long before I heard the familiar clinking of management keys.

Blaine and Sandy appeared from behind the row of steel, both looking surly and carrying clipboards.

I hopped down and went to stand next to the counter.

Blaine came closer, waving the stragglers over.

“Okay guys, here’s what’s up,” said Sandy. “It has been brought to our attention that there have been some issues back here lately.” She paused for a moment.

No one said a word.

“Is that true?” she asked.

The unloaders looked around at each other but stayed silent.

“Look, no one back here is in any trouble. We’re just trying to figure out what’s going on.”

“What kind of issues?” asked Daniel.

“A hostile work environment issue-” Sandy started.

Blaine cut in. “We’ve got two associates who are claiming that the other one’s behavior has been the cause of hostility back here.”

I felt a lump in my throat. It wasn't hard to figure out that they were talking about the two unloaders who were not present.

"Has there been tension back here?" asked Sandy.

There were a few nods but still no one said anything.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen," said Blaine. "We're going to gather statements from each of you individually and everything you say will remain within the walls of my office."

He was met with blank stares.

"No one here is in trouble. There will be no retaliation for anything you divulge," he said.

Some of us nodded again. I felt better knowing that I myself wasn't in any trouble, but I worried about Travis and Jake.

"Okay," said Blaine. "Daniel, you're first, please come with us to my office. The rest of you will start on the truck."

Daniel soon followed and the three were out of sight.

I slogged through the daily grind with an upset stomach and a distracted mind. I stood next to the metal rollers, nervously waiting for my turn to go to the front office. I mindlessly shoved each dusty box passed me, not entirely sure of whether they were for my section or not.

"Hey Dyke, you're up!" Josh spouted as he entered the receiving area. He wasn't smiling.

I put the box I held in my hand back down on the line and looked at him. "Was it bad?" I asked as I walked by.

Josh shrugged. "It is what it is."

I made my way to the front office, wringing my hands together and trying to reassure myself that I wasn't the one in trouble. I rapped my knuckles against the door.

"Come in," called Assistant Manager Sandy.

I entered the room slowly and saw Blaine sitting behind his desk as Sandy sat in one of the chairs on the other side. They were both hunched forward as I came in; both fell back into their seats and wrenched their heads up as they acknowledged me. They looked exhausted.

“Have a seat Donna,” said Blaine, pointing at the chair next to Sandy.

I sat and pulled my sweatshirt sleeves down over my hands.

“Okay I’m not going to mince words,” said Blaine. “We’re here because two unloaders have made serious complaints about the other. When that happens I’ve found that the truth lies somewhere in the middle. That’s where you guys come in.” He picked up a piece of paper that was in front of him. “I’m going to ask you some questions and I want you to answer as truthfully as you can, okay?”

I looked at Sandy for a brief moment and then over to Blaine. I nodded.

“It’s been brought to our attention that there is a fair amount of stress in the backroom, is that right?”

I glanced at Sandy again. She nodded affirmingly.

I looked back at Blaine. “Yes.”

“Has this stress been between two associates in particular, or in general?”

I hesitated for a moment. “Kind of both,” I said.

“Explain.”

“Well we’re always short-handed, and that’s a lot of trucks to unload, then they come down on us when we’re behind.” I looked over at Sandy. “Not you.” Sandy was one of the managers in charge of the overnight crew, and although frustrated when the freight wasn’t on the floor when she came in, she never yelled at us like the other managers. She would often scream at others, but seemed to have a soft spot for the unloaders. She was in her late forties and had a

bulky frame. Her blunt, blonde haircut and glasses always gave the impression of her being nonsense, but some of us—those of us who worked hard for her—got to see how she could joke around and laugh heartily. She had insanely long manicured nails that were always immaculately buffed and painted, yet she wouldn't hesitate to jump in the truck to sling freight or grab a jack and pull pallets. She was a badass and I looked up to her.

The corner of Sandy's mouth turned up slightly.

“And the two associates?” continued Blaine.

I hesitated.

“I know you guys are tight back there,” began Sandy. “No one wants to rat anyone out, but some of these things are really serious.”

My stomach wrenched.

“Look, I'm just going to come right out and ask you if you saw any of these things,” said Blaine. “And you tell me the truth, okay?”

I nodded.

“Has anyone ever lost their temper back there?”

I nodded.

“No, I want to hear from you,” he said.

I felt the reprimand. “Yes,” I said.

“To the point of throwing or destroying merchandise?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said, feeling a bit exposed.

“Have you ever witnessed demeaning or threatening language being used either towards you or a fellow associate?”

“Yes.”

“And who was it that used this language?”

I hesitated again. I felt as though I were betraying a confidence, some unspoken code of the unloader.

“I know you don’t want to see anyone get in trouble,” said Sandy.

“Which one was it?” said Blaine.

I looked up abruptly. The question confused me a little.

“What?” Blaine asked.

My eyes shifted between the two of them. “May I speak freely?”

Blaine put the piece of paper he held back onto his desk and slid it forward. “Absolutely.”

“We’re talking about Jake and Travis, yes?”

Blaine sighed and nodded. “Yes,” he said. “And each of them has written a statement saying that the other has created a hostile work environment with angry outbursts, throwing things, screaming at people, and intimidation.”

For a moment I just sat there and stared at him.

“I need to know who’s telling the truth,” he said.

I took a deep breath. “Well, they both are.”

Blaine leaned back in his chair and interlocked his fingers behind his head. “Explain.”

“Look, I like both of these guys,” I said. “They’re both really hard workers and both want to do what’s best for the crew.”

“But?” asked Sandy.

I turned to her. “But they have bad tempers...both of them.”

“You’ve seen this?” asked Blaine.

“Yes, several times.” I looked between them again. “Travis gets mad sometimes and I get it, we screw up a lot and he’s the one that gets yelled at for it. The shit rolls downhill, you know?” I cringed. I had forgotten who I was talking to. “Sorry.”

Blaine waved me off. “That’s fine,” he said. “Has he ever done this to you directly?”

I sat there while all the times Travis screamed at me floated through my head; the first time I threw the truck, the time I pulled a pallet I stacked out of its spot just to see the entire back half fall off, the time I pulled a pallet of dog food out of the truck, lost control and ripped a giant hole in the side of one of the bags—I stood there not knowing what to do while kibble flowed out—all of these things were normal infractions and certainly did not merit profanity or belittlement. But I kept feeling something nagging at my gut when I thought of all those times; after each one of those incidents, I made damn sure not to make the same mistake again, and that was because of Travis. But I couldn’t lie either. “Yes,” I said.

“Give me an example,” said Blaine.

I tried to think of something less odious.

“Was there an incident with a cart of food?”

I looked up surprised. Travis was particularly hard on the way we stacked freight on the carts. He wanted us to stack so that no aid was needed but occasionally, especially when the cart was extremely full, he allowed us to use shrink-wrap. The fact that Blaine had asked about carts told me that he knew about something specific. I nodded.

“What happened?”

I felt embarrassed. “I had stacked a cart of food,” I said. “And I didn’t stack it so well.”

“And?” said Blaine.

“Well, we were out of shrink-wrap...so I used tape.”

“Tape?” asked Sandy, annoyed.

I nodded. “Travis saw it, came over, grabbed the cart handle, and yanked it sideways.”

“And the tape didn’t hold,” said Blaine.

I shook my head. “The freight went everywhere...and I had to clean it up.”

Blaine sat back and sighed.

“I shouldn’t have used tape OR shrink-wrap,” I said.

“That’s not the point, Donna,” said Sandy.

“What about Jake?” said Blaine.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You said he loses his temper too, in what way?” he said.

“Well, it gets frustrating back there, you know because there’s not enough of us most of the time,” I said. “Not only do we not get help, but sometimes people get in our way, it gets old.”

“People get in your way? How?” asked Blaine.

“Sometimes we’re trying to unload or bring a pallet out of the truck and people will bring a million carts of trash back to try and dump,” I said. “One time Jake came out of the truck and he ran right into the carts. His pallet fell over and he got mad.”

“What did he do?” asked Sandy.

I looked over at her. “He started swearing and kicking the boxes around.”

Blaine exhaled and scooted his chair up to his desk. He looked at Sandy.

“Well,” she said. “That sounds sadly accurate.”

Blaine nodded and grabbed a yellow legal pad and pen. He flipped it around and placed them in front of me. “I need you to write down what you just told me.”

My skin felt cold. “Why?”

“We’ve asked everyone to write up what they witnessed,” said Sandy. “That way we have an accurate account of what happened.”

“What’s going to happen to them?” I asked.

Sandy looked at me; her eyes looked hollow. Blaine didn’t look up at all. “That’s what we’re going to discuss,” she said.

I felt horrible. They were my friends, my mentors; and I had broken the code.

## Chapter 7

~Dawn~

For the next couple of days we had random managers floating in and out of receiving, unlocking the bay doors and barking orders. The rest of us just kept clocking in and out, robotically doing our jobs and not talking much. We soon found out that Jake had been transferred to the overnight crew and as for Travis, he just seemed to disappear. There was never a definitive answer to what happened to him. The rumor mill tossed about several different scenarios for explanation. One person heard that he had been transferred to a different store; another offered that he quit while yet another said that they were sure he had been fired. What I know for certain is that I never saw Travis again. That young man who had mentored me, yelled at me, supported me, scared the shit out of me, and believed in me was gone. It was now time to see if I could stand on my own.

After about a week or so I began to notice the managers came back to receiving less and less. We had lost two of our crew members; Daniel had gotten a vendor job with Pepsi and Josh had simply stopped showing up. We were a skeleton crew that everyone had just forgotten. This void came into sharp focus for me one day when I came into work to see that the bay doors had not been unlocked. The rest of the crew were scattered around the receiving area just sitting and waiting, not being bothered the slightest about the fact that we weren't able to work. For me however, it was different. My job wasn't just how I earned money; it had become a distraction from my troubles at home and a place for me to expend my negative energy and anger. It was where my friends were, somewhere I could laugh, and had become a connection to my self-worth. In that moment, as I stood in my stagnant workspace, I felt irritated. I looked over to the black phone that hung on the wall by the emergency exit and my palms began to sweat. I moved

towards it. Each step I took increased the already quick pace of my heart and I swallowed hard as I slipped my hand around the middle of the receiver.

Rachel who was laying down on a piece of cardboard put on top of the metal rollers, popped her head up. “You calling management?” she asked.

“Why?!” I snapped back. “You want to do it?!”

She looked at me with disinterest, shook her head and placed it back onto her cardboard pillow.

I looked back at the phone, took a deep breath, and lifted the receiver. I pushed #96 and held the phone away from my ear and towards my mouth. “Attention associates. Can I get a member of management to receiving?” My voice was shaking. “A member of management to receiving, please. Thank you,” I said and quickly slammed the receiver back into its cradle. I could feel the tears from anxiety welling up behind my eyes but was able to hold them back by keeping myself moving. I went over to the stack of empty pallets, climbed a couple steps up, grabbed the top one, and flipped it down onto the concrete floor. I slid it into one of the department slots and went back to the stack.

“What’s going on back here?” asked Assistant Manager Bob.

A few of the unloaders lifted their heads.

I pointed to one of the bay doors. “We need an unlock,” I said.

“Yeah I get that,” he said while unclipping his keys from his hip. “So, the rest of you just planning on chillin’ while Donna does setup?”

The rest of the crew got up and moving, grumbling slightly. It was going to be a long day.

Similar days repeated and, with so few unloaders, seemed endless. The only person who seemed to care or worked hard was a relatively new addition named Dawn.

Over the years I have crossed paths with hundreds of Wal-Mart associates. I even keep in contact on social media today with the majority of individuals from my Wal-Mart days. Our career paths always remind me of a busy train station. Some of us were merely sharing a car for a short while but ones that make the biggest impact on our lives, are the ones we share the longest ride with. Most of those on the unloading crew were drifters, always on their way to somewhere else. But those of us who stuck around, seem to share something deeper.

Dawn came onto the crew just as it was imploding. Travis's mood had grown continually foul and unloaders dropped one after another until there were only five of us left. Sticking it out through all the turmoil and nervousness helped build my self-esteem. As my muscles and resiliency grew, so did my confidence. So when Travis pulled me over to where he was giving a new associate the familiar rundown on the operation of things, a tiny bit of pride slipped out of me because I no longer needed his instruction.

"Hey Donna, come over here," said Travis. He stood next to the end of the rollers, a woman standing at his side.

I finished slamming down an empty pallet, slapped the dirt off the palms of my hands, and made my way over to the two of them. I stood there, attempting to look tough and annoyed, with my hands slung up onto my hips.

Travis looked over at Dawn while pointing at me. "This is Donna. She's going to show you how everything is done back here."

I was shocked, nervous, and proud. "I am?" I said.

Travis shot me a look of exasperation. It actually reminded me of when I would ask what he thought was a dumb question back when I first started. “Yes,” he said and turned his attention back to Dawn. “Anyway, she’ll show you what to do and answer any questions that you have.” He sternly looked back at me. “Won’t you?”

By this point, my hands had dropped to my sides and I was looking on blankly. I nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Now I’ve got to go take care of some things up front. Get going on the truck and I’ll be back.” He turned on the heels of his boots and clacked his way out of the backroom.

For a few moments I just stood there looking at Dawn.

She looked younger than me, but exuded a stoicism that made her seem older. She looked about twenty-five or so, with dishwater-blonde hair haphazardly thrown up into a ponytail. Although she was only about five-foot-four, her athletic build and aloof presence made her seem much taller. She stood there, arms crossed against her chest, radiating a stern confidence.

I was intimidated. I hadn’t had my new feeling of confidence for very long and with only a little under a year under my belt, I certainly wasn’t an expert on this job. I did know that I could hold my own, and had learned through working around men, that allowing them to smell your fear was never a good idea. I adopted Dawn’s detached attitude and grabbed a piece of chalk from the box on the counter. Starting from the section nearest us I began scribbling the numbers onto the floor, moving from one area to another, waving at her to follow me. “These are the department numbers,” I said. “Everyone’s given a section-“ I hesitated for a moment. “As you can see there’s not that many of us so we try to cover more than one section.” After covering all the areas around the line, we made our way back to the counter and I flipped the chalk back into its container. Pride tingled within me. I then grabbed a box from the line and flipped it over

so that the label was facing up. “This is where you find the department number,” I said. “Try to make things level, stack from the back of the pallet to the front, and if you see any stars on the boxes, that means they’re a feature and need to go on that pallet over there.”

Dawn calmly looked around at her surroundings. “Alright,” she said.

“Okay, cool,” I replied and began to walk away.

“Hey,” blurted Dawn.

I stopped and shook my head. I couldn’t believe she had a question already. I had a little touch of superiority in that moment, and it felt good. I turned and looked at her with my eyebrows raised.

Dawn looked at me coolly. “What section should I be in?”

I immediately felt a lump in my throat. I couldn’t believe I forgot the most basic of information. “Oh, right,” I said. I tried to act as cool as she was. “You and I will work on this side together.” I waved my hands over the area I was standing in. “I’ll work this half, down to foods, and I’ll shove the rest down to you, cool?”

She glanced around again and nodded. “Cool.”

Dawn caught on instantly and quickly became an indispensable asset to the crew. After a while I recognized that not only did we work really well together, we had also become pretty good friends. She was married and raising two kids, boys, and had very little time or patience for bullshit. Incredibly methodical and hardworking, Dawn struck me as someone who deferred her dreams for a higher goal. She was a mother hen who constantly took care of others and always looked drained and tired. On the surface she could be cold and brash, but underneath she possessed an incredible capacity for love and laughter. We would often go out to eat at Shari’s diner after our shift was over and she would tell me stories of her life and children, whom she

adored and would do anything for. Sometimes we would venture into Seattle and go club-hopping. I have this image of her, drink in hand, the song, “Oops (Oh My)” thumping on the sound system, and the two of us pointing our fingers at—almost daring—each other while singing the lines, “Oops there goes my shirt, up over my head, oh my”. We were both prone to do some crazy things but we always seemed to steady each other. Until Dawn, I hadn’t really had any really close female friends and during this time in my life I felt as though I was getting to know the world and myself. That type of trustworthy friendship became significant. Like Jiminy Cricket she was always there to tap me on the shoulder and shake her head when she thought I was making the wrong decision. One particular trip to our familiar diner changed the way I looked at my life.

Dawn and I slid into the well-worn vinyl booth and were about to order our regulars.

“Coffee and a diet coke right?” said the waitress.

We both smiled and nodded.

“Alright I’ll go get those and come back for your order.”

I scooped up the grubby, plastic menu and flipped to the late-night selections.

“Now keep your eyes down and don’t make contact with anyone,” ordered Dawn.

I snickered quietly. “What are you talking about?”

She put down her menu and glared at me. “You know exactly what I’m talking about,” she said. “You lock eyes with someone and flash your smile,” she turned her attention back to her reopened menu. “And before you know it some stranger is sittin’ at our table, chattin’ us up.”

I just smiled.

“I am *not* in the mood tonight,” she said.

“Okay, okay,” I told her. “And it doesn’t happen every time.”

“Uh huh,” she retorted without looking up.

I smiled again.

“And do NOT hit on the waitress,” she added.

I pushed out a hearty chuckle. “Oh come on,” I said. “I’m not that bad.”

“Uh huh,” she said.

Just then the waitress returned with our drinks.

I couldn’t help but look up and grin.

She was young, early twenties, with long blonde hair that was pulled back into a loose ponytail.

I continued to grin sheepishly as I quickly twisted my head back towards the menu in my hands.

“Okay, what can I get you?”

“I’ll have the nachos,” said Dawn.

“Mozzarella sticks and fries please,” I said looking straight at Dawn and not the waitress.

The waitress nodded. “Great, I’ll have that right out to you,” she said, collecting the menus and walking away.

I shot a look of accomplishment.

She smiled back at me. “Good.”

“No faith in me, I swear,” I said.

“Speaking of girl drama...”

My smile melted.

“Girl,” Dawn said. “You’re gonna drown in that drama of yours.”

“Right?!” I said. “It’s never-ending.”

“It sure seems to find you doesn’t it?”

I crinkled my brow a bit. “What do you mean?”

“Look,” said Dawn. “I’m not saying you’re causing it, but some of your decisions sure do invite it in...know what I’m sayin’?”

Her words struck something in me. No one had ever posed it to me like that before.

“Just something to think about,” she said.

Perhaps I’d gone so long without tasting life that I craved excitement; perhaps it was that I occupied the role of victim for so long that it was difficult to see myself as anything else; perhaps all of it had just become habit. Whatever the reason, Dawn’s words gave me pause to acknowledge my own responsibility in the creation of the atmosphere that surrounded me.

Dawn was not only someone that I had a blast hanging out with, she was also someone I looked up to. She was caring and loyal and within that huge vortex of chaos that I allowed to encircle me, I now see that I didn’t appreciate that enough. She had been through so much, both in her past as well as when I knew her, and yet she was always there to give advice and support. When she left the unloading crew, I was sad; when she left for another store, I admit I felt lost for awhile. We have spoken on and off over the years and have recently become friends on Facebook, but it wasn’t ever the same, like when we were fellow unloaders. I appreciated her words and friendship so much; I don’t think I ever told her that.

Towards the beginning of our work relationship however, it was just that—work. We didn’t have time for laughs or trips to Shari’s, those would come much later. We were bogged down by three and four truck nights with minimal help and even after a few months, we still lacked a replacement for Travis. Even the news about finding a new lead to our crew came in excruciatingly long increments. A couple of months would go by and we would hear that they

were still looking; a couple months after that we heard they were interviewing but hadn't found anyone suitable. Every day in receiving felt like we were able to just keep our heads above water. We would often make jokes that we got paid the same whether things got done or not, or that this was what real job security looked like. For me the whole experience was character-building; I was forced out of my usual passivity and into a role with more responsibility. None of this was done with intent; more often than not I was pushed to do things simply because I would look around and there was no one else there to do it, nor would they want to. Time and time again I would try to hand over the paperwork that came with every single trailer to a member of management to take care of, only to have them look down at it and say, "What's that? I don't want it." Before Travis left, he had shown me how to finalize the truck paperwork a couple of times so I took it upon myself to do it; after a couple of weeks, the woman in the invoice office caught on and one day came back to receiving with Assistant Manager Sandy.

"Hey everyone," said Sandy. "Stop what you're doing and come over here really quick."

We all stopped and gathered around the long counter.

The invoice woman began to wave the truck paperwork from the day before in her hand.

"Who finalized the truck yesterday?" she asked.

My head hung down while the rest of the unloaders looked around at each other, confused.

My heart began pounding. I thought I was in serious trouble.

"Seriously, does anyone know who did this?" she continued.

I slowly raised my hand, my eyes still turned downward.

"Okay, come with us," said Sandy. "The rest of you get back to work."

I followed them back to the invoice office, preparing for the worst. The three of us entered the room and Sandy closed the door behind us.

The invoice lady sat in her chair, set the paper on the desk, and pushed her finger onto the top page. “You did this?”

I had kept my head down, but I nodded.

“How long have you been doing this?” she asked.

“A couple of weeks,” I answered.

“Why?” she said. “You aren’t authorized to do this.”

I stood there for a couple of minutes, thinking about how hard it had been since Travis and Jake left. I began to get angry. “No one would take them!” I snapped.

The two of them looked at each other and Sandy snatched up the paperwork in her hand. “Yeah, we were afraid of that.”

“Am I in trouble?” I asked.

“Well you shouldn’t have just done it,” said Sandy. “You should’ve come and talked to me.”

I nodded my head in affirmation.

Sandy gave the paper back to the invoice lady.

“Did I do it wrong?” I asked.

“No, not exactly,” said the invoice lady.

“And that’s not the point,” barked Sandy.

I nodded again.

“Well?” the invoice lady said, looking at Sandy.

Sandy sighed. “Yeah, go ahead.”

The invoice lady grabbed a pen. “Okay look, if you’re going to do this, you have to write it out like this,” she said, scribbling on the paper. “Okay?”

The tightness in my chest began to fade and was replaced with a slight swelling of pride. I nodded.

“And you have to put your initials on here, every time okay?” she said.

I nodded again and looked at Sandy. “May I go now?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’ll walk back with you.”

We were halfway back to receiving before either of us said anything.

“I knew it was you,” she said in a low tone.

“How?”

She chuckled. “The only days they weren’t done and put into the invoice office were on the days you were off.”

Although I felt a little dumb, I smiled.

“On the other days she’d have to come back here and search just to find the damn things,” she said.

I kept smiling, and Sandy noticed.

“Just tell me this stuff okay?”

“I will,” I said. By this time we were back with the other unloaders.

“Oh, and you’re going to have to designate someone to make sure the paperwork gets put in the Invoice office when you’re not here,” she said.

“Got it,” I said.

Sandy turned and shot the rest of the crew a narrowed glare before turning on her heels and left.

A couple of weeks later Blaine called me into his office for a chat. He said that he had heard about the truck paperwork, and how I was taking initiative in the wake of Jake and Travis's absence. He told me that they had decided not to fill Travis's vacancy with another support manager and that he had come up with an interesting alternative: Me. Blaine went on to explain that he wanted me to be the lead on the unloading crew, and how that's basically what I had been doing on my own anyway. In his best managerial voice, he explained that because I had a few infractions on my record he wasn't able to make me a support manager. What he was able to do was give me a raise and an unofficial title of lead. Some of the unloaders saw it as a slight that I wasn't made a support manager, but being as though I was anxiety-ridden enough being made the lead, I was perfectly okay with it. Plus I was making more money. For me, it was perfect.

## Chapter 8

### ~Thing One and Thing Two-Part Two~

Since I had been working close to sixty hours every week, there was very little time to address the issues I was having at home. Shelby's disappearances became more frequent, and I began to care less and less; somehow it became easier to deal with a wounded heart than an ugly fight. Part of me wanted to tell Shelby about my promotion. Even though it was something that was sort of dropped on me—like a bomb went off on the unloading crew, and I was the only one standing—I felt proud of myself. Until then I had often run from responsibility, or at least the anxiety it produced, but when I realized that I was a capable individual, my world began to change. I knew there was a good chance Shelby would be bothered by my doing well and moving up at work, and on the drive home the night of my promotion my mind bounced back and forth between the pros and cons. My worries ended up being pointless, however; as I walked through the door I noticed that there was no one to tell my good news. I flipped the switch on the wall, only to find that the light would not come on. I walked over to check the switch in the kitchen and open the fridge; neither light would come on. I knew that it was getting close to shut-off time as far as my electricity was concerned but was hoping I could make it to payday. That clearly wasn't going to happen. I fed Thing One and Thing Two, grabbed a bowl of cereal and sat on the couch. I contemplated my new raise and while I sat there, surrounded by darkness, I couldn't help but recognize the irony. I finished and set my dish in the sink, hoping there was enough hot water left in the tank for a shower. There was, and as I let the last of the warm streams fall over me, somehow I felt very lucky.

I had the next couple of days off and spent most of them sleeping. It wasn't until I heard the front door open on the afternoon of the second day that I even stirred from bed. I walked into the living room to see Shelby at the computer, fiddling with the mouse.

"The electricity got shut off," I said, half groggy, half annoyed.

"Oh," she said. "You're home, how long has it been off?"

"Just yesterday," I said. *Not that you would know.*

"Oh that's not bad," she replied and began to stuff some things into the backpack she had in her hand.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

Shelby glanced over at the door and then back to her bag. "I just needed some things. I'm going out job hunting."

That's when I noticed that the front door was open a little. I looked back at Shelby whose face was beginning to turn white. I made a quick break for the door but Shelby had dropped her bag and crossed over to intercept me before I got to it. "Why is the door open?" I asked.

"No reason," she said while placing herself squarely in front of me, hands on my shoulders. "I just forgot to close it."

We stood there tussling for a couple of minutes, and then I saw the door slowly open all the way. There she was. I knew it was her. I then watched her step into my apartment, and I lost it.

"Uh uh, no way! Get out!" I said and lunged forward.

Shelby put her full weight in front of me.

"I'm here for Shelby," this woman said. "And I'm not going anywhere!"

“Fuck you!” I yelled while trying to shove Shelby to the side. “This is MY place! And you better get your skanky ass outta my fucking house right now!”

“This is Shelby’s house too!” she spat at me.

“Yeah?!” I shot back. “Who pays the fucking rent, bitch?!”

Shelby strained to twist her head around. “Look, go downstairs, I’ll be down in a minute.”

The woman folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Honey! I’ll take care of it!” Shelby yelled.

I saw red. I tried to make out whether I had heard Shelby correctly but upon seeing the alarm in her face when she turned back around, I knew I had. Every fiber in my body felt like it was on fire. I slapped Shelby’s arms off of me and shoved her aside. I raged towards the door, slammed the palms of my hands against the woman’s chest, clutched her shirt and pushed her backwards. It’s hard to believe that my tiny, 112lb frame was driving this 250lb woman back, but that’s how angry I was. I drove out of my doorway, then across the breezeway and against the wall of the apartment across from mine. After hearing the thud of her body hitting the wood, I let go and ran back to my place and tried to shut the door. The woman however was right behind me. The two of us pushed against the door with equal intensity until I felt a tiny bit of give. For a second I thought I’d be able to get the door shut and locked, but I soon found out that yield was only because the woman had given herself some space to throw herself against the door with all her might. Before I knew it, the door had smashed into me and I was hurled to the floor. I was dazed. It took me a couple minutes to sit up, but as I did, I noticed that the door had swung open all the way, knocking the bowl of Thing One and Thing Two off of its stand. The bowl was intact but was sitting on its side, half of its water missing.

“My fish!” I yelled and crawled over to the bowl.

One of the fish was still inside, swimming in what water was left, while the other flapped against the wet carpet. I quickly picked up the bowl and scooped up Thing One. I soon noticed there wasn't enough water left in the bowl for both of them. I looked up at Shelby, tears already screaming down my face.

“I'll get some water!” Shelby said, racing to the kitchen.

“It can't be too cold,” I said meekly.

Shelby brought a small bowl over and I gently put Thing One into the water. He immediately floated to the top. I put my finger into the water and swirled it around, hoping that it would help. He kept floating.

“I'm so sorry Donna,” said Shelby.

I looked up at the woman who now stood in the middle of my living room. She looked sorry, but I didn't care.

I took the bowl from Shelby's hands, stood up, and placed it on the kitchen counter. I then walked back towards the bedroom, put my hand on the knob to push it open, and paused for a moment. “You killed my fish,” I said, then disappeared into the dark room, and shut the door.

The next day I woke up to find Shelby sitting at the computer.

“The electricity is back on?” I mumbled. I was still groggy.

Shelby swung around in her chair. “Yeah, I paid the bill this morning.”

“Where'd you get the money?” I asked.

She didn't answer. She didn't have to.

I blinked my eyes slowly and shook my head. I stumbled to the kitchen and pulled a coffee mug and a box of Swiss Miss out of the cupboard. I ripped open the paper packet, dumped

the contents into the cup, and filled it with water. I grabbed a spoon and began to swirl. The bowl with Thing One in it was gone; Shelby had obviously cleaned up the mess and I looked just beyond where she was sitting to see Thing Two swimming happily in a full bowl of fresh water.

“What are you doing here?”

She didn't look at me. “I live here,” she said.

I sighed roughly and turned to put my mug in the microwave. I pushed the button and leaned against the counter. “Do you?” I asked.

Shelby looked up at me, face filled with familiar guilt. “Yes, I do.”

I shook my head again. “If you want to be with her, be with her,” I said, now crying. I was so sick of crying.

“Being with her isn't healthy,” she said.

“What am I supposed to do then?” I asked.

Shelby was crying now too. “I don't know, support me? Help me?” she said. “I mean, what do you want me to do?”

“Well, you could stop fucking her,” I snapped at her.

“I'm trying!” she barked. She ran her fingers through her hair roughly. “Look, I don't know why I'm with her, it's...it's like I can't help it!” She jumped out of the chair and went to sit on the couch. “And you're gone all the time!”

“I'm working!”

She put her hand up, almost as a buffer. “I know,” she said immediately. “I know, but I'm alone all the time. And I just get stir crazy and then I start thinking about drinking and...other stuff.”

Shelby and I never once talked about the “other stuff”. I didn’t have a whole lot of experience with drugs or anyone on them, but there were times I just knew that she wasn’t herself. Everything about her would change; her eyes, her behavior, her language, even her love for me. There wasn’t one thing that wasn’t affected by some sort of chemical influence. It was like dealing with an unmanageable darkness whose sole purpose was to make me feel as badly as she did. And yet, I still felt compassion for her. I grabbed my mug out of the microwave and sat down in a chair by the couch. “Just be honest with me,” I said. “I can work with the truth.”

Shelby was wringing her hands together and looking down.

“Do you love me?” I asked.

She immediately looked up at me. “Yes.”

“Do you love her?”

Her head went back down. “Yes,” she said.

My heart felt a jab of pain. I took a deep breath. “Then you need to decide who it is you want to be with.”

Her face looked pained.

I got up and went back to the kitchen to put my mug into the sink. I then sat down on the floor and began to cry harder.

Shelby immediately came over and sat next to me. “I want to be with you,” she said.

I shook my head. “Don’t say it unless you mean it,” I said. “I can’t keep doing this.”

She put her arm around me. “I mean it,” she said. “I’m sure. I can tell her tonight when you’re at work.”

Work. I had forgotten about work and my heart began to panic. I quickly looked at the clock.

“You’re fine,” Shelby said. “It’s only two.”

I wiped the tears from my face and nodded.

She helped me up to my feet and hugged me. “Go get in the shower?”

I nodded and went to get ready for work. While in the shower, I closed my eyes and let the water hit my face. I felt like my spirit was slipping away from me and I felt so isolated from everything; but the most difficult thing was not the thought of losing my relationship, it was the fact that I was so confused. My mind had been so clouded and twisted around by her that I was no longer able feel my life; and no matter how hard I searched for it, I couldn’t find the truth.

## Chapter 9

### ~Dawn-Part Two~

I felt familiar numbness as I walked into the store. The noise of it all, the customers, associates, the intercom, swirled around me so voraciously that I felt like I was drowning in it. I shuffled back to the time clock and into the backroom where everyone was starting to set up for the first truck of the day. I threw my sweatshirt onto the counter and began to wrap my back-brace around my waist.

“Rough night?”

I heard Dawn’s voice behind me and turned around to face her. “What?”

“You look like shit,” she said while laying an empty pallet down on the floor.

“Oh, yeah I guess,” I said and secured the Velcro across my abdomen. I began to walk around the end of the rollers to the other side of the line when another unloader, Tim, rushed past me. “You’re late!” I barked.

He stopped and turned around, swinging his arms and body forward in a fake-confrontational way. “Yeah, so?”

I pointed past him. “Yeah so you get the corner.”

“What?! No fuckin way!” he said.

The “corner” was the middle section of the metal rollers where it was bent at a ninety-degree angle. Our receiving bay wasn’t shaped to take delivery of the trucks straight on; the building lay perpendicularly to the dock, so when the rollers came out of the trailer, they had to make a tight turn to the left. Whoever worked that section of the line had to be fast. Not only because they had a lot more departments to work, but also because they had to take their boxes off of the line quick, to make sure the other merchandise didn’t fall off at the corner as the person

up in the truck pushed the freight down. Everyone hated to work the corner because they had to work twice as hard, and so I usually did it, but not that day.

“Yes fuckin way!” I yelled back at him and pointed again. “You don’t want to work the corner, don’t be late!”

Tim grumbled under his breath and took up his designated position.

I took up my own, working the end of the line, across from Dawn.

“Whoa,” she said. “You’re in bad fuckin’ mood.”

I grabbed a couple of boxes off the line and put them onto a blue, rolling cart. “My fish died.”

“Your fish?” she said, looking a little confused.

I grabbed another couple of boxes. “Yes,” I said. “My fish...my goldfish. I had two of them and one of them—“ I stopped and put the boxes that were in my hand back onto the line. “That bitch killed my fucking fish,” I said in a voice just above a whisper.

“What?” said Dawn. “Who did?”

I breathed in deep and exhaled with a huge gust. “The woman who Shelby is cheating on me with.”

“What?!” she said.

I looked at her and nodded my head.

“And this bitch killed your goldfish? How...you know what, I don’t want to know.”

Dawn turned to put a couple of boxes onto one of her pallets; she then quickly whirled back around. “And your girlfriend is cheating on you?”

I nodded again and again picked up the boxes. If I kept moving, I wouldn’t cry. I wasn’t about to cry in front of the guys.

“Holy shit!” said Dawn.

The guy working next to Dawn had overheard her exclamation. “Holy shit what?” he asked.

I kept working.

“Oh nothing,” Dawn said as she pushed a couple boxes down the line. “Donna’s girlfriend is just a bitch, that’s all.” She looked at me and grinned, pushing a couple more boxes down to me. “She’s fat too.”

I smiled at her.

“Orca fat,” Dawn continued.

“Yeah?” the guy asked me.

I looked over at Dawn to see that she had her arms bowed out at the sides and had filled her mouth with air. She had her cheeks puffed out to capacity with her eyes firmly crossed.

I chuckled. “Yeah,” I confirmed to the guy. “Orca fat.”

Dawn smiled and tossed me one of my boxes.

I caught it and put it on the cart.

## Chapter 10

### ~The Other Woman: Part Two~

The next couple of weeks were tense, both at work and at home. I knew with my being made the lead, the others on the crew would be looking to me for direction, asking me where to go and what to do. What I didn't anticipate was getting bombarded with questions from outside of our crew. Managers, associates from other departments, even maintenance people would come to me with various questions having to do with the backroom. It seemed that with my name being associated with authority and the back of the store translated to knowledge of all of receiving. The hardest part was trying to figure out where my line of authority was; I knew that from 4pm until 1am the receiving bay was my turf, but it was difficult to determine how far into the rest of the backroom that line could be pushed. Never having a clear-cut response to that answer was frustrating—the most common piece of advice I received were the words “fake it ‘till you make it”—and without any training for my new position I was forced to make my way through the best way I knew how: trial and error.

Shelby was spending all her time at home, and was clearly unhappy. I tried doting on her, giving her space, but everything just seemed to irritate her. I was confused by the growing friction until I realized the friction was not directed towards me.

Shelby and I spent most of the evenings on my days off in silence, me on the couch with a book or magazine and her clicking away on the computer. When the phone in the kitchen rang, it made both of us jump and look at each other. Shelby got up to answer it.

“Hello,” she said.

For a few seconds I could hear nothing but low mumbling.

Shelby came out of the kitchen carrying the cordless phone in her hand, her palm covering the lower part of the receiver. “It’s my mom,” she said. “I’m going to step out into the hall.”

I nodded. I didn’t believe her for a second. I set my book down, scooted to the edge of the couch and started to wring my hands together. I knew she was talking to *her*, and I knew I had a right to hear what was being said, but I was scared. I picked myself slowly off the couch and tiptoed to the bedroom where we had the extension. I carefully pulled the phone from its cradle, pausing for a moment to see if I heard the front door, and then quietly made my way to the bathroom. Leaving the light off, I shut the door behind me and sat down on the cold tile. I covered the bottom of the phone with my hand, held my breath, and pushed the receiver button.

“I’m handling it!” It was Shelby’s voice.

I could hear sniffing on the other end.

“You’re handling it?” said the other woman.

“Yes! I’m hand-“

“But you’re not handling it!” the other voice yelled through convulsing sobs.

I recognized the voice. It was her.

“Aww, honey don’t cry,” said Shelby.

Hearing Shelby call her “honey” pricked my heart, but noticed it didn’t stab like I thought it would. I was confused more than anything else, and afraid.

“I really am trying to fix everything,” said Shelby.

“I don’t know if I believe you.”

Shelby’s voice sweetened. “I just need time baby, that’s all.”

*Baby*. That’s what she’d call me all the time; my stomach churned.

“She’s unstable,” Shelby continued. “I mean really disturbed...I’m afraid of what she might do.”

I sat there in the dark bathroom and began to cry. Was I really crazy? Shelby certainly made me feel as though I was. From one moment to another it felt as though my life trembled beneath my feet, and I was uncertain of where to step. I silently cried harder. I tried to stifle the screams inside as I tightly gripped the receiver. I couldn’t hold my breath any longer and suddenly sucked in some air between my clenched teeth.

“Did you hear that?” asked the woman.

“Hear what?” asked Shelby.

I slammed my free hand against my mouth.

“Is she home with you right now?”

“Yea...wait a minute,” Shelby said.

I heard the front door creak open. My heart started to beat frantically.

“Donna, I want you to listen to me,” said the woman. “Shelby has been lying to both of us.”

I looked down at the light coming in from underneath the bathroom door. I watched it slowly dim as I felt Shelby’s presence on the other side. I held my breath again.

“Did she tell you that she wants to be with me?” said the other woman.

I heard a light tapping of a fingernail on the bathroom door.

“Shelby told me that you were threatening to kill yourself. That you went crazy when she told you she wanted to leave you-“

“Stop it!” yelled Shelby into the phone.

I could hear her on the other side of the door as I kept gripping my mouth, the tears, saliva, and mucus now seeping over and through my fingers.

“Donna?” Shelby sweetly spoke, just above a whisper, through the crack in the door.

“Baby? Are you in there?”

I jammed my eyelids closed.

“Donna?” It was the other woman again. “I know how we can end this,” she said.

“I said stop it!” Shelby yelled.

“Fine,” said the woman. “Then you stop it, right now, tell me who do you want to be with? Me or her?”

“What?!” said Shelby.

“Who do you want to be with, me or Donna?” the woman repeated.

“This is ridiculous!” countered Shelby.

I heard the bathroom doorknob shake, making my body jerk the other way.

“Donna honey,” said Shelby. “Open the door and give me the phone okay?”

“Just answer the question,” said the other woman. “Simply answer the question and all of this can be settled.”

I sat there in the dark, shaking and feeling as though my insides were being ripped apart.

I didn’t need to hear the answer, Shelby’s silence was enough, and I hung up the phone.

I slowly brought my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around them.

“Honey,” said Shelby softly from the other side. “Look, it’s not what you think. Let’s just talk, okay?”

I stayed silent.

“Donna,” Shelby said, this time more firmly. “Donna, open the door.”

“No,” I mumbled.

The knob shook again and Shelby pounded her hand on the door. “Dammit, open this door! Give me that phone!”

I looked around at the darkness and suddenly felt my fear give way to anger. I jumped up off the tile, grabbed the phone, flipped on the light, and clutched the doorknob in my hand. I paused for a moment but then took a deep breath and swung the door open.

Shelby stood there, the palm of her left hand resting against the outside of the door frame. I thought I could almost see a grin poking out from the corner of her mouth.

“You want the phone?” I said.

“Yes,” Shelby responded.

Without hesitation I flipped the cordless phone into her chest, with the black antenna whipping up to hit her on the chin.

The last thing I remember seeing is her eyes turning dark and charging into me. The last thing I remember feeling is her forearm hitting me squarely in the chest and being lifted off my feet. I woke up, face down on the bathroom floor.

Shelby was sitting next to me crying.

I kept hearing, “I’m sorry baby, I’m so sorry.”

I remember crying and my entire head ringing. Later on my left cheek hurt from when my face hit the floor. Shelby had carried me into the bedroom and tucked me gently into bed. I remember asking her what happened but I don’t remember the answer. She stayed with me that night but then was gone for quite a few days after that. Was it from guilt? Love? Drugs? My mind was so mired in murkiness. I felt trapped and had alienated everyone in my life. The only thing I had left that was mine was work, and was struggling to even manage that. I was alone.

## Chapter 11

~Donna~

After taking a couple of days off, I came into work feeling defeated. Shelby had beaten my self-esteem down to a raw pulp and being a female lead of an almost entirely male crew didn't allow for showing any weakness.

"Hey Donna," said the familiar voice that now greeted me every day when I came in.

"Hey Skip," I said.

"Guess how many trucks we got today."

"I don't know Skip, how many?" I said as I put my things into my locker in the break room.

Skip held up two fingers enthusiastically.

I nodded my head in acknowledgement.

"Want me to throw today?" Skip asked.

"Sure if you want to," I responded after grabbing my badge and swinging the door closed. I walked to the time clock and swiped my badge. "See you in back."

"Yep, yep," Skip said, patiently waiting by the time clock.

I made my way down the hall, knowing he wasn't going to clock in until the time read exactly four pm. As annoying as Skip could be, I could always rely on his attention to detail.

As I shuffled back to the bay, I was confronted with the antithesis of Skip, guys who would always clock in early, just to screw around. "You guys plan on working today?" I barked.

One of them, Ernie, had only been hired a month earlier and at nineteen, decided that he knew more than I did. He took every opportunity to question my directions and authority and I would often have to track him down because he was never where I asked him to be.

The other one, Richard, was—on the surface at least—a thug wannabe. He weighed a buck-fifteen soaking wet, and yet tattooed himself as if he were built like 50-Cent. He would often laugh at the jokes that Ernie would crack at my expense, and stuck his nose up like a tough guy ready to take it on the chin anytime I came down on him.

As I came back to receiving, Richard was messing with his backward-facing ball cap while Ernie was laying down on one of the empty pallets. They both grumbled at my presence and prodding to actually work and begrudgingly began to move.

I saw that management had already come back and unlocked the doors, so I pulled the lock off the side door, pulling on the rope to open it up. “Alright, grab jacks and bring in some stacks of pallets.”

Ernie mumbled something under his breath and Richard laughed.

I held the rope with one hand and waved my other hand, gesturing out the door.

They both shook their heads and headed out past me; Richard first, with Ernie following behind him.

Ernie pretended to cough, “Ehem! Ack! Ack! Bitch. Ehem!”

Richard laughed again.

I ignored it and started laying down the pallets that we had. By then Skip and the others had made their way to receiving and pitched in.

Ernie and Richard brought the pallet stacks in and we all finished setting up.

Skip checked the seal number against the number on the paperwork, ripped it off, and handed them both to me.

“How big is it?” asked Ernie.

“1565,” I responded.

“I’m gonna throw, right?” said Skip.

“Why don’t you let one of us bigger guys handle that Skip?” said Ernie snidely.

“You think you can handle it?” I asked.

“Oh I can handle it sweetheart,” Ernie spat back.

“Man!” I said. “I love it when people use terms of endearment to address me.” I looked at Skip. “How big is the second truck Skip?”

“1598,” he said.

I looked back at Ernie. “I’ll tell you what, you take the first one and I’ll take the second one.”

He grinned at me.

“If your time is better than mine, I’ll be the one to go out and get the empty pallets for all of next week. If mine is better...” I paused for a moment. “...then you have to.”

“And you’re going to throw the bigger one?” he asked condescendingly.

“Uh huh,” I said.

“You sure about that?” he asked.

“Oh yeah,” I answered.

“Alright, let’s do it,” he said, chuckling, as he headed to the open trailer.

Everyone else took a position on the line.

“I’ll even work the corner for you,” I said.

Ernie looked at me with distrust.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “Skip will make sure all the freight gets pushed down, okay?”

Ernie nodded and took his position at the head of the trailer.

I turned to go back to my area.

“Wait,” he said, took off his shirt, and threw it to the side. “Alright,” he said with his arms stretched out in front of him. “Ya’ll ready?”

The rest of us looked at each other quizzically.

I then looked back at Ernie. “Um, yeah, I think we’re all set,” I said.

Ernie started putting boxes on the line and giving them a shove.

“Hit the timer Skip!” I shouted.

The truck went fairly smoothly for the next hour and a half. I kept sending Skip up into the truck to make sure the freight was getting pushed down, everyone worked well together, and Ernie came out wearing a grin.

“Well?” he asked.

“One hour, fifteen minutes!” Skip shouted.

“Wow,” I said. “What’s that? A little over twenty boxes a minute? Not bad.”

Ernie grabbed his shirt and sauntered past me. “Your turn,” he said.

“Yep,” I said. “Break everyone! After we get back, we’ll pull the full ones and set it all up again.”

Break seemed to go by swiftly, as did everyone else when we returned. Apparently they were all eager to see how the showdown would play out.

We all took up our positions again, this time with Ernie and I changing places. At first I thought this was unfair and thought for a moment that I should say something, but after I saw him blow me a kiss, I quickly changed my mind. I began tossing boxes on the line and shoving them down. I crunched through the first couple of panels without much resistance, but as I plowed through the third one, I felt it becoming harder to push the freight down; which was a tell-tale sign of them slowing down on the line. “Where’s Skip?” I yelled.

“Skip?” shouted Ernie.

“Yeah?”

“Donna wants you!”

Skip sprinted up into the truck. “Yeah?”

“Is there room to push freight down?” I asked.

“Um, a little,” he said.

“Well push down what you can and then tell those guys to pick it up.”

“Okay!” he yelled and did as I asked.

A few minutes later I felt some slack in the line. I gave the freight a giant shove and resumed putting boxes on the line. I had broken down a couple of walls when I saw something shiny. I pulled back a large box to reveal almost an entire wall of SlimFast; they came packaged two cases to a flat, wrapped in plastic, weighty and easy to throw. *Oh, you are so fucked*, I thought to myself. I made my way down the truck, pushing the freight down as I went, until I came to the opening. “Hey!” I yelled down to the end of the line. “You’re going to need an empty pallet for SlimFast!”

Ernie glanced into the truck and saw the line empty. He smiled.

I just grinned back and made my way back up into the trailer. I positioned myself between the wall of SlimFast and the line, grabbed the first package, and threw it onto the line. One after the other I chucked them onto the rollers, letting the momentum of my toss and their own heft propel the boxes down the line. By the time I was done, the line was almost entirely full of SlimFast. I wasted no time pulling the other boxes down and filling up the line behind the massive amount of diet supplement. I tried to give the freight another shove.

“It’s full!” someone yelled from outside the truck.

I quickly bounded down and out of the truck. “What’s the deal?” I asked.

Ernie sneered at me. “They’re backed up down there.”

“Somethin wrong with your arms?” I shot back at him. “Why not help them?”

“That’s not my area,” he said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. I jogged down to the end where the others were unloading the SlimFast onto a pallet. They had dropped the empty pallet at least five feet from the end of the line and were subsequently walking each flat that distance each time. I looked around and found Dawn.

Without a word between us, she nodded at me and positioned herself on one side of the SlimFast pallet. She pointed at the end of the line. “Chuck em!” she yelled.

“Serious?” I asked.

“Absolutely.”

“You got it, sister!” I answered back and quickly started heaving the flats to her.

One after the other I would hurl them into the air and she would catch them in her arms and slam them down onto the wood. In under ten minutes, we had almost all of them off the line.

“Skip?!”

“Yeah?!” he said and scooted over to me.

“Can you toss?” I asked.

“Yep!” he answered.

“Then you’re up!” I said and switched places with him. I ran back up into the truck and resumed unloading, only to have the line back up once again a few minutes later. I could feel myself begin to seethe as I made my way back down. As I came out of the truck I could see that the majority of the boxes on the line were for Ernie’s section. Now I was really pissed. I noticed

Richard starting to come up to help Ernie with his freight. I put my hand up. “Nah Richard, I’ll help him,” I said sarcastically. I was standing on the other side of the line from where Ernie’s area was. I flashed him a cold glare and proceeded to pick up his boxes, tossing each one down onto the floor at his feet.

Every time he bent down to pick one up, another one would slam into the concrete next to him. He shot me an angry look.

“Try to keep up,” I said and walked back up into the truck. Eventually I was able to finish unloading the truck and as I put the last box up onto the line, yelled, “Time!” Covered in sweat and trying to catch my breath, I took my time coming out of the truck. Ernie’s area was a complete disaster, with boxes strewn everywhere and stacks that looked close to falling over. I made my way to the end of the line, leaned against the counter, and looked at the clock.

“One hour and seven minutes,” Skip, mumbled.

“Say that again,” I said.

“One hour and seven minutes,” he repeated and showed me his watch.

“There’s no way!” Ernie yelled.

“Why?” I retorted.

“Because...because...” stammered Ernie.

I wanted him to say it. I knew that he wanted to. I could feel it oozing out of him.

“Well I timed it too,” said Dawn. “Only I had an hour, six.”

Ernie’s face was turning red. “Whatever!”

“Alright everyone,” I said. “Let’s go to lunch.”

Everyone started gathering their things and heading down the steel aisle way.

Ernie snatched his muscle-man t-shirt up off the floor and came over towards the counter to grab his sweatshirt. He shot me a look of disgust and turned to walk away.

“Let me know if you ever want a rematch...sweetheart,” I said.

He kept on walking, never once looking back. Ernie managed to last only a couple more weeks before he disappeared from the job. He certainly wasn't the first guy on the crew to flip me crap like this and I knew he wouldn't be the last. The consolation was that these types of guys were always fleeting. The good ones always stayed around awhile, showing respect and having my back.

## Chapter 12

~Skip~

Skip Rouska was, without a doubt, the most dependable person I ever worked with. He was unassuming and thin, standing at a mere five feet, six inches tall. He always had a smile and a nice word for every person he passed. Although I never found out exactly how old he was, he looked to be around his late forties and sported a wreath of dark, brown hair around a prematurely balding crown. He also loved his moustache—which garnered the nickname “Chester the molester” due to its bushy and unkempt, seventies style—and wore it with pride. I would often chuckle at the crazy shuffle he had when he walked. It always reminded me of a kid in grade-school who wanted so much to run or skip down the hall, but knew he had to walk. He loved bragging that he was from Aberdeen, Washington—same as Kurt Cobain he would say—and would argue with anyone who said that the Rolling Stones were not the greatest band ever. Skip always walked with his shoulders slumped forward, because perhaps there was a bit of a chip there, but always straightened right up when I told him he did a good job at something. He and I would always tease each other in good fun. He would always notice when I had a gray hair showing and would immediately point it out. “How’s it going, gray hair?” he would say, to which I would reply, “At least I have hair.”

Any time we were assigned a new assistant manager, and they spent just a short amount of time with Skip, they would always pull me aside afterward and ask, “Is that guy...okay?” All of us on the crew knew that Skip was different, but even with his sometimes limited capacity for mental acuity, and his small frame, he was all muscle and could outwork most of those around him. Most of those on the outside looked at Skip and saw what they thought he lacked, but the entire store loved him, and he had the ability to take the details taught to him and house them like

a steel trap. He had an incredible memory—which would often emerge as an exasperating game of “hey Donna, remember that one unloader”—and a tenacity to learn and improve; all of which he did with a great attitude and no complaining. I pushed him hard and lost my patience with him often, but his dependability saved my ass more than once and in the end, he taught me way more than I was able to teach him.

One night there was a lot of damaged merchandise to take to the claims area for processing and Skip and I decided to tag-team it together. He always had a tough time with silence...Skip loved to talk. While filling out claims slips, Skip tried to make conversation.

“Hey, did you go to the movies on your days off?” he said.

“Nope,” I responded.

“I did. I took my wife to see X-Men.”

“That’s great Skip,” I said.

“And a steak dinner,” he said, curling his thumb and index fingers toward each other to form a circle in the air. “I had me a steak about this big-“

“Skip?”

“Yeah?”

“I want to get these claims done tonight, know what I’m sayin?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, putting his hands down. “Sorry, sorry.”

A few minutes were able to pass in silence.

“Hey Donna?”

I exhaled loudly. “Yes?”

“We did a good job today right?”

Though irritated, I stopped for a minute to look at him. “Yes, we made a great team today Skip. You did a great job, thank you.”

He smiled.

I went back to what I was doing.

“Hey Donna?”

“I’m beginning to hate the sound of my own name,” I mumbled.

“Huh?” said Skip.

“Nothing, what is it?”

“Are you goin’ to college?”

“What?”

“I heard you tell some people you wanted to go to college,” he said.

“Yeah, I’m tryin’ to get there,” I said.

“You ain’t been yet?” he asked.

I finished filling out one slip and picked up another one to start working on it. “No, I haven’t been yet.”

“You graduated high school?”

“Yeah, I graduated high school.”

“Me too,” he said enthusiastically.

I thought he might have felt good that we had something in common. “That’s great, Skip.”

“Hey Donna?”

“Jesus Christ,” I mumbled again. “Yes?”

“Can I tell you something?”

I exhaled again, exasperated. “Sure,” I said, semi-curtly.

“Some of the classes that I had to take in high school?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, some of them were, you know...” he said as he leaned over closer to where I was and lowered his voice. “...special ed.”

I immediately stopped what I was doing and looked at him. I never saw him look like that before, so sad. At first I didn’t know what to say.

“It’s true,” he said.

“So...Skip, let me tell you something,” I started. “You probably had to work harder and learned more than a lot of others in those regular classes.”

He nodded and looked away.

“Hey,” I said to him.

He looked back at me.

“You’re the hardest working person on the crew,” I said. “And who’s the only one who knows exactly how to do all the claims?”

He stared at me blankly.

“You, Skip...don’t let anyone tell you you’re not smart. You know more than most of the other dumbasses we’ve got back there.”

He grinned and continued to fill out the paper in front of him.

“Got it?”

“Yep, that’s true. That’s true,” he said. “Except you.”

“What?” I said.

“I’m not a harder worker than you,” he said.

I chuckled. "Alright, I'll give you that one."

"But I do know how to do more claims than you," he said.

I laughed again. "Don't push it," I said.

"Sorry. Sorry," he responded.

I shook my head but he was right. I hated doing claims and never hesitated to assign the duty to him. That thought made me smile.

Skip was the unloader I worked with, directly on the crew, the longest. He would often kid me that I was the only one who had worked there longer than him, and that he would catch me eventually. After I had quit and gone back to school, I remember sitting in the library one day when it dawned on me that I had been gone from Wal-Mart for almost two years. Skip was hired on only a year and a half behind me and I couldn't help but smile and think of him when I realized that he had done what he said he was going to do. He had now surpassed me in length of service at Wal-Mart. I wish I could have been there for that ribbing.

## Chapter 13

### ~Me-Part Two~

Over the next few weeks I only saw Shelby a handful of times. I poured myself into work and wasn't home much, but I could tell she hadn't been there. I felt myself going from being afraid to come home to feeling relieved every time I opened the door to silence. When we did see each other, it was filled with tension. We didn't discuss the bathroom incident and I tried really hard to act like everything was okay between us; mostly because I knew she would go away if I did. I slowly started integrating myself back into my life outside of our relationship. I began hanging out with others after work; sometimes with my younger sister and her friends, sometimes with the guys. I had made other changes as well. I opened a separate checking account, in my name only, and had my direct deposits transferred over. I had bought myself some new clothes, started doing my hair and make-up, and occasionally went out to bars with friends on my days off. These changes did not go unnoticed.

One day after doing some grocery shopping, I came home to find Shelby sitting on our couch.

"Hey," she said as I came through the door.

"Jesus!" I jumped. "You scared the shit out of me!"

"Sorry," she said weakly.

With every muscle in my body tensed, I closed the door and crossed over into the kitchen to set the bags on the counter.

Shelby came over, grabbed the chair in front of the computer, scooted it towards the opening to the kitchen, and sat down in it backwards. She crossed her arms over the back and rested her chin on the backside of one of her hands.

I slowly started to unload the groceries from one of the bags. I was trying not to look at her; I didn't want to know if she was normal or angry.

She sighed loudly.

I finally looked over.

Her eyes looked sunk-in and hollow, with dark circles underscoring her lower eyelids. She looked as though she hadn't slept in days. Her skin was ashen, and her clothes were all wrinkled.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She started crying. "I don't know. I don't know what I'm doing."

I kept unloading the groceries. "Trouble in paradise?"

"Don't," she said.

I turned to her. "Look, I'm not trying to fight, I just don't think I'm the right one to be your sounding board right now."

"I'm not asking you to be...I just need to hide out for awhile," she said.

"I don't want any drama-" I started.

"No, neither do I," Shelby said. "I know I screwed everything up, I know that. I don't expect anything from you...I just need to clear my head."

"I'm not changing any of my life around for this," I said.

"I'm not asking you to," she said.

"And I don't want her over here."

"Okay," she said.

"I mean it."

There were a couple of moments of silence.

“What?” I asked.

“She’s supposed to drop some stuff off to me in a little bit.”

I sighed. “Well, you can pick it up from her on the street. I’m serious. This is MY apartment and I don’t want her up here.”

“Okay, that’s fine,” she said.

I finished putting away the rest of the groceries, folded up the paper bags, and put them on the side of the refrigerator. “And we’re not together,” I said firmly.

A couple more minutes of silence passed between us.

She looked up at me again. I had never seen her look so vulnerable almost as though she was a child in trouble.

“What?” I asked once again.

“I wanted to create some distance between her and I,” she said. “So, I kinda told her that you and I were...well, that we...”

“That we what?” I asked.

“That you and I were legally domestic partners,” she answered.

“What?! Why?!”

“I didn’t know what else to say! I just needed some time, to you know, to figure some things out!”

“Jesus Shelby, this woman already hates my guts!”

“Well, if it makes you feel better, I’m pretty sure she hates me more right now.”

I glared at her.

“I guess not,” she said.

I went over and sat down on the couch.

“Thank you,” Shelby said. “For letting me stay here.”

“Uh huh,” I said.

“By the way, you’re looking really nice lately,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said awkwardly.

The dynamic between us was difficult for me to understand. On the one hand I still felt dread and uneasiness when I was around Shelby. I was still afraid. Not only was I frightened of what she was capable of physically, but also of the control and manipulation that she had been able to weave into the pockets of self-doubt that had developed in my mind. That night, after taking a long, hot shower, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I stood there, naked, dripping onto the mat below my feet, just staring at the divot in the middle-right-hand side of the mirror. I reached out to touch it with my finger; it was barely noticeable. I pulled my hand back and began to scan my reflection. I looked so different. Muscles were showing themselves beneath the skin on my arms and shoulders. I used that same finger and placed it just underneath my breasts, then ran it down the length of my stomach. I had never had abs before. I began to cry softly. What I saw in the reflection was strength, when inside I felt anything but. I didn’t want to regret allowing her to stay, but I already did. I had never been able to say no to her and was afraid that I would never be able to find the strength to do so.

## Chapter 14

~Ryan~

I made my fair share of mistakes while working on the unloading crew, but there has been only one thing that I really regret. As the lead I had the opportunity to see many different people and personalities come and go. Few made as big an impact as Ryan. Barely nineteen and thin as a rail, he wore the proverbial baggy pants and borderline-offensive t-shirt. His shaggy blonde hair fell across a hardened, surly face. The small tuft of his scruffy chin hair hid a large crease, caused by the frown he always wore. At times he reminded me of a younger brother, not just because he was annoying, but because I also felt this odd sense of vulnerability from him. He was tall and thin, always walking hunched over, eyes pointed down. There seemed to be a strange cloud of defeated animosity that followed him around. He wasn't the most pleasant person to work around initially and I didn't have much patience for an angry and argumentative teenager. There was his constant grumbling or backtalk whenever he was asked to take a spot on the line. I even heard the occasional "bitch" under his muffled breath, but had gotten pretty used to that before young Ryan came along. He would do things half-assed and didn't seem inclined to learn from his mistakes. It also seemed that he had only one speed, slow. All of this was frustrating but I began to notice something interesting. For someone who looked like they despised their job, he would always show up, on time, for every single one of his shifts.

As time went on, there were a couple of incidents that seemed to change not only Ryan's attitude, but mine too. For Ryan's first foray into the actual throwing of the truck, I decided to use the same technique that Travis had used on me. I told him that we were pressed for time and that I would be pulling the pallets off the truck as he unloaded, and that he damn well better keep up with me. The first couple of panels went exactly how I expected. Not used to the way the

distribution center wedges everything together to utilize space, he was having trouble freeing the boxes up to put them on the line. I of course, feeling superior, stood with my elbow on my jack and chin on my hand, looking at Ryan with a bored look in my eye. I figured this would light a little flame of anger—and hopefully motivation—inside him. What I didn't anticipate was that during all of these weeks of lollygagging angst, this young man was actually paying attention. As I came back after dropping one of the pallets, I began to notice the people on the line picking up the pace...rapidly. I quickened my own pace and as I approached the truck I could see Ryan feverishly slinging packages onto the line, sweat coming down the sides of his cheek. I raised my right foot and kicked the metal rollers to the side—having a few boxes fall off in the process—turned my pallet jack around and drove it up into the truck. Ryan had already unearthed a large pallet of Purina dog food and as I glanced over I could have sworn I saw a slight, crooked grin at the corner of his mouth. Now it was me who was motivated. I shoved my jack into the pallet of Purina and quickly pumped the handle, eager to see the pallet that was behind it. I slowly let the wheels come forward, careful to let any miscellaneous boxes behind to fall as gently as possible, to reveal a short, two-layered pallet of Sam's cola. I looked back at Ryan to see if he could see what I saw—he did—and as I allowed my jack to pick up speed, our eyes locked for a brief moment in determination. I turned and looked at the line, making sure it was firmly against the opposing side of the truck; I couldn't afford to have one of the arms on the rollers sticking out and possibly puncturing a hole in a bag of dog food on the way out. Satisfied, I put my hands behind my back and clutched the jack handle firmly.

“Coming out!” I yelled as I damned near jogged out of the truck. I heard a chuckle as I rounded the corner of the line.

“Giving you a run for your money?” asked Josh.

I chuckled back, “Seems like.” I paused for a minute and smiled. “Wanna make him work for it?”

“Hell yeah,” he retorted.

I went down and parked the big Purina pallet and ran back to the truck. Everyone on the line was now working fervently as I pulled pallet after pallet out, each time returning to the truck in a dead run (stopping just short of the view of the trailer, of course). Ryan plowed through panel after panel like a rabid dog and though I didn’t know whether it was fortitude or sheer spite for me that spurred him on, I realized I didn’t care. Something had shaken loose inside him. As I turned my jack around to enter the truck again, I saw a glimmer of light reflecting off the metal inside of the trailer. Ryan had made it to the back wall.

“Skip?!” I yelled.

“Yeah?”

“Come here!”

Skip rapidly made his way over to me. “Yeah?” he repeated.

I pulled some money out of my pocket. “Take this, run up into the truck and see what kind of Gatorade Ryan wants, then ask these guys what they want, and go out to the floor and buy them. I’ll take a blue one. Okay?”

Skip nodded his head affirmingly, mumbled his signature, “mm-hmm” and shuffled out of the backroom.

The stream of boxes coming out of the truck was beginning to slow and everyone on the line began to clean up their areas as they plucked the last of their section’s freight off the line. While standing at the mouth of the truck I let go of my jack for a moment so that I could give a

shove to some of the remaining merchandise down the rollers. After a few more minutes, I could see Skip coming up the single aisle.

“Move those feet Skip!” I yelled.

His shuffle became more pronounced, his arms full of Gatorade.

“Which one’s Ryan’s?”

Skip tapped a free finger on the top of the red bottle.

I grabbed it and my own, then my jack, and made my way back up into the truck. When I reached the back Ryan was putting the last of the boxes onto the line. I shoved my jack into the last remaining pallet, a half-pallet of bottled water. Ryan slammed the last box onto the rollers and grabbed the metal end, intending to push the line out of the truck.

“Hold on,” I said and sat on top of the water pallet. “Take a load off.” I handed him the bottle of Gatorade.

He took it and quietly sat down beside me.

I took a couple of swallows of my own drink and looked down at my shirt. “Holy shit, I actually broke a sweat,” I swung my eyes over at the unloader sitting beside me. “Huh, that doesn’t happen very often,” I said and smacked him on the shoulder.

He broke into a sheepish half-grin.

I gulped down the rest of my Gatorade and hopped off the water. I reached back and pulled a black sharpie pen from my back pocket, pulled the cap off and proceeded to draw a big smiley face on the Gatorade label. I then yanked the shrink wrap on the side of the pallet back and jammed my empty bottle into the gap, the smiley showing prominently through the plastic. Ryan hopped off as well and as I began to jack up the pallet he tucked his drink under his arm and again grabbed the end of the rollers.

I looked over at him as the pallet began to roll forward. “Great job Ryan.”

His head tilted up ever-so-slightly, his mouth turned up into a full grin.

I yanked the water towards me and began to turn around, stopping briefly for a moment.

“You know this was a tie right?”

Ryan let out a slight chuckle and wiped the sweat off his forehead.

I smiled and turned, pulling the last pallet down and out of the truck. The relationship between Ryan and I was different after that. His attitude lessened and I became less of a hard ass. He listened and improved and even helped new people as they came on; I could see how just a little bit of praise and confidence could change a person’s outlook and I was feeling a little proud that I had anything to do with that. Little did I know that Ryan’s impact on my life would far exceed my impact on his.

When an associate has been at Wal-Mart for three months, otherwise known as a ninety-day trial period, they are given their first performance evaluation. Since I was the lead it was my responsibility to fill out Ryan’s evaluation paperwork and then go turn it over to the assistant manager over the unloading crew. The review consisted of different sections (dependability, dress and safety, productivity, to name a few) and within those sections had several criteria that were then followed by three appraising boxes—below expectations, meets expectations, and exceeds expectations. Although Ryan didn’t exactly start out strong, he had progressed rather rapidly in the few weeks prior to his evaluation. He still had a couple things to work on but overall his paperwork represented a meeting of expectations, with a sprinkling of checks indicated in the below and exceeds categories, but most falling into the boxes in the middle. On the day of Ryan’s review, Assistant Manager Sonia had called me into the office to go over the

papers before giving Ryan his evaluation...so I went and knocked on the management office door.

“Ah, Donna, yes come in,” she said brusquely. I quickly took a seat as she pulled out the paper I had filled out and placed it on the desk in front of her. “I just wanted to go over some things on Ryan’s evaluation; I want us to be on the same page.”

“Okay,” I said.

Sonia immediately nodded and spoke swiftly. “Good, I have a few questions.”

I got along well with most of the assistant managers. I felt that if I could get to know them a little bit, then it was easier to see them as people and not my superiors. I also found that if I showed them respect and understanding, I would then see that in return. Sonia unfortunately was not the kind of boss that allowed her subordinates easy access. She would often exert her authority when it was unnecessary and flaunt her intelligence/education (which I have learned are not necessarily the same thing) through belittling others. I was always a bit on guard where Sonia was concerned. What I was not prepared for was her speaking to me as more of an equal.

“I need your help,” she said.

“Okay,” I said slowly.

She pulled her chair around the desk so that we were now seated side by side and took the paper into her hand. “You see, you’re my eyes and ears in the backroom. I don’t know these guys as well as you do, which is why it’s your responsibility to fill out these evaluation forms.”

“Uh huh,” I said, unsettled. Her being nice and respectful put me off balance.

Sonia softly tapped the piece of paper with her fingertips. “But there’s a small issue with this.”

“Okay,” I said.

“It’s just a little thing,” she assured me. “Just a small fix that you can help me out with.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Well, I see here that you gave Ryan a “meets expectations”.

“Yes.”

Sonia looked at me and crinkled up her nose in disapproval. “Do you really think he meets all of these expectations?”

“Well no,” I said. “That’s why there are check marks in the other categories.”

“Yes but this is supposed to be an average of his entire performance over the last three months,” she said. “Let me ask you this...your opinion...do you really think he has met the standards for “meets expectations” for all three months?”

I started to get confused and nervous, as if I did something wrong. “Well, no but—“

“Let me explain my problem,” she jumped in. “I cannot sign off on an evaluation that is “below expectations” unless the majority of the check marks fall into that category.”

“Okay,” I said sheepishly.

“Look I know you’re doing a great job at leading the crew, and I can only assume that you want to move up in the company,” she said.

I nodded my head. I didn’t actually know what I wanted to do but I felt compelled to agree.

“It’s hard for us women right?” she asked.

I nodded again.

“We need to stick together don’t you think?”

I nodded again.

“Good. So I’m going to need you to change some of these boxes,” she said.

I went rigid.

“Just move some of these “meets” over to the “below” section.”

“But that wouldn’t be true,” I said.

“Oh, just move the ones that don’t matter...like uniform.”

“But how can someone get “below expectations” on their uniform? He didn’t come in naked or anything.”

Sonia leaned back in her chair, pursed her lips, and she gave me a look as if she pitied me. “Surely he forgot his to wear his back support every once in awhile?”

*Sure he had*, I thought. We all had at one point or another, but now I was trying to remember how often he had.

“Didn’t he?” she spat at me.

I nodded.

“Okay then,” she said, handing me a pen. “Go ahead and change it.”

I took the pen into my hand. I changed it.

Sonia smiled and pointed out another box.

“This doesn’t feel right,” I said.

“I know, but that’s policy,” she said. “Being a member of management means we have to play the game to get what we need.”

I looked up at her.

Sonia raised her eyebrows and clicked her tongue to make a *Tsk* noise. “We gotta play the game girl.”

I felt a pit in my stomach. I changed enough boxes to “below expectations” to meet her request, and then got up and quietly left the room.

A little while later the three of us sat in the same room for Ryan's evaluation and besides the churning inside my stomach, it went off okay. Sonia's voice was monotone and swift. Ryan had no reaction at all, not positive nor negative, almost as if it was what he expected. My head was hanging throughout most of it. I was ashamed. After the evaluation, the walk back to the receiving area seemed excruciatingly long. Ryan and I passed through the first half of the store in silence. While passing through the second I could no longer contain my guilt without it bubbling up to the surface.

"Well that was fun," I muttered. I had attempted to say it sarcastically but it came out feeling more like condescension.

Ryan remained quiet.

"I'm sorry about your eval," I said and then paused slightly. "You know I don't think that about you now, right?" The remorse was pounding so hard in my chest that I couldn't discern which one of us I was trying to make feel better.

"Yep," was all he said.

The pit inside my stomach would remain for quite some time. In that moment I was forced to acknowledge the fact that I didn't like who I was. I didn't want to be someone who allowed themselves to be manipulated into doing something they didn't agree with. I didn't want to put a need to be noticed and praised by superiors above what was the right thing to do. I didn't want to be someone who "played the game". And yet, that is who I was in that moment. I vowed never to be that person again.

Life on the unloading crew sauntered on and Ryan, not surprisingly, was still meeting expectations, but that ambition I noticed after our truck competition had waned. He certainly met the bare minimum of daily tasks, but he didn't go further than that. I felt horribly but other than

an occasional joke here and there, I had no more tricks up my sleeve. One day, a couple of months after his evaluation, Ryan was looking a little more sluggish than usual. After lunch, as we were all pulling freight to the floor, Ryan came up to me and asked if he could go home after all the pallets were pulled. He looked pale.

“You feeling sick?” I asked.

He nodded.

“Okay, I don’t have a problem with you going home, but you’re going to have to ask an assistant manager.” As the lead I had a lot of what I liked to call “imaginary authority”. Through attitude and vagueness, I could exude an air of influence but actually I was pretty much powerless. I retrieved the walkie talkie from my hip and pushed the button on the side. “Is there an assistant manager available?”

We waited a few minutes for an answer.

I hit the button again. “Does anybody know what assistant manager is on right now?”

“It’s Sonia,” a CSM answered. “She just came in.”

“Location?”

“UPC office.”

“Thank you,” I responded and tossed my head in the direction of the office, signaling to Ryan to go get an answer. And off he went. I kept on with my responsibilities until about forty minutes later when I heard the nightly page:

“Attention all Wal-Mart associates, we will be having the evening meeting in the garden center. Again, the evening meeting will be held in the garden center, thank you.”

I finished up what I was doing and made my way to the back corner of the store. I could see the unloaders gathered together behind the desk by the sliding door that led to the outside

patio and made my way past the crowd of other associates to join them. As I pulled my jack up to park it underneath an end-cap I noticed Ryan was with the others, leaning up against some shelving. “What are you still doing here?” I asked.

He crossed his arms across his chest and shook his head. “Sonia said no.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

Just then Sonia walked up and began the meeting and I stepped closer to hear. She gave all the regular updates, closing assignments, store sales totals, birthdays, promotions, etc. and in the middle of it I noticed Ryan step out onto the patio. He was gone for just a few minutes and then returned, a little wet (it was raining) and looking a little paler. Sonia finished the meeting and ordered everyone back to their respective areas. All the unloaders grabbed their jacks and started towards receiving. I stuck out my arm to stop Ryan.

“Go home,” I told him.

“What? Sonia said no,” he said.

I pointed to the patio. “What were you doing out there?”

He didn’t answer.

“Did you get sick?” I asked.

Again he didn’t answer, just looked down at the floor. He looked embarrassed.

I went to the sliding doors and when they opened, stuck my head out. I then came back to where Ryan was standing and looked at him. “Go home.”

He looked up at me. “What about Sonia?”

“I’ll worry about Sonia,” I said.

“You sure?” he asked.

“Go on,” I said. “I got you.”

Ryan nodded.

“Leave your jack here, just go straight to the time clock and clock out.”

He did as I asked and disappeared down the aisle.

I piggy-backed his jack onto mine and brought them back to receiving. Knowing that the assistants usually begin their night in the backroom I was betting on running into Sonia as I entered, and there she was, barking orders. Soon enough she caught a glimpse of me.

“Donna!?” she yelled.

“Yeah?”

“What have you got everyone doing?”

I walked up to where she was standing and motioned for Skip—who was standing behind her—to come over. “I’ve got Skip back here with me,” I began and handed the two jacks to him. “Take these and put them in the pallets over there won’t ya?” I returned my attention to my assistant manager. “I put Jarrod and Paul in pets, Kris and Dienson in hba, Kam and Chris in paper goods and chemicals, and Dawn’s on break-packs.”

“Where is Ryan?” she asked while writing something on her clipboard.

I stood quiet for a moment. I had absolutely no authority to allow any associate to go home, and I had a strong feeling that Sonia knew that I knew that. “I let him go home.”

She stopped writing and looked at me. “What?”

“He was sick so I said he could go home,” I said. “He’s already clocked out and gone.”

She looked shocked but I couldn’t tell whether her crinkled mouth indicated anger or contempt. Perhaps it was both. She let out a huff and wrapped her arms around the beat up board in her hands. “You don’t have the authority to do that.”

“I don’t?” I asked condescendingly.

She lowered her eyes at me. “No...you don’t.”

“Oh well, my bad,” I said. “I guess it’s hard to know what I can and can’t do sometimes.”

“I could write you up for this,” she threatened.

I sighed heavily. “Well, I guess I’ll have to take it. It *was* my mistake.” I was absolutely ready to take the penalty, but I also knew a couple of things. One was that the managers generally tried not to write associates up for things that were mistakes and not egregious offences; and two, the store manager liked me, meaning that when he heard I had gotten a coaching, he would definitely want to know why. If Sonia reprimanded me, that would make *her* look bad not me. I was betting on her knowing the latter.

She looked at me with a mixed expression of irritation and twisted respect. “Don’t let it happen again,” she said.

“I won’t.”

She and her clipboard made their way down and out of the receiving doors. As soon as she did I called Skip back over. “Do me a favor. Will you grab a mop, bucket, and the sanitizer and go out to the garden center patio?”

“Mm-hmm, why?”

“You’ll see what to clean up when you get out there.”

“Mmm, okay,” he said as he walked away.

“Hey, Skip?”

He stopped and turned around.

“Don’t let anyone see you clean it, okay? And I owe you big time.”

He shook his head up and down and left the backroom.

I felt lucky to have gotten away with something, but more importantly, I felt some of the self-respect I had lost seep back into my soul. I knew that this gesture hardly made up for what I had done with Ryan's evaluation. After all, there was nothing that I could do to fix that, but it made a difference, both to me and, as I found out later, to Ryan. He didn't actually work there for very long, maybe a year or so, but before his last day he approached me at the end of his shift, head down, with his fists stuffed into his pockets.

"Yes?" I asked.

"I just wanted to say thanks for everything."

"You don't have to thank me for anything. I was just doing my job."

"Yeah but," he stopped.

"Hey I'm just glad you and I were able to get past the shitty stuff ya know?"

He looked up at me. "It meant a lot."

"What did?" I asked.

"You depending on me to do a good job."

I was confused.

"Look. My old man, he doesn't give a shit about me. Tells me I'm worthless all the time," Ryan said.

The sentiment felt foreign. Normally, outside of work, I would show empathy, say *I'm sorry* or something; but here, at work, I wasn't sure what to say, if anything.

"You never said I could do stuff, you just expected me to."

"Yeah, I did," I responded.

"Well," he said. "I never had anyone believe in me before."

I felt a bulge in my throat and gulped my saliva down hard. “Ryan, I have no doubt that you can do anything you set that stubborn ass mind to.”

He shifted his weight and looked back down at the floor.

“Don’t let anyone ever tell you you’re worthless.”

He shifted again but lifted his head up a bit.

“Come on,” I said. “Don’t tell any of the others, but you’re one of my best guys.” I smiled at him and playfully jabbed him in the ribs.

He smiled. “Yeah, I know.”

“Good. Now get outta here,” I said.

He walked past me and down the aisle towards the back of the store. I looked down at his familiar shuffle and baggy pants and chuckled silently to myself.

I never saw him again.

## Chapter 15

~Kathleen V Stephenie~

The confidence that was slowly building within me was wonderful, but it was also very confusing. At work, I performed all tasks with certainty and clarity. I made decisions quickly and rarely second-guessed them. The moment I walked through those front doors I was comfortable, and I felt safe. Life outside of work was noticeably different. My mind was often cloudy and uncertain; I didn't feel worthy of anything good and had become afraid of damn near everything. I had been beaten down so far and for so long that it was difficult to see anything clearly. It wasn't as simple as learning how to get past my insecurities, or choke down my pride, and ask for help; it had gotten to the point where I truly believed that I didn't deserve help. There's that adage that says sometimes someone needs a ton of bricks to fall on their head to be able to wake up to the realities around them. For me, it wasn't a ton of bricks. It was a car.

The day of the accident has holes in it for me so it's difficult to piece it together, but I remember enough. It was one of my days off, and seemed normal for the most part. Shelby and I had lived in relative peace for the weeks preceding; we were affable but not close, and we slept in the same bed but were not having sex. I don't think either of us really knew what we were to each other at that point, but it was clear that neither one of us wanted to fight anymore. Things from that specific day are hazy, with flashes of episodes coming into sharp focus and then slowly fading. These are the things that I remember...

There was a phone call. Shelby told me that her on-again/off-again girlfriend was upset and wanted to come over to talk. I remember being upset. We fought.

I remember yelling, "She killed my fish!"

At some point Shelby went out to the parking lot in back of our apartment building to talk with the other woman.

I remember standing at our bedroom window and looking out, watching the two of them argue through the driver's side window.

Shelby came back up and told me she had to go with her.

We fought again.

I remember being really upset, but I have to admit I'm not sure why. It may have been that it felt as though Shelby was choosing her. It could have been that I was sick of the drama. I know I didn't like her being near my home.

I vaguely remember screaming at Shelby to take her stuff with her.

She wouldn't.

I know I was tired of being yanked back and forth.

She left the apartment.

I followed her out to the parking lot.

We kept arguing.

I remember the other woman screaming at me through her window, but I don't remember what she said.

Shelby tried to calm her down and keep her from getting out of her car.

I don't remember if I said so, but I do remember wanting her to choose, once and for all.

Shelby said she was going with her, and walked around the front of her car to get in.

I remember feeling my backbone. I didn't want her to leave with a key to my apartment in her pocket.

Shelby opened the passenger-side door.

I wanted that house key.

Shelby got into the car.

The door was still open. I wanted to demand the key from her.

It was my key, my apartment, my life. She no longer deserved access.

I walked in front of the car.

Kathleen hit the gas.

I don't remember the car hitting me. I don't remember if it hurt. I don't remember how long it took for the ambulance to get there.

"She did this on purpose!" Kathleen yelled.

I know I yelled something back, but I don't remember what I said.

"Stop fighting, you guys!" yelled Shelby.

I remember being cold.

"She did this so you'd stay!" said Kathleen.

I remember not wanting her. I wanted my mom.

"That's a lot of blood," said Shelby.

I don't remember the ambulance ride, the doctor, or how many stitches were put into my head. But all of that wasn't important. What was really important was what happened after that.

\* \* \*

I lay there in the emergency room, with my head stitched up and bandaged, looking up at my mother on one side, Shelby on the other. I remember my sister Stephenie was standing down at the foot-end of the bed I was in; she was crying. Demerol was now running through my veins so

nothing was hurting, except for my heart. I hated to see the hurt and fear in my little sister's eyes like that.

"We're taking her home," my mom said.

Shelby immediately countered with, "No, she's coming with me."

"Like hell she is!" yelled Stephenie.

"I'm taking her home, and I'm going to take care of her," said Shelby.

"Yeah, you've done such a great job so far," my sister countered.

"She's my girlfriend!" yelled Shelby.

"She's MY sister!" Stephenie shouted back.

"Stop fighting," I mumbled weakly.

"Well she's MY daughter," said my mother. "And we'll leave it up to her."

I looked at my family and then back at Shelby, who with a tear in her eye was softly stroking my hand.

"I want to go back to my apartment," I said.

Stephenie, still crying, turned her back to me and walked out of the room.

I remember the next few minutes of silence being stifling.

It seemed like a really long time but I think it was only ten minutes or so.

There was so much I wanted to say, but I couldn't.

Then a nurse appeared with discharge papers in her hand.

Shelby took them into her hand quickly.

"She has to be taken out by wheelchair," said the nurse.

"I'll get one," said Shelby.

I couldn't bear to look at my mother. I felt so ashamed.

Shelby returned and she and my mother helped me into the chair.

When we got to the front door I remember stopping Shelby because I didn't feel well.

"What's wrong?" asked Shelby.

"I'm going to be sick," I said.

Shelby grabbed a plastic sack and handed it to me.

I vomited.

"Why is it that color?" Shelby asked the nurse.

"That's the Demerol," she said. "She'll be okay."

I looked at my mom.

She looked at me and then at Shelby. "Are you sure you want to go home?"

I nodded.

"Okay," she said and came over and kissed my cheek. "I love you," she said.

I watched the hospital doors slide open as she walked towards them and out to the parking lot.

I remember the ride home being quiet. Shelby helped me up to my apartment and tucked me tenderly into bed, propping up all the pillows as to keep my head slightly elevated.

"I'm going to let you rest," she said. "I'll be right out here in the living room if you need me okay?"

I nodded.

Shelby gingerly closed the door. A few minutes later, the red light on the phone base that sat on the nightstand began to glow.

I remember feeling alone and scared.

## Chapter 16

~A Police Officer~

I woke up the next day with my head pounding. The bed beside me hadn't been slept in. I initially thought that Shelby had left and gone over to Kathleen's house, but then I saw the bedroom door pop open.

"Heeeeyyyy," said Shelby. "How are you feelin'?"

"Okay, my head hurts and my body aches," I said.

"That's to be expected," she said. "Don't worry about work, I called and talked to your assistant manager."

"You did?" I said. "What did she say?"

"To get better."

"What did you tell them?" I asked.

"That you were in a car accident. Don't worry, everything's fine," she said, stroking my arm. "Do you need help going to the bathroom?"

"Yeah."

Shelby came to my side of the bed. "Swing your arms up over my neck," she said.

I did as I was told and tried to stand up. My legs were extremely wobbly.

Shelby wrapped her arms around my waist and guided me to the bathroom, helped me pull down my pants and sat me down.

"I can do the rest myself," I said.

"What? I've seen you pee like a thousand times," said Shelby.

"I just want some privacy," I said.

"Okay," she said. "Just call me back in when you need me."

“Okay.”

She went out and shut the door.

I immediately cringed in pain and looked down at my right hip. There was a reddish/purple bruise, about the size of a basketball, which started at the outside of my pelvic bone area and wrapped around my hip towards my backside. I could see a few scratches embedded in the skin. I touched it lightly with the tip of my middle finger, and then pulled it back. I finished and called for Shelby. She helped me back to the bedroom and just as I was about to crawl back into bed, I noticed the pillow. It was covered in blood. I stopped and started to cry.

“No, it’s okay,” said Shelby. “We just need to change your bandage.” She sat me on the edge of the bed and grabbed the pillow. “I’ll change the case and it’ll be good as new.”

I sat in stunned silence.

She returned, changed the bandage that wrapped around my head, and settled me back into bed.

There was a knock at the door.

I gave Shelby a wounded look.

“No no, it’s not her,” she said confidently. “I’ll go see.”

A few minutes later the bedroom door slowly opened. Shelby stood there, a very large and muscular police officer standing beside her.

“Hey honey?” she said. “This gentleman is here to take your statement about the accident. Is that okay?”

“I can come back later if you’re not feeling up to it,” he added.

“No I’m okay,” I said. “Is it okay if you come in though?”

“Of course,” he said, coming in and standing on my side of the bed by the window.

Shelby followed him and sat on the end of the bed, rubbing my foot through the covers.

“Actually Miss, I need to take this statement alone,” he said to Shelby. “I’ll come out and talk to you in a few minutes if that’s okay.”

“Oh,” said Shelby. “Of course, that’s totally fine.”

The police officer smiled and nodded.

Shelby left the room, closing the door behind her.

The police officer turned to me and pulled a pen from his front shirt pocket. “First of all, how are you feeling?”

“I’m okay,” I said. “Got a little bit of a headache. I guess I shouldn’t have done so many shots last night,” I continued, smiling.

He smiled back at me. “You want to explain to me what happened?”

“I’ll try,” I said. “It’s kind of fuzzy.”

“I bet, just do your best okay?”

I nodded.

“Let’s start with the easy stuff,” he said. “Who were the people involved?”

I gave him my, Shelby’s, and Kathleen’s basic information and then described what I remembered.

He scribbled everything down on his clipboard, nodding occasionally. “What injuries did you sustain?” he asked.

“Well, my head obviously,” I said, motioning to the bandage that encircled my head. “I know I got stitches, but I don’t know how many.” I glanced over to the door.

The officer nodded.

“I have some bruises and scratches on my arm,” I continued.

“Uh huh, anything else?” he asked.

I hesitated for a moment and looked over at the door.

“Miss?” he said.

I looked back at the officer and nodded my head. “I have a pretty big bruise on my hip,” I said.

“Can I see it?” he asked.

I peeled the covers back, turned onto my left side, and pulled the side of my sweatpants down a little.

The officer leaned over and inspected the bruise. “Wow,” he said. “Does it go all the way around?”

“Almost,” I said. “The worst part is on the side here.”

He looked puzzled. “Hmm,” he said. “Did you get any x-rays done?”

I glanced back over at the door. “I think so.”

The officer looked over at the door as well. “Are you okay?” he asked.

I looked back at him. “Yeah, why?”

“You keep looking over at the door. Do you want me to go get your girlfriend for you?”

I immediately shook my head. “I’m just tired.”

“Okay, well I only have a couple more questions for you,” he said, clicking the end of his pen and placing it back into his shirt pocket. “Have there been any other incidents between you and this other woman?” he asked.

I looked down and shook my head.

“How about between you and your girlfriend?”

I didn't answer.

“Okay, well I'm going to go out there and get a statement from your girlfriend, and then I'll come back in here to give you some paperwork okay?”

I didn't look up but nodded affirmingly.

The officer left the room, closing the door behind him.

I sat there for the next few minutes, just staring out the window.

There was a tap on the door.

“Come in,” I said.

The officer came back into the room and shut the door. “I just have a few more questions for you,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

He came back over to stand beside me. “I need to ask you this again...have there been any previous physical altercations between you and your girlfriend?”

Again, I didn't answer. My heart started beating faster.

“You don't have to say anything,” he said. “You can just nod or shake your head no.”

After a couple of seconds I tentatively shrugged my shoulders.

“I'm sorry, but I have to ask this,” he said. “Did you jump in front of that car on purpose?”

My eyes darted immediately to his. “No!” I said, instantly becoming aware of my raised voice. I looked over at the bedroom door again.

“She stepped outside to make a phone call,” he said.

I looked back at the officer. “I didn't, I swear I didn't,” I said. “Ask Shelby, she saw the whole thing.”

“I did,” he said. “She corroborated Ms. McIntosh’s account of you jumping out in front of the car.”

“She did?” I asked meekly, looking down at the bed. My heart felt like it was crumbling. I looked back up at him. “But I didn’t,” I said.

“I’m not saying I believe her,” he said.

I sat there, my head whirling. “Why do you say that?” I asked.

He pointed at my leg. “Your bruise,” he said. “Most people involuntarily react when they know they’re about to be hit by something. Your injury looks as though you didn’t react at all.”

I started to cry.

“Do you think she intentionally hit you?” he asked.

I shook my head. As much as I despised this woman, I didn’t think she did it on purpose.

“You can try to take her to claims court,” the officer said. “But it looks like your girlfriend would most likely testify for her side. It would be hard for a judge to side with you.”

“I guess it doesn’t matter then,” I said, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

The officer reached behind his back and took something out of his pocket. He handed it to me.

I took the small card from him and looked at it. It read: DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES OF SNOHOMISH COUNTY. I shoved it back into his hand. “I can’t take this,” I said.

“Take it, you can hide it somewhere,” he said.

“I said I can’t take it,” I spat back.

He sighed exasperatedly. “Alright,” he said. “Then I guess we’re done here.” He handed me the clipboard. “I need you to sign your statement, here at the bottom.”

I grabbed the clipboard and quickly signed the paper.

The officer took back the board and gave me a couple of pieces of paper.

I snatched them and placed them on the nightstand.

He moved over to the door and turned the knob. "Are you sure I can't leave you a card?"

he asked.

I didn't say anything, just stared blankly out the window.

"I hope you feel better soon," he said and walked out of the bedroom.

I felt cold.

\* \* \*

I knew it was only a matter of time before Shelby would need to check in with her new girlfriend, and I waited, patiently. My opportunity came just three days later. It was a Sunday. I saved myself on a Sunday.

"I should go get some things from the store," said Shelby as she sat beside me on our bed.

"That's a good idea," I responded.

Shelby jumped up and grabbed a sweatshirt from the closet. "I think I'm going to run some errands while I'm out. It might take a little while."

"Okay," I said, trying to stay calm, feeling my heartbeat quicken.

"Do you need anything before I go?" she asked.

I shook my head and forced a smile.

She came around to my side of the bed. "Alright," she said. "I'm going to head out."

"Okay," I said.

She kissed me on my left temple.

I tilted my head and let her.

Shelby left the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

I held my breath and listened intently. I heard the jingle of her car keys. Then I heard the front door open and shut. My heart started pounding. I waited a few minutes before getting up and sliding towards the window. I slid my finger between the blinds and while shaking, parted them ever so slightly. I could see Shelby in her car, first reversing, and then making her way out of the parking lot. I watched until I couldn't see her car anymore. I began to breathe quickly, then turned to the nightstand and picked the phone up from its receiver. My hands shook as I pushed the buttons. I held the phone to my ear.

“We’re sorry, you have reached a number that has been disconnected or is no longer in service. If you feel you have reached this recording in error-“

I slammed my finger down on the “end” button. I started to panic. I tried to dial the number again.

“Hello?”

“Mama?” I said.

“Donna?” my mother said.

“Mom, come and get me, please.”

“Okay honey, okay, calm down...are you at home?”

“Yes, Shelby went out. I don’t know when she’ll be back. I can’t drive yet. I need someone to drive my car. I need you to come right now!”

“Okay, we’re coming. We’ll be there as soon as we can. Just get your things together.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” I said and hung up the phone.

My mom's voice was calm and it made me feel a little better. I threw some clothes on and grabbed my backpack. With my mind frantic, I tried to think of what the important things were. Anything that had any sentimental value I shoved into the bag; my journals of writing and poetry, things I had from my father, a small book of poetry my mother had given me when I was little, my Wal-Mart badge, and the paperwork given to me by the police officer all made their way into my backpack. I kept racing from room to room, confused about what I should take and what I should leave behind. Then I heard a knock at the door. My heart jumped. I made my way to the door and peeked out the little hole. I saw my sister Stephenie and her boyfriend Wayne and started to cry. I swung the door open.

They both rushed in, ready to help. "What do you need?" asked Wayne.

My whole body was shaking. "I don't know, I can't think," I said. "I grabbed Dad's stuff, my writing--"

"What about clothes, did you grab clothes?" he asked.

I shook my head.

Stephenie went right to my bedroom, grabbed a duffle bag and started shoving clothes into it.

"Where's Mom?" I asked.

"She's outside in her car. She's watching to see if Shelby comes back," Wayne said.

"Okay, good," I said.

Stephenie came back out and showed me what she put in the bag.

I nodded approvingly.

Wayne pointed at the computer. "That?"

I shook my head.

He continued pointing around the living room. “That? That over there?” he said.

I kept shaking my head. “I don’t want anything,” I said. I made my way over to the computer table, scribbled something down on a post-it note, and stuck it to the side of Thing Two’s bowl.

“What’s it say?” he asked.

I didn’t answer.

Stephenie came over to look. She read it and turned her head back towards her boyfriend.

“It says, ‘Don’t let me die’.”

I kept looking at my fish.

“Okay, let’s go,” said Stephenie.

Wayne grabbed my car keys and my wallet on the way out. “I’ll drive her in her car, you jump in with your mom and fill her in okay?”

Stephenie nodded her head.

“Wait!” I yelled.

“What do you need?” Wayne asked.

“Grab my pillow from my bed!”

“The one with the blood on it?” Stephenie asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, please grab it,” I responded.

Stephenie went and grabbed the stained pillow and the three of us left the apartment.

Wayne and I climbed into my car. I slowly buckled my seatbelt and leaned my head against the window. The cold felt good against my forehead.

We began to drive away.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I left my fish,” I said.

“Your fish will be okay,” he said. “You made the right decision.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re strong, you know that?” he said.

I let my thoughts get lost in the motion of the trees that whipped by outside the window.

“Yeah,” I said. In that moment, as I sped away from my life, I certainly didn’t feel strong. I was scared. I may not have known what the future was going to bring, but I did know that I wanted one.

## Chapter 17

### ~Blaine: Part Two~

I spent the next couple of days hiding out at my mom's house. Shelby's phone calls began almost immediately. My mom was firm in saying that I wasn't there and refused to tell her where I was. I needed to come up with a plan; I couldn't hide from her forever. I also knew that I needed to get to work and let them know what was going on; and I needed to do it before Shelby decided to make her presence known there. I couldn't let her ruin the one good thing that I had left in my life. It wasn't long before I found myself, nervous and self-conscious, outside of Blaine's office door, trying to conjure up every ounce of courage I had just to knock. I rapt my knuckles upon the small window.

"Come in," said the voice I'd come to know so well.

I no longer had a bandage wrapped around my head, but still felt like my scars were showing. I carefully poked my head inside.

"Donna!" exclaimed Blaine. "How are you feeling?"

"I need to talk to you," I said.

The jovial expression on his face melted. "Come inside and sit down."

I came in and slunk down into the office chair.

"What's going on?"

"Well, in a nutshell, I need kindness and to ask you a favor," I said.

"This sounds serious," said Blaine.

"It is," I said.

"Does this have to do with the car accident?" he asked.

I nodded my head. "I wasn't in an accident," I said. "I was hit by a car."

Blaine sat back in his chair.

“The woman my girlfriend has been cheating on me with was behind the wheel.”

“Oh my god!”

“I need your help.”

“What do you need?” he said immediately.

“I need to get out of here,” I said and began to cry. “I no longer trust my own judgment when it comes to her.”

“Donna,” Blaine said softly. “What do you need?”

“I need to be away from her. I need to go back home and clear my head.”

“Where is home?” he asked.

“California,” I answered.

He pulled a box of tissues from one of his drawers and pushed it across the desk to me.

“We have stores there,” he said. “You can take a leave of absence, go down there, find a store near you, and we can transfer you.”

“But I have a write-up on my record, I can’t transfer with a write-up,” I said. My tear-soaked eyes looked at him. “I can’t lose this job...it’s all I have left.”

“You’re not going to lose anything,” he said. “I’ll take the write-up off your record. You’ll be able to transfer with no issues.”

“Really?” I said.

“You have my word,” he said.

I cried harder. “Thank you.”

“When do you need to go?”

“After I get paid on Friday.”

“That’s a whole week,” he said.

I nodded.

“Are you afraid she’s going to come looking for you?”

“Yes,” I said.

He stood up, came around to the front of his desk, and put his hand on my shoulder. “Can you get me pictures of the two of them?”

“I think so,” I said.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll have them posted up at the courtesy desk. They won’t be allowed into the store.”

I wiped my eyes and looked up at him. “I don’t know how to thank you,” I said.

“By keeping yourself safe,” he said. “Now, go back to personnel and fill out all the paperwork okay?”

I nodded again and got up to leave. I put my hand on the handle of the door, and then turned back to him. “Thank you.”

He smiled. “We’re a family here and we take care of each other.”

I smiled back. I didn’t know in that moment that I wasn’t going to be able to see him again before I left. That warm smile however, would stay burned in my memory, and kept me company on the 1,100 mile drive back to where I grew up. I never had the chance to truly convey the deep appreciation that I have for all that he did for me. To merely say that this man saved my life sounds trite. He was a mentor, a father-figure, a sounding-board, and teacher—he was also a profoundly compassionate human being who unearthed a confidence from within me that I never thought existed, and he allowed the freedom where my confidence was permitted it to grow. The truth is, he didn’t save my life; he provided a safe space wherein I was able to save myself.

## Chapter 18

~Store #2556~

I only saw Shelby once more, years later, at a women's-only party in downtown Seattle. She was still with Kathleen and I actually hadn't seen them at first. I was walking across the wooden dance floor with my then-girlfriend, when a woman stepped out of the shadows and swung her arms around my neck. Someone was giving me the most awkward hug in history. It was then that I realized who was embracing me: Kathleen. She mumbled something along the lines of, "Ohhh, it's so good to see you!" I stepped back and could see Shelby standing behind the other woman, trying hard to force a grin. Kathleen presented her left hand to show me a ring. "We're married!" she exclaimed. This was long before gay marriage had become legal.

"Congratulations," I said, with a fake smile and little inflection. I made up an excuse for a quick exit and started walking towards the bar.

Kathleen grabbed Shelby's hand and began to drag her towards the dance floor. As Shelby and I passed each other, she leaned her head towards me and said, barely audible, "I'm sorry."

I nodded once and kept on going.

I found out later that she had indeed gone to my old store in the days after I left for California to look and ask for me. With the photo of her placed securely under the counter at the front of the store, the associates knew immediately who she was, and subsequently feigned any knowledge of my whereabouts. A couple of months after I left Washington, a box came to my mother's house. It had a few of my personal items in it...things my grandmother had knitted for me before she died, computer disks with my poetry on them, and some miscellaneous photos I had left behind. A small note accompanied the box that simply read, "I thought these things

would be important to Donna.” I was appreciative. I have found that forgiveness is a lot easier when you can recognize that there was, at least at one time, a little bit of goodness in someone that has treated you so badly. I wanted to move forward, but it was important to never forget how quickly things can go bad. That’s why I had my sister retrieve that blood-stained pillow. I held onto it for years and dragged it with me every time I moved; I wanted it as a reminder of how close I came to not having a future at all.

Without Blaine Theriault, I wouldn’t have had a career at Wal-Mart. When I was lead unloader, I was always the last one to clock-out; staying behind to double-check that everything had been finished and ready for the next day. After one particularly long shift, just as the night was about to merge back into the day, I headed up to the management office to return keys to assistant manager, Sandy. The door was open. I stepped into the office to see her sitting in the chair normally occupied by Blaine.

“Aye Donna!?” said another voice.

My head whirled around to see Blaine in the chair that I was familiar with.

“Yeah?”

“You’re just now leaving?” he said.

I grinned. “Yep.”

“Dedicated isn’t she?” asked Sandy.

“Sure is,” he said.

I handed Sandy the keys. “Goodnight,” I said and started to turn.

“Oh, hey,” shouted Blaine.

I stopped and popped my head back in. “Yeah?”

“What do you think of the new unloaders I hired you?”

My smile widened. “We’ll see,” I said. “They seem to have potential, but I’m not going to simply acquiesce, I’m going to make them earn it.”

The two managers looked at each other for a minute.

“Acquiesce?” asked Blaine.

“I told you this one was smart,” said Sandy.

Blaine looked at me and then pointed up at the wall behind Sandy’s head. “You need to get one of those,” he said.

It was a framed college degree from the University of West Florida.

“Yeah?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said. “It’ll take you places.”

I smiled and turned to leave. “I’ll think about it.”

There are relationships that I look back on and feel so incredibly humbled by. Blaine wasn’t merely a mentor or protector; he had become a father-figure at a time when I was dealing with the most severe type of paternal void. Until my father’s death, I had never experienced such loss and grief, nor had I known how heavy the remorse for lost opportunities. Blaine reminded me of my dad through mannerisms and physical stature, but more so by the immense compassion and understanding he showed. Recalling the memory of Blaine’s college pep talk conjured a separate one of my father. I was in high school and struggling with my grades. The way my father handled receiving my report card in the mail that day exemplified the man he was.

I knew what my father held in his hand as I sat at the kitchen table, head down.

He placed his glasses on the end of his nose and opened the envelope.

I remained silent.

He took a few moments to look over the contents. “Well,” he said while sliding the piece of paper back into the envelope and tossing it onto the table. “Next time I guess.”

I lifted my head up slightly. “You’re not mad?”

“Of course not, why should I be mad?” he asked.

I was confused but relieved.

He tapped his index finger on the tip of the envelope. “This doesn’t mean anything,” he said. “Because I know what’s in there doesn’t show how smart you are.”

I looked up at him, my face all scrunched up.

He sat back in his chair. “Let me tell you a little story. I screwed around in high school, a lot. And when my report card was posted the principal gave me some serious what-for. I mean he gave it to me good, saying I was a screw up and stupid and told me that I was never going to amount to anything.”

“He really said all that?”

My father nodded. “Yep, and you know what I did?”

I shook my head.

“The next term I made straight A’s,” he said with a slightly defiant tone.

“Really?!”

“Yep and you better believe I went and showed the principal!”

I felt lighter in my seat.

“And then you want to know what I did after that?” he said.

I quickly nodded.

“The term after that I went back to getting bad grades,” he said with a chuckle.

“What? Why?”

“Well, mostly because I was stubborn. But also because I knew those lower grades weren’t me. Those grades didn’t show what else was going on at the time. Those grades didn’t show if I was smart or not.”

I let what he was saying sink in, and began to feel better.

“I didn’t need to show that guy that I was smart and you don’t need to prove that to anyone either.” He got up from the table and pointed at the envelope. “There’s a lot more to you than what is in that envelope.”

That day in Blaine’s office, I heard my father. I heard someone who believed in me. I missed out on the opportunity to show my dad that he was right, that I had accomplished something that he could be proud of. At Wal-Mart I tried daily to prove to Blaine that his confidence in me wasn’t misplaced. I didn’t always succeed, but hope that he is at least proud of where I have ended up. My fellow unloaders played a part in that growth as well. We put our trust and loyalty in each other every day and displayed a belief in one another that most of us were severely lacking. My memories of work and family blend together because Wal-Mart WAS a family. So many see the behemoth retailer as nothing more than a malignant, big-box suck on society—and I admit things weren’t always perfect—but the “evil” stigma isn’t accurate. Just like any family member, it’s never as simple as them being all good or all bad; their true character lies, complex and intense, somewhere in the middle. Working for Wal-Mart and being an unloader changed my life, even saved my life. The dreams that I am realizing now are because I was I was an unloader then. Dirt-covered and sweaty I’d gladly do it all over again.

The day I left store #2594 to go to California was a bittersweet one, but I knew I was doing the right thing. The scar on my head is a constant reminder: of what happens when I lose sight of my worth, of how incredibly strong I have the capacity to be, and of how a group of rag-

tag individuals can come together to form a family. At first it felt as though I was running from my life, but I soon found out that I was actually running towards one. A new Wal-Mart experience, a new identity, a new me; I was given the opportunity to start over. Eventually I would come to realize the value of my own life and how powerful self-assurance can be. Through gaining physical strength I was able to uncover how strong I was emotionally and psychologically.

As I sped down the freeway, I began to feel the freedom seeping into me. I blasted the stereo; I would put the song “Duck and Run” by Three Doors Down on repeat and let the words, “This world can turn me down/But I won’t turn away/And I won’t duck and run/Cause I’m not built that way” pound through my chest. I was no longer afraid and was finally facing the world standing up straight. I was worthy of what it had to offer. As I passed the border into California, I rolled the car window down and let the wind sweep across my face. I thought of how many tears I cried over Shelby; and the wind felt cleansing. I felt the sun on my arm and looked forward to the days ahead instead of dreading them. I wondered what the guys on the new crew were going to be like. I knew it wasn’t going to be easy but that thought made me smile because I knew that I could handle whatever life was going to throw at me. *I was given this life because I was strong enough to live it*—the words drifted in on the wind. I smiled wider, and stepped on the gas.

*Finis*

MFA Poetics Statement

University of Washington Bothell

Donna Lynne Griggs

May 29, 2018

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

~Maya Angelou

When I began my journey through academia, back in January of 2011, I had absolutely no idea where those first few steps would take me. I had given up a secure, comfortable job where I made an adequate wage and had full medical and dental insurance. I was steadily putting money into my 401K and was allotted a month's vacation a year; I had sick pay and due to a familiar and safe environment, had my GAD (General Anxiety Disorder) well under control. Essentially, there was no observable reason for me to quit my job, cash out my fully-vested 401K, move two states away from my family and, at almost forty years old, go back to school. At first I suppose a large part of me wanted to know if I could even achieve academic success, but as I made my way through the different levels of academia, it became more and more clear that I desired something more. I did not want to merely survive the life that I had been given, I wanted to actually live it and have it mean something.

As anticipated, with each year that passed, each class I attended, and every professor I attentively listened to, I learned new and interesting things. What I had not prepared myself for however was how much I would learn not just about the world, but about myself. By the time I entered the MFA program here at UW Bothell, I was confronting not just a simple desire but a fierce urgency to have the experiences of my life find their voice within the narrative of this chaotic world and even, perhaps, make a difference to someone else. My thesis started out as a wish to express the complexities of working at an enormous, and exceedingly divisive, entity such as Wal-Mart. Certainly issues such as gender disparity, class stratification, and political and cultural supposition play a part in my piece—and I hope that it will factor more prominently in future sections. I realized through the process of writing it however, that it was becoming about

so much more. To be able to adequately illustrate how this metamorphosis occurred, I must explain what happened to me this past winter quarter.

I was originally registered to take an English elective on the Seattle campus, but due to unforeseen prerequisites, was forced to make a quick change in that first week. Professor Julie Shayne was teaching Topics in Global Cultural Studies: Cultural Resistance in the Americas, and the artistic mediums presented in the course description really intrigued me. I quickly jumped on the opportunity to take the class. Having never taken a cultural studies class, I was immediately affected by the heavy subject matter (i.e. revolution, oppression, torture, rape, and murder) and found the recounting of themes within my own narrative difficult. At first, I found this parallel irritating. Little did I know that the entire experience would have a profound and lasting effect, not only on my thesis, but on my perspective of the world in general.

*In the final paper I wrote for that class, "Muted: Recovering One's Voice From the Grips of Trauma" I wrote:*

*"I haven't been able to finish my thesis. I just sit there, staring vacantly at the blank page in front of me, that blinking, vertical, black line taunting me. Certainly I've experienced writer's block before, but nothing like this. It was as if the words, that once flowed so freely, had simply and immediately dried up; and I didn't know why. Although disheartened and more than a little anxious about my upcoming deadline, I didn't have the luxury of wallowing in the 'whys'. I had to keep trudging forward; there were other classes and assignments to attend to and with*

graduation just a couple of quarters away, very few extra minutes  
to squander.” (Griggs, 1)

It was a horrendous struggle to complete the first draft of my thesis and it was not until I focused on the words of so many courageous women I studied in that cultural studies class that I realized why. In a nutshell, the class concentrated on the different forms of art (song, theater, oral history/storytelling, writing) that individuals who experienced horrible acts of oppression and cruelty utilized to articulate their survival and resistance. I found myself gravitating toward a woman writer and activist named Alicia Partnoy. Her novel *The Little School* was based on her experience of being “disappeared” and incarcerated during the Dirty War period in Argentina. Although technically fiction, I found the writing of the book a similar medium to my own (a mix of confessional non-fiction and poetry). The tone—a melancholic ache layered atop a core mixed with pain and strength—was eerily familiar. Her verse reduced me to tears. “They cut off my voice/so I grew two voices/into different tongues/my songs I pour” she says...“Like resplendent drums I am playing—/Today I am playing” (*The Little School*, 9). Through imprisonment, torture, starvation, humiliation, sexual degradation, and the fear of death (for both her and her family) Partnoy’s refusal to be silenced is a testament to her resiliency and that of the human spirit, and I found myself extraordinarily moved. I thought about the problems with finishing my thesis again, and was struck by the impotency of my own voice.

While doing research for that final paper, I encountered Carmen Aguirre, an actress, writer, and Chilean exile now based in Vancouver, Canada. The first piece of writing by Aguirre I read was a play called *The Refugee Hotel*. It depicts the experiences of a group of Chilean exiles as they land in Canada and are forced to deal with the difficulties of not only cultural adjustment, but the psychological fallout of war as well. The themes of mutism, displacement,

drinking, anger, and suicide felt as though a large bucket of PTSD were dumped out and slathered onto a blank page. As I read Carmen Aguirre's play, I found myself mired between two very poignant lines. One of the characters, Fat Jorge (who deals with daily vomiting and problems sleeping) says, "...stay right here and listen to all of this! Keep your eyes open. Keep your ears open. Look. Listen. Very carefully. This is life. And you've got to be present for it. You've gotta be" (73). That powerful line was bookended with Fat Jorge dying, and his daughter, Adult Manuelita, saying that, "He lived in the open wound and he died in the open wound" (125). I could not help but see this as a warning. Healing is imperative to truly surviving trauma; you need to confront the truth of what has happened, but you cannot allow yourself to stay in those episodes. Aguirre's play was not only affecting, it was also familiar. As I looked at myself and the progress (or lack thereof) that I had made on my thesis, I was confronted with the fact that not only had I not remained present in the reality of my life, I was blatantly avoiding it. As I began to write my thesis, I intended it to be predominantly a story about my time at Wal-Mart, accented with a few personal anecdotes about my time outside the job. However, as I wrote the first sixty-four pages, I realized that it was morphing into more of a story about trauma and how my experience at Wal-Mart, along with the support of those I worked with, helped me extract myself from an environment of abuse. While reading the courageous stories of so many women who had experienced the cruel truth of violence and exploitation I could not help but see the relationship between their stories and my own. While reading Carmen Aguirre's memoir, *Mexican Hooker #1: And My Other Roles Since the Revolution*, I was overwhelmed with a strong sense of association. Aguirre tells of her young, turbulent life in Chile; relates the difficulties of adjustment being a Chilean exile in North America; and describes, in brutal detail at times, the account of her rape by a man dubbed the "paper bag rapist". "We're alive. We survived. He

*didn't kill us. We are here*" recounts Aguirre (212). She describes a childhood filled with terror and emotional damage with a firm resolve, yet crafts her words in a way that shows a delicate vulnerability. As a writer I am in awe, and as a woman I am inspired. I dealt with similar horrors when I was young and was able to see in the reflection of my own writing, how critical the belief in one's own strength can be. As Aguirre progresses through the sections of her life story, I hear the tone of her voice grow stronger, more resilient. This is an aspect highlighted when she talks about traveling to a prison to meet her attacker face to face. In an article titled, "'I'm Carmen. Nice to meet you again': why I faced my rapist in prison" in *The Guardian*, Aguirre explains why it was important to confront her assailant; "I tell them what Laura (another survivor of this man's heinousness), one of the wisest, most articulate people I've known, says. 'Because I'd like to meet the man I've been in a relationship with for my entire life'". This is the cruel truth of trauma; it invades your body and sticks to your bones. It lingers like a dense fog, and you end up having to fight for any shred of sunshine for the rest of your life. Aguirre goes on to explain that she wishes to "even out the power balance" between her and her attacker. I wondered just how many people get the opportunity to confront the person or persons who have caused them so much grief and anguish, let alone be willing to take advantage of such an opportunity. I am certainly not sure I could have. But in reading how Aguirre made her way through the process of healing, especially in such a bold way, I became motivated to do the same. Aguirre utilized different genres of the creative arts to deal with her past traumas and reclaim her voice. How could I not do the same?

The stagnation I found myself in when it came to my MFA thesis was caused by fear. I have been engaged in different forms of psychological therapy for almost thirty years, so discussing details of the traumatic events of my life has become almost like second nature. But expelling

those stories vocally is one thing; pulling them out of your soul to slap them down onto the blank page is very different. Somehow the intended themes of socioeconomics and class disparity faded into the background and simple humanity bubbled to the surface. Essentially, my thesis is how working for Wal-Mart saved my life. In documenting how the relationships I formed there created a buffer of safety from the abusive relationship I was in at the time, the larger theme of healing from trauma became clear. The writing of my thesis had gone fairly smoothly until I got to the part where I needed to explain how another person's hands were put on me and I ended up in the hospital. I made excuses why my thesis work stalled; I was too busy, had too much reading, I was not feeling well. I used all of these to justify why I could not sit down to my computer. I tried so hard to avoid telling my story, from hearing my own voice. But the other voices, the ones of the women I had listened to winter quarter, would not allow me to sit idle. With all they had been through and the obstacles they had to traverse to find their voices, how could I claim that my journey was too difficult? It hit me hard to realize that although no one's trauma should ever be minimized, if these women had the courage to tell their stories, then I needed to find the courage to finish mine.

The MFA program here at the University of Washington Bothell defines poetics as more than just the study of aesthetics in writing; it characterizes it as, "why we write how we write." If what we are attempting is to gain wisdom in the understanding of why we write the way we do, it stands to reason that it will then lead to a deeper awareness of where our creativity springs from. My creativity comes from a multitude of things; among them are an empathetic soul and an ability to soak up the world around me. However, at my core, I know it stems from my ability to survive. I write the way I do because I did not die.

My chosen genre—creative nonfiction—deals in truths. There are merits in other styles of creative writing, e.g. fiction, poetry, etc, and they all use a certain amount of fact and/or reality. However, there is a particular rawness that comes with nonfiction that, in my opinion, cannot be duplicated. In Raquel Partnoy’s (Alicia’s mother) essay, “The Silent Witness”, she expresses her artistic goals, “When working on these paintings, not only was I interested in preserving my family memories, but also in portraying both the positive and negative aspects of life” (*Women Writing Resistance*, 32). Highlighting the polarities of one’s own experience can be powerful. That is where the emotive aspects of life break through the societal rules to reveal their wounds; exposing our scars is terrifying, but also breathtaking, and beautiful. A furtive intensity drives me to extract every ounce of truth and push it towards the light; I know what it feels like to think that tomorrow will never come and I construct my words as if I am already out of time. The fear that comes with revealing what lies beneath does not often show itself, but when it does, it makes for a fierce adversary. That is when I remember that my very existence is the resistance. I see myself as a warrior and my voice is worth fighting for.

Gloria Anzaldúa speaks sagely about the risks in writing in her essay, “Speaking in Tongues: A Letter to Third World Women Writers”: “The danger in writing is not fusing our personal experience and world view with the social reality we live in, with our inner life, our history, our economics, and our vision” (*Women Writing Resistance*, 85). She goes on to state, “What validates us as human beings validates us as writers. What matters to us is the relationships that are important to us whether with our self or others” (85). What is most true to us is precisely what is essential to our success as writers. The matter of what makes me who I am is what will form the strongest bond between my writing and whoever is reading it; and that includes the good as well as the bad. Readers rarely connect with two-dimensional characters

and they can smell dishonesty. What I want to achieve with my words is a rich image that people can perceive clearly, that is so real they can almost taste it; and all of that begins with a firm foundation and an open route to relatability.

Every piece of writing I create is constructed with the idea that it is not merely mine. I try to choreograph a dance between the two of us; one that attempts to draw the audience in so that we can engage in dialogue. Part of that is that I am a giver. There is enough darkness in the world and I firmly believe that the more positivity and beauty I put out into the sphere, the more it multiplies and thus the more I add to the fight to combat that darkness. My desire is that whatever I put forth will disarm the listener and compel them to answer in some way. This could come in the form of differing opinions or dissimilar experiences; it could materialize in affirmation and validation; but whatever shape it adopts, it at least stimulates participation.

Rosario Castellanos expounds upon this in her essay, “Language as an Instrument of Domination”:

The meaning of a word is its addressee: the other being who hears it, understands it, and who, when he answers, converts his questioner into a listener and understander, establishing in this way the relationship of dialogue that is only possible between beings who consider themselves and deal with each other as equals.

*(Women Writing Resistance, 76, 77)*

Writing is an opportunity to participate in the powerful exchange of the meaning of words. The free flow of ideas and emotion is what truly keeps the equilibrium of the universe in balance. The response does not have to be a reply that comes directly to me or anyone else for that matter. It

might be something that elicits a questioning of self or the world around them. Whatever the return, I just hope that the echo is loud enough to be acknowledged.

For my birthday one year, a friend of mine gave me a necklace; it was engraved with an inscription that read “you were given this life because you were strong enough to live it.” There were certainly times in my life where I thought about not living it anymore. My anger and obstinacy to not be decimated by another’s actions fueled my tenacity. I know that I was lucky. Others I have known either did not have—or could not find—that fire and subsequently lost their fight. There is a part of me that feels as though I owe them space in every conversation I have, that in some way I am obliged to reserve some of the breaths that I am so lucky to have for them. I feel a kinship to the women writers I have had the fortune of reading winter quarter because a lot of their words resonate with me. How through their own experiences, they highlight the lives and voices of others. That is something that I would very much like to accomplish in my own writing. I want to shed a light on a healthy path for others, to show them that there is a way to survive the trauma they have experienced. I want my words to be able to show a map of how to escape the darkness, to live again. “We must use what is important to us to get to the writing,” says Gloria Anzaldúa (*Women Writing Resistance*, 85). What is important to me is not only did I survive the trauma of my life, I also clawed my way back from the brink to learn how to live it. I want to show others it can be done. I want to inspire and encourage others, women especially, to go on that search to unearth their voices, and to not stop until they find them.

In writing my thesis I was confronted with the reality that memoir is far more complicated than I first believed. As Patricia Hampl says in her book, *I Could Tell You Stories*, memoir is not merely artful transcription; it is more like developing a relationship with memory. “Stalking the relationship, seeking the congruence between stored image and hidden emotion—

that's the real job of memoir" she says (30). While creating this story about Wal-Mart I began to see that it was about much more than just class structure and socioeconomic disparity, or even corporate misconception. At its base it is about the human condition. With memoir, memory and emotion are inextricably intertwined, and it is learning how to delicately navigate that interrelation that I hope to be able to hone my craft. It begins however, with facing the harsh truths about what we keep buried within our closets; to, as Fat Jorge suggests, be present for our life. To finish my thesis I had to engage with the pain of my past. "To write one's life is to live it twice..." says Hampl (37). Unfortunately it also requires the writer to survive that life twice. It is not always pleasant to experience, but it is certainly necessary in developing something honest and relatable. For a significant portion of my life I found myself running from death. My writing has echoed the need to etch my story into history to show not only that I was here, but that I fought so hard to be. My hope is that my thesis is a reflection of that. Finally I have been given a chance to tell my story. I would have the chance to make a difference.

I write because I can.

I write because so many cannot.

I write, because I did not die.

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