

I drove down the hill in my car to get here, and it felt the same as it had when I was a little girl. I opened the windows and let the air blow in, whipping my hair across my face and into my eyes. My tires turned beneath me, this time four instead of 2; the street was freshly paved. I went 28 even though I knew the limit was 25. The house looked the same. The garden in the front was still blooming with an abundance of lilies and tulips. I knew Momma would never let someone else touch her garden. I noticed, however, that the paint on the house was beginning to peel off in little strips, eventually falling to the ground like leaves from a tree. A rush of guilt came over me. *If Momma hasn't been able to paint, maybe she isn't doing too well*, I thought. *I should have come back earlier. I should have answered her calls*. It had been years since I had seen Momma. Sam and I had moved to Washington with the kids 10 years ago. I wasn't trying to get away from Momma, but that is just what I had done.

I was about to knock on the door when it swung open, a swish of warm, perfumed air rushing out to greet me along with Momma. She had a smile spread across her face, and I could see that her teeth were still perfectly placed and a bright white. The wrinkles around her mouth were new though. And her lips were thin and pale, not a stitch of lipstick on them.

"Oh Casey! I haven't seen you in forever! How are you?" she said. Her words quivered their way up and down the back of my neck. I was nervous.

She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the house.

"I'm good Momma. How have you been?" I noticed her nails were still perfectly polished, fresh with a glossy coat of crimson color.

"Oh you know, just keeping up with all of my little things around the house. Ever since I retired I've had a lot of free time. I read a lot and do work in the garden mostly."

She sat down at the kitchen table and I took my place across from her. There was a silence, something which made me uncomfortable. I didn't like silence. I didn't like free time. It just left too much time to *think*. Not just think about that movie I saw with the kids last weekend or think about what I was going to make for dinner the next night, but time to really *think*.

Luckily Momma broke the silence for me, "I've got some peanut butter and raisins in the pantry, and I just picked up some celery at the market this morning if you want me to make you a snack." Her green eyes had a glaze over them, I could tell her sight was going. This wasn't the Momma I grew up with. She didn't look strong and powerful. Her hair was ratted and other than the mascara she had smeared all over her eyelids her face was bare. The wrinkles on her face were the biggest shock. Momma had always had that gorgeous glowing skin, never a blemish to flaw her porcelain complexion.

"No thanks Momma. I'm alright."

"So tell me about the kids. How is Eve doing in school? And isn't little Albert in kindergarten this year?" she asked. Her expression nearly broke my heart right in half. I felt terrible. She barely got to see her grandkids. After we moved I just never found the time.

"Eve is doing great Momma. She's a straight A student and she just started playing soccer. And Albert actually won't start kindergarten until next year. Sam and I decided to hold him back a year since the class he was supposed to go into was already overfull."

"Oh that's wonderful Casey. And how's Sam?" she asked with a touch of excitement in her voice. I knew Momma loved Sam. She thought he was perfect in every way.

The steering wheel felt cold and slick beneath my dried out fingers. My palms were moist and ever since I had passed over the state line into Washington my hands shook as they gripped the wheel. I took slow, long deep breaths with every mile marker I passed. I looked at the clock. 4:17. I would arrive in about a half an hour if I kept going five miles under the limit, something else Momma had engraved into my mind. *Always go 5 under the speed limit. It is safer for you and safer for everyone else on the road. And always, Casey I mean always, leave 20 minutes earlier than you think you need to. Being punctual is being respectful. And if you respect other people, they will respect you...*

There wasn't a day that went by that Momma's voice didn't run through my head. She was always there, giving me one of her "helpful" hints, demanding excellence, telling me how life needed to be. She was always there, even though I had moved 7 states away from her. Moving was bittersweet, and I feel like a heartless woman now as I realize that it was mostly sweet to get away from Momma. It was wonderful in fact. I looked at it as a blessing in disguise.

We had moved because of Sam's job. He had been offered the new residency position at the Cleveland Clinic, an opportunity he told me he just couldn't pass up. When I told Momma this she was thrilled, excited even. She had cupped her hands together, cocked her head to one side, and given me a smile of approval that I had seen many times before. The lines on her forehead gave her away when they bent and crinkled in the center. I remember the look she had given me, her soft eyes staring at me, unforgiving, silently begging me not to go. I had told her I would stay in touch and visit her soon.

What Momma didn't realize is that I wouldn't call her all the time. Maybe once or twice a year. Perhaps an email ever so often. I didn't want to talk to her because I simply didn't want her to control me anymore. Momma had a power over me. I decided that constantly hearing her

in my head telling me to drive slower or to do Eve's hair, to do this that way or do that this way was all the Momma I could handle. I had slipped out of her reach, but only in the literal sense. She was still there, even when she wasn't.

I turned the radio off as I got closer. I began the drive down the hill, and it felt the same as it had when I was a little girl. I opened the windows and let the air blow in, whipping my hair across my face and into my eyes. My tires turned beneath me, this time four instead of two; the street was freshly paved. I sped up to 28 even though I knew the limit was 25. Every time I defied Momma it felt good, like a rush adrenaline. Some people bungee jump to feel alive or ride a motorcycle with no helmet. I drive three over the limit and leave ten minutes early instead of twenty, that's how I feel alive. My heart started pumping as I neared the house. This was it, the moment I had been waiting for my entire life. It took me far too long to recognize this feeling inside of me. This feeling that was just dying to be released. I could feel it building up in the pit of my stomach. She didn't realize what she had done to me. I would tell her. I would tell her the moment I walked in that door.

The house looked the same. The garden in the front was still blooming with an abundance of lilies and tulips. I knew Momma would never let someone else touch her garden. I noticed, however, that the paint on the house was beginning to peel off in little strips. They were scattered all over the ground, like leaves from a tree. A rush of guilt came over me. *If Momma hasn't been able to paint, maybe she hasn't been doing very well*, I thought. *I should have come back earlier. I should have answered her calls.*

*No.* I surely wasn't the one who should be feeling guilty here. *Tell her everything, just let it out first chance you get.* I gripped the wheel hard and took a deep breath in. *You can do this.* I

let the air in my lungs out in loud huff and shut the car off. I wiped the moisture from the palms of my hands on my pants.

I was about to knock on the door when it swung open, a swish of warm, perfumed air rushing out to greet me along with Momma. She had a smile spread across her face, and I could see that her teeth were still perfectly placed and a bright white. The wrinkles around her mouth were new though. And her lips were thin and pale, not a stitch of lipstick on them.

“Oh Casey! I haven’t seen you in forever! How are you?” she said. Her words quivered their way up and down the back of my neck.

She grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the house.

“I’m good Momma. How have you been?” I blurted this out without even thinking.

*Remember what you came here for.* I noticed her nails were still perfectly polished, fresh with a glossy coat of crimson color as she grabbed my hand.

“Oh you know, just keeping up with all of my little things around the house. Ever since I retired I’ve had a lot of free time. I read a lot and do work in the garden mostly.”

She sounded nothing like herself.

She sat down at the kitchen table and I took my place across from her. There was a silence, something which made me uncomfortable. I didn’t like silence. I didn’t like free time. It just left too much time to *think*. Not just think about that movie I saw with the kids last weekend or think about what I was going to make for dinner the next night, but time to really *think*. I wanted to tell her. I just had to start the conversation.

Luckily Momma broke the silence for me, “I’ve got some peanut butter and raisins in the pantry, and I just picked up some celery at the market this morning if you want me to make you a snack.” Her green eyes had a glaze over them, I could tell her sight was going. This wasn’t the

Momma I grew up with. She looked at me with those soft eyes, her gaze landing a little to my left. I wondered how clearly she could see me.