Isn't Everything Wonderful Now?

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A person should be whole. By whole I mean that they should have all the pieces that make up a good life — a mom, a dad, a house, perhaps a sibling, a pet maybe, a loving support system. I wouldn’t go so far as to say I never had that or I don’t have everything together because I did. I was whole. I had a mom, a dad, a house, a brother, a dog, a loving support system.

What happened?
An elephant moved into our living room.

If I had to give it a description, I imagine it would be hot pink and sit on the sofa eating chips, drinking Diet Coke and watching Oprah all day because, well, it’s an elephant and it can do whatever it wants I suppose.

I might not have noticed the elephant had it not had such a firm grip on my father, who didn’t care much about the whole thing in the first place. He was far more concerned with the elephant, which was second only to his concern (or lack thereof) for himself.

A part of me is missing because the elephant took my father. I used to think if I had my father, I would be whole. Come to realize, things lost to elephants don’t come back so easy.

Dec. 26th, 1995 — ±11:45pm
I don’t remember what I was dreaming about, but I do remember being woken up. My mother touched me gently on my shoulder with a warm hand and shook me, telling me to get up.

Being woken up in the middle of the night usually merited one of two things — either the house was on fire or it wasn’t as late as I thought. I opened my eyes slowly and stared into the blurry image of the couch and blankets I wrapped around myself to keep warm. My mother’s voice from somewhere over my head was telling my brother to get up. When I asked why, she said that we had to go, to get our shoes and grab a coat. I sat up slowly and stretched and asked where we were going.

My mother repeated her request for us to put on shoes and a coat. It was only then that I remember registering something was wrong.

I sit on a big leather loveseat, my hands folded neatly in my lap, back straight. It is summer and hot outside, so logically I’m wearing shorts. The only problem with this is that my bare legs are sticking to the couch. I’m very uncomfortable. I decide that I hate leather.

The woman sitting across from me looks old enough to be my grandmother. She’s wearing some calico print dress, big old person glasses, and clunky old person shoes. Her graying hair is perched on the back of her head in a bun. It looks a lot like a little gray ball Velcroed to her head. She bites her lip, nods, scribbles something on her clipboard, and looks up at me smiling. It’s one of those smiles that suggests that she understands me and urges me to continue. I play with my flip flop and say nothing. I decide that I hate her.

“Miranda?”
She’s not sure if I’m paying attention to her or just playing with my shoe. I look up, but continue to play with the shoe.

“How does that make you feel?”
I’m pretty fucking sure I’ve spent the last fifteen minutes telling her how I feel, but I don’t say that. Instead I continue my thought from where I left off after she started smiling, nodding, and scribbling.

“I just don’t understand. I wish things were the same as before.”
Bites lip, nods, scribbles, smiles.
“The same as before?”
“Like, I want my family to be together again. But I don’t think that’s going to happen.”
More biting, nodding, scribbling, and smiling.
“How does that make you feel?”
Clearly, she doesn’t get it at all.

After the counseling appointment, we find our car parked outside under a shade tree at the curb. My mother is trying to give my brother a hug, but he just stands there and looks sad. In the car she tells us that this is going to help us. It
didn't help her and daddy, so how is it supposed to work for us? I decide that I hate therapy. A lot.

We stopped going to that therapist at the end of the summer. I think either she got too expensive, we ran out of money, or mom got to the point where she was okay. I think it was the former. Either way, I didn’t have to see Velcro bun again, which made me happy.

Dec. 26th, 1995 – ±12am

Climbing carefully into mom’s 1985 Toyota Corolla, she puts the car in neutral and turns the key. We sit in the backseat and say nothing. The car is like a tomb as mom pulls out of the driveway. Something is wrong, but we sit silently and let mommy drive. I think it was on our way there and not back or the next morning that she told us what was going on, what was wrong. Mommy had gotten a phone call from the police, saying we have to come pick up daddy. A nice lady had taken away his keys because he tried to drive home drunk. I remember realizing that perhaps this was why he was never around. He was drinking. I could hear my mother crying in the front seat. We told her it was okay and she said nothing. She wiped away her tears and kept driving.

Two years later I find myself in another counseling office. This time my counselor is Mr. Magoo. Not really, but he sure looks like it. He is a small man with wispy brown hair, balding, with a large mustache, large glasses, and large teeth. He is smiling at me like an idiot and I really wish he would stop. It’s more of a cartoon smile. It is freaking me out.

“So, how are you feeling today?”
I feel kinda shitty.
“Tell me about school.”
I did this two days ago. Not a whole lot has changed in two days. Everyone still thinks I’m psychotic and my teachers are trying too hard to understand why I’m so stubborn. Probably the only thing that has changed is that I am two days older than last time.

“Okay, how are you?”
“Yeah, I’m kind of tired. I had lots of homework to do and soccer practice is long.”

He smiles his stupid cartoon smile at me and props his chin on his hand.

“Tell me about school.”

He sits up and scribbles something on his clipboard and stops smiling. Finally. He looks back up at me and strokes his mustache. After a moment he sets the clipboard on the table behind him and scoots in his wheeley chair over to a filing cabinet. I can hear him shuffling papers for a few minutes before he pulls out a piece of paper, turns around, scoots back over, and hands it to me. The paper has a picture of a sad bird in a cage with two bars through which it was peering. He folded his arms on his knees and looked at me looking at the picture.

“What do you think this means?”

I look intently at the picture for a few minutes, thinking, letting it tell me that I feel the same as the bird – illogically trapped.

“It means that there are many opportunities for freedom, but we don’t see them. We only see the things that hold us back.”

He smiles at me kindly and nods.

“Do you think you’re like that?”

“Yes,” I acknowledge slowly, “I am.”

He smiles his cartoon smile at me. I really wish he would stop.

Dec. 26th, 1995 – ±12:15am

We pull into a strip mall in front of a place where we often get pizza. I like this particular pizza place because it is cheap and the crust is the right thickness. Sometimes they serve this pizza for hot lunch at school. There are some cars here and there and there are people milling around probably wondering what’s going on. Flashing lights are producing a bright glare in
the rearview mirror as mom gets out of the car. I look over at my brother. He is probably just about as scared as me. We can’t see what is going on because of where mom parked. So all we can do is sit and wait in silence.

I would often sit in my room, staring up at the ceiling, music blaring, door closed, and feel like I was losing it. It was the only way for me to be at peace, knowing there were people out there who felt me, knew me, and spoke to me through flat, 5mm cylinders of plastic and years of technological development. This drove my mother crazy. She would come in to the room, often angry and without knocking, and tell me to either turn the music down or leave the door open. I didn’t want her to know what I was listening to, so I turned it down and kept my door closed. I had developed a weird security from having my door closed. It blocked out things I didn’t want to deal with, particularly everybody and everything. The only thing that felt right in my life was my alone time, which considering my fractured mental state, was somewhat dangerous. It was the only time I could put down my happy façade and feel truly torn up. One song stopped and another began.

I never thought I’d die alone
I laughed the loudest, who’d have known?
I had heard that there are signs, just like for every other malady out there, but true to form, I was in denial that something was wrong. Only I was allowed to know what I was thinking, about the thoughts going through my head. Only I was allowed to even feel this way about my life, about how fractured it was.

I’m too depressed to go on
You’ll be sorry when I’m gone
And all at once, I had the answer to my problem.

Dec. 26th, 1995 – ±12:30am

After a very long time (or what felt like a very long time), my parents came back to the car. My mother looked sad and angry; my father looked indifferent, like he didn’t know why she was so mad. They were looks I became very familiar with over the next year, looks that I was already vaguely familiar with. Mom started the car and carefully pulled out of the parking lot. No one said anything on the ride home. I stared out the window and refused to look at my father. I remember beginning to feel very angry, the start of a tumor of hate that would grow and shrink and grow and shrink unconsciously as I grew older. How could he?! I thought, how dare he ruin this day. It was so perfect, and now everything was ruined. I didn’t understand how something that started out wonderful could get so bad. I stared silently out the window as we passed cars and buildings in a kaleidoscope of neon and sulfur. I vaguely remember wanting to cry, but held back. What I do remember about the ride home that night was that it was then that I decided I hated Christmas. I was nine and my brother was five.

I feel very idiotic and selfish. Mom is staring at me with tear-stained eyes. My poor mother. First she had to put up with her mother, then my father, then her mother again, and now me. I’m such a horrible person. I can’t deal with my own pain and fear properly and I hurt people as a result. I think I might have thought about being nice to her, but I was still too mad to think clearly. My mother continues to stare at me and cry. The only other time she was this mad…well, I don’t know. Maybe she’s never been this mad.

“How could you do this? Do you have any idea how selfish you are?!”

“I’m sorry!” I’m crying too, and I really am sorry. I wasn’t, but I am now.

“People love you and care about you, why would you do that?”

At this point I might have suggested that it is because I didn’t ask to be plucked up from my happy misery and transferred to my own personal hell. Wisely, I did not.

“I know you don’t want to be here, but that isn’t the answer.”

“I’m sorry, mommy,” I whisper.

“Your brother has come to me crying telling me ‘I’m worried about Miranda.’ Does that not mean anything to you?”

I say nothing for a moment as I recall one evening when my mom and brother had come to pick me up from Bible study. I had gotten into the car and turned around to say something to
my brother and saw that he was crying. I remember laughing and making a comment about not letting our grandparents get him down after asking him what was up and getting no response. Everything is dawning on me, but it feels somehow violent. Maybe it's because mom is yelling at me.

"Yes, it does! I said I was sorry!"

"You're not showing me that you're sorry!"

"Yes, I am! Mom, I'm sorry! I'm so, so sorry!"

It was the first in a long series of fights that we would have regarding what it was I was thinking or not thinking about my apparent selfishness. Part of it was I was thirteen; part of it was I really was being selfish. Years later, she gets on my case for the opposite reason - now I'm too generous and I need a job.

"You've broken my trust. You're grounded until you can earn it back!"

"Mom, I'm sorry! I'm really, really sorry!"

"Then you can show me by earning my trust back. No more sitting in your room. You have no privacy until I feel you can earn it back."

She was true to her word. For the next three weeks, I was watched constantly. After a month, I was able to sleep in my own bed again. The next day, I was on permanent suspension from school. Six weeks later, my fate was to be decided.

Dec. 26th, 1995 - ±1am

I don't remember coming home. I don't remember getting out of the car and crawling into my bed. I don't remember if my parents fought after they knew my brother and I were asleep. I don't remember if I stayed awake staring at my ceiling before I fell asleep. I do vaguely remember waking up the next morning. The sun shone in through my window and made a grid on the floor where it came through the screen, a metaphorical cage that I had not realized was there. I might have stared at it for a while before rolling over and staring at the wall. The silence in the house was unnerving. Even today, I still dread silence in the house. Silence is more than an absence of noise; for me, it is an absence of life, of feeling, of emotion. It plays with your head, telling you that there are things, thoughts, and voices that are all around you and yet not there at all. Silence disturbs me. I decide I hate silence.

Waiting is hard. Waiting for someone else to decide your fate is even harder. Which is what I was doing – waiting for my fate to be decided. Waiting in a cushy office chair staring behind the main office desk out beyond the little teller windows in the wall into the silence of what I was hoping was a second chance. I shifted my gaze to my neatly folded hands on my lap, framed by my denim pants. I was grown up and helpless at the same time. A kindly lady walked past and smiled sweetly at me. I smiled back and returned to my hands. My hands, my hands, my hands. Who knew that so much pain could be inflicted with two such delicate hands as mine? Bored with my hands, I looked back down the hallway where my mother had disappeared. A door opened halfway down the hall and I returned quickly to my position staring out the little teller windows on the opposite wall. I turned as my mother appeared beside me.

"They're going to let you in," she said smiling. I smiled back, stood up, and hugged her.

"Promise me you won't do that ever again."

"Yes mommy. I promise."

She hugged me again and kissed me goodbye. A tall, clean-shaven man had appeared and ushered me back down the hall to the counselor's office. A tiny woman with a bob and large front teeth smiled kindly at me as I entered.

"We're glad to have you with us, Miranda," she said beginning to pull out papers with schedules. I paused for a moment. I didn't want to be Miranda anymore. I wanted to start over, without Miranda, without thinking about all the things I'd done.

"Ana," I said. "I'd like to be called Ana."

She smiled and nodded. It was my first day of eighth grade.

April, 1997

I remember hating, or at the very least not liking elementary school. I had been in the same class since kindergarten and it seemed to me that most of the people in my class were
particularly wishy-washy, especially when it came to me. I was alone a lot because most of the friends I had didn’t like me or I didn’t like them. A lot of the boys saw me as a crybaby and so did the girls; the difference between the comments wasn’t necessarily who was saying it, but what they were saying. One boy would call me a crybaby all the time no matter the occasion, causing me to cry and when the girls saw me crying they would make snide remarks about how ‘big girls don’t cry’ and then walk away murmuring to themselves. Strangely enough, I admired these girls and wanted to do anything to be like them, to be pretty and popular, to be friends with all the ‘right’ people and stop being a crybaby. More than anything, I wanted to fit in. But, me being me, it was kind of unlikely. More often than not, I would come home from school completely miserable and not want to go back. Regardless, I still got up every morning and went to school convincing myself that today would be better, different, but knowing it was most likely going to be the same.

I remember coming home from a particularly horrible day at school and my mother told me we were leaving. Leaving where and where were we going, I asked. Leaving here and going to live with your grandparents, she said. I don’t remember if I yelled or just stood there. It will be better, she said soothingly. As miserable as I was, I was mad. I didn’t want to go, and I let her know it.

I joined the band for three reasons: first, I played an instrument; second, it gave me something to do with my time; third, I enjoyed it. Band was a peak in my life – from band I got a life and I got friends, both of which I embraced with open arms. Though we had our disagreements on occasion, everything always worked out for the best. I remember the trip we took to Disneyland in the spring for Magic Music Days. We went and spent the whole day in the park and then, later we went back to the buses, changed into our uniforms, and marched down Main Street playing a college fight song chosen by the director that we had memorized for the parade. After we were done playing, we changed out of our uniforms and got back on the buses to go home. I remember sitting on the charter bus, holding a Coke, sweating like crazy, and smiling as I stared out the window reflecting on the day. A girlfriend turned around in her seat in front of me and looked down at me.

“Well?” she asked, folding her arms on top of the seat. I looked up at her. “It’s been a good day.” I smiled. And I remember thinking, for the first time in a long time, everything is wonderful now.