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## The Catalyst

Eleanor and her dad were gardening in the backyard of her dad's home, Eleanor's childhood home. This was a weekly ritual since the passing of Eleanor's mother. There was a comfortable silence between the two as Eleanor weeded the garden and her father planted some tulips, country music playing from the stereo to keep them company. It was a Garth Brooks CD, one of her father's favorites. The two bobbed their heads along to the music. A quick, up tempo song ended and a beautiful ballad followed. Her father stiffened.

"Oh, Dad! This was Mom's favorite song!" Eleanor cried. Her dad stood from his knees, approached the stereo, and skipped the song.

"What was that for?" Eleanor asked, "It's a great song..."

"Enough, Eleanor," was all her father offered. Her face dropped, but she tried to smile.

"Oh come on, Dad. It's just a song..."

"I said, 'enough.'" He dropped back to his knees and continued silently as "The Thunder Rolled" played on in the background. Eleanor wordlessly continued with her weeding, clearly upset. She thought about why her dad might hate to talk about her mom. Yes, he was in the car and survived the accident while her mother hadn't, but it'd

been six years since the accident and he still refused to speak about her. It didn't make sense to Eleanor, but she tried to accept it, to accept her father for who he was.

Sunday rolled around and Eleanor eagerly waited for the call. She glanced obsessively at her phone, tapping her pen ferociously as she feebly attempted to focus on an essay for her British Literature class. Her eyes darted around her apartment. Her leg bounced at her desk. She couldn't sit still. Her brother, Jack, had never missed their Sunday phone call – they had been extremely close as children, but had had a strained relationship since their mother's passing. Nonetheless, he'd call every Sunday just to check in on his baby sister. It was the only day he had off in the Peace Corps and, being so far from home in Santa Barbara, he loved to hear Eleanor's familiar voice. They'd make small talk: he'd ask about their father, about Joseph (her childhood best friend), about how school was going, and if Eleanor had made any progress on opening an animal shelter like she'd always dreamed of doing. Their conversations never changed much, but Eleanor loved them – she loved to hear his voice, hating when the connection would get fuzzy or having to say goodbye.

The truth was that she felt very alone with her brother in Tanzania. With him in a third world country, she was left to take care of their father all by herself, a responsibility she'd grown to resent. She desperately wanted Jack back home to share the burden. Not that there really was any burden, but Eleanor perceived that there was one. She felt she had to take care of her father, that she had to take on all the tasks around the house that her mother used to do.

The ring of the phone shook Eleanor out of this stupor, causing her to jump. Instead of answering right away, though, she let it ring three times before finally picking up the phone. She knew that this Sunday's conversation would be different than all the others and she knew how awkward it was going to be. But she wanted to talk to her brother about it before she brought it up with her father.

"Hey, Jack!" she finally greeted.

"What up, sister lady?" he responded cheerily.

"Oh, you know, the usual... essays and work. Gotta pay the bills!" He laughed at his baby sister. She was always so focused on the future; she could never just live in the moment. "Hey! I'm going to be successful in life! I've got it all planned out! Don't laugh at me!" She was getting defensive, but knew that Jack was only teasing. She sighed, letting out a chuckle herself. "But, on a more serious note, Jack? There's something I wanted to discuss with you..."

"What's going on, Eleanor?" He'd stopped laughing and just static could be heard on the line as he waited for her to gather her thoughts.

"I want to talk about Mom..." she ventured, cautiously.

"Oh. Okay."

Days earlier, Eleanor and Joseph had sat, knees touching, on the couch in her living room, *Ten Things I Hate About You* playing on the TV. Eleanor had been engrossed in the plot, but Joe couldn't manage to keep from glancing over at Eleanor. He loved to watch as she would half smile at Heath Ledger's antics or how her eyebrows would furrow as the characters' did. She'd seen this movie a hundred times, had the

entire script memorized. When Joe had suggested a movie night, she couldn't wait to pick this movie to watch; she knew Joe wouldn't care.

The movie ended and Eleanor and Joe had sat in a comfortable silence. Nothing ever seemed to be awkward between them; it was always so natural. Joe had looked around the room, noticing pictures of Eleanor's family and that of her roommate's, as well. But something was missing. He couldn't seem to see any of Eleanor's mother.

"Something the matter?" she asked, noticing his puzzled expression.

He was caught off guard; he hadn't realized that he'd showed his confusion on his face or that Eleanor had been the one watching him for once. "What? No, nothing's wrong. I just noticed..." he trailed off.

"Noticed what?" she asked playfully, pushing his knee away from herself.

"Well, how come you don't have any pictures of your mom up?" Eleanor's face dropped and her posture straightened. The tension in the room came instantaneously. She didn't say anything for a long moment.

"I dunno. I just – It never – Uhm..." she trailed off, uncomfortably. She was getting defensive.

"It never...what?" Joe pried.

"I don't know, Joseph. I just don't have any." She got up, grabbed their water glasses, and took them into the adjoining kitchen. She fidgeted with the faucet and soap dispenser. Joseph watched closely, reading her body language.

"But why? She was such an amazing woman. You can't just erase her from your life." He was pushing her, provoking her.

Eleanor froze. She slowly turned to face Joseph. “Erase her from my life? You think that’s what I’ve done? Joseph, I think about her every single day of my life. She was my mom, for fuck’s sake! Every morning I wake up and relive the nightmare that she’s gone forever. That her final moments were of terror and pain. I have NOT erased her from my life.”

Joe stood and approached her. He enveloped her in a hug, which at first she resisted but after a long moment, she gave up and relaxed into his embrace. The sobs came and she couldn’t stop them. They stayed there for several long minutes, Joe simply holding her while she cried. She hadn’t let it all out like this in years.

“Eleanor, that’s not how you should remember her. You need to remember the good, the happy. Think about all the wonderful memories you have with her. She was such a big part of your life for 16 years. She was there for your prom, that family trip to the Bahamas, everything.”

Eleanor looked up at him. She was no longer sobbing but tears still spilled from her eyes, nostalgically remembering these moments.

“Think about her contagious smile and how she could always make you feel better with a mug of delicious cocoa. And I remember that you would never hang out with me on Tuesday nights because that was the night that you would watch *American Idol* together.”

“Yeah. She was pretty great.” A small smile crept onto her face. She wiped the tears and her nose. A half laugh, half sob escaped from her mouth. “I remember this one time when we had the sleepy ha-has. Dad was away on business so I was watching TV with Mom on his side of the Big Bed. We were watching *Saturday Night Live*. It was an

old repeat from when Steve Martin was still on. And the “Two Wild and Crazy Guys” sketch had us in tears; we were laughing so hard.”

“See? Those are the things you need to remember, El.” Joseph was stroking her arm comfortingly. The two had moved back to the couch and Eleanor was leaning into Joseph. He breathed in her scent. For the next hour or so, they exchanged happy memories of Eleanor’s mother, laughing while Eleanor shed a few tears on occasion.

“This is the first time I’ve really talked about her since the accident. It feels kinda liberating.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“It’s just been so...taboo...in the house, you know? My dad *never* speaks about her. I mean, just the other day, when Mom’s favorite song came on the stereo, Dad flipped out and skipped it and yelled at me when I tried to talk to him about it. And Jack doesn’t talk about her either. I think that’s why he joined the Peace Corps, to be honest. To get away from it all. I haven’t thought about any of these stories in years, Joseph. It feels good. It feels right.” Joseph stood up and walked into Eleanor’s room.

“Where’re you going?” Eleanor remained sitting, but sat up straight, following him with her eyes.

“Your room. To get your old photos. I know they’re in that box in your closet.” Joe smiled at this. “Want to join?” Eleanor jumped up and raced in front of him. She wanted to be the one to open the box for the first time in nearly six years.

“Hey, Daddy, what’s up? Everything okay?” concern in Eleanor’s voice as she eagerly answered her phone. “Oh...okay. Yes. Dad, I’ll be by the house this weekend to help clean up the garden...No, don’t worry about it, I can study for my exam after...Yes, I’m sure. Okay, drive safe...love you too, bye” Eleanor said into her iPhone as she walked to work at the Admissions Office Tuesday morning. She sighed deeply, running a hand through her hair. She dreaded the conversation she’d promised Joe she would have with her father the following weekend; it was a dark cloud looming over her head, never relenting.

A few days after she and Joe had looked through all the photos that she’d hidden away in her closet, they’d sat down together and really talked about the issue. “I’m scared. My dad’s gonna shit a brick when I bring her up,” she’d explained.

“But you have to, El,” Joe had pleaded, “Otherwise she’s always going to be this source of unhappiness and tension in your family. It’s been six years. I think that’s long enough.” Eleanor had looked at him, stared for a long minute.

“I know,” was all she could manage to say.

“Plus, you talked to Jack about it Sunday, didn’t you? And you said that conversation had gone better than you’d expected. And that was half the battle. Now you know you’ve got his support behind you. And mine,” he offered.

“Yeah, I know you’re right. I just...still don’t want to do it.” Her eyes remained fixed on her hands in her lap.

“I know that it’s probably difficult for Dad to talk about it because he was in the car when it happened, but we both know that it’s time. Promise me. Promise me that you’ll talk to him. This weekend. I’ll go with you if you want.” He knew that Eleanor

had gotten through her mother's accident, but he also knew that she hadn't come out of it the same happy girl that she'd been before. He wanted to see that girl again. This family that he'd grown to be a part of was falling apart in front of his eyes and he didn't want to let that continue.

Eleanor's face lit up. "Would you??"

"Of course. I've been your best friend since we were, like, 6 years old. You were the first friend I made here when I moved to Santa Barbara. You've always been there for me, and I've always been there for you. That's not gonna change." He

The front door of Eleanor's childhood home creaked open as it always did. Six years had gone by and her dad still hadn't put any WD-40 on the hinges to stop the creaking. Nor had he changed any of the furniture since her mom's death. The house still felt warm, inviting, like her mom had intended it to, but Eleanor felt as if she was walking into a nightmare. Joe was right behind her, his hands in the pockets of his worn-out Levis. He felt completely at ease, completely at home; he'd grown up in this house almost as much as his own house next door. And while Eleanor was at college, he'd come by a few times a week to help out Eleanor's dad with everyday chores. But Joe could tell that Eleanor no longer considered this her home: it was her dad's house to her now.

Eleanor paused. She thought back to her youth, saw herself sitting in the living room off the foyer, playing with her Matchbox cars and Barbie Dolls simultaneously. She saw her mother snapping a photo of the mess. Saw herself running into the kitchen



at the smell of fresh baked cookies – her mom’s cookies. Saw her mom sneaking her an extra cookie because Eleanor had been a good girl. She saw herself running through the house to the backyard to jump into the hot tub, even though it was the middle of summer. She saw her mother laughing and rolling her eyes, affectionately. Most importantly, she saw her family whole again, everyone sitting on the couch laughing at some movie on the TV, like they did every Thursday night.

“Daddy?” she called into the foyer. “Daddy, we’re here!” She looked back at Joe and took a deep breath, sighing and wiping her sweaty hands on her leggings. He winked reassuringly.

“I’m right here,” he whispered. She offered a weak smile in return.

A cheery voice echoed from the back of the house. “Back here, honey! Hi, Joey! I’m coming!”

“Hey, Dad!” Joe piped in. He’d always called Eleanor’s parents Mom and Dad. He was like their third, adopted, next-door-neighborly child.

Joe and Eleanor made their way to the kitchen, taking seats at the island. Eleanor’s dad glided into the room, a bright smile on his face, kissing Eleanor on the top of her head as he whirred by.

“Someone’s in a good mood,” mused Eleanor.

“Yeah, well...I sealed another deal with a client today! This one was a big investment, which means more money for us!” Eleanor only half smiled, knowing full well that she was going to ruin her dad’s good mood.

The three of them caught up for a while, Eleanor putting off the inevitable. She'd realized how silly of a decision she'd made by asking Joseph to accompany her – he wasn't going to let her chicken out.

“Something on your mind?” her dad finally asked.

“What? No,” Eleanor quipped. Joe threw a look at her.

“Eleanor. I'm your father. I know when something's bothering you.” He was standing across the island from Joe and Eleanor, reinforcing the parent-child boundary. Joe watched her face pale, watched the blood drain from it, nerves taking over. She'd reverted back to her childhood, remembering all the times her father had been stern with her, including the gardening incident just a few days prior. Joe reached a hand over and rested it just above her knee, and squeezed. She breathed audibly. Joe remained silent, but encouraging.

“Well, Daddy. Uhm. You're not going to like this conversation.” Her father looked at her, concern in his eyes. “Joe and I were talking the other day. And. Uhm...”

“You got this.” Joe's hand tightened on her leg once more. Eleanor seemed to ignore it.

“How come we never talk about Mom?” she blurted, eyes glued to her hands, which were in her lap.

“What?” Her father's face looked confused.

“How come we never talk about Mom?” she repeated in almost a whisper.

“That's what I thought you said.” His expression was pensive, but cold. The silence lingered for a long time, what felt like hours but must have been only minutes. Joe almost thought that this was a terrible idea, that he'd encouraged Eleanor to do the

wrong thing. After all, she knew her dad better than he; who was he to tell her what to do? Just when the two thought her father wasn't going to respond at all, he looked up.

“Why did this come up? After all these years, why now?”

“Well – ” Joe cut Eleanor off.

“That’s my fault,” he said. “I noticed in Eleanor’s apartment the other day that she didn’t have any pictures of Mom up. So I asked her about it.”

“Ah, I see.” He took another moment to think about how he would continue. Eleanor began to gain a smidgen of confidence; she sat up straighter. “I don’t think I want to discuss this with you, Eleanor,” he replied.

“But that’s not fair.”

“I never said it was fair, Eleanor.”

“Dad, I’m an adult. I’m 22 years old. I think I deserve an explanation for this.” Her father began to walk out of the room. “Dad, if you leave right now, so will I. And I swear to God I won’t come back.” Joe’s eyes widened; he did not see that coming.

“Eleanor, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Shh. I need to do this,” she whispered. She removed his hand from her leg.

Eleanor’s father froze in the doorway. He slowly turned around, giving her his attention. “Why are you so afraid to talk about her?” He remained silent. “Dad. She was my mother! My mom! I want to be able to talk about my mom with you! I don’t want to have to worry about upsetting you! Is it really so hard for you to think about the good times?” Eleanor was practically yelling. But she was proud – she wasn’t crying.

“Yes, Eleanor. It is. Because I loved your mother so much – ”

“Yeah, well so did I! And so did Jack. And Joseph, for that matter. Everyone

loved her!” He was stunned into silence, so Eleanor continued. “But that doesn’t mean her memory has to die with her. She was incredible! She loved so much! And I just want to be able to talk about her!” Eleanor’s cheeks were flushed.

“But I was there!” he boomed. “I was with her when she died! I survived and she didn’t! And I’ll never forgive myself for that.” Her father’s cheeks were red with anger.

“But, Dad! It wasn’t your fault! That driver hit you! He was drunk! You couldn’t have avoided it!” Eleanor persisted.

“I should’ve swerved or something! I should’ve seen him coming.” His voice was calmer now, his eyes distant.

“He didn’t even have headlights on...how could you have seen a black car at night if it didn’t have headlights on?” Eleanor lowered her voice, as well. A moment passed.

“Stop blaming yourself.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“But you have to try. If you keep hiding behind things and avoiding it, you’ll never be happy again.”

Another long moment passed. Her father looked to the floor, a long sigh escaping. Finally, “Okay. I’ll try, Eleanor. I can’t promise that it’ll be easy, but I can promise that I’ll try. For you.” He sounded defeated.

“Thank you.” Eleanor stood up and approached her father. She enveloped him into a hug, the first one in years. It was an awkward hug, not fully reciprocated, but Eleanor relaxed visibly. It wasn’t completely fixed, and it probably never would be. But Eleanor knew that this was the catalyst necessary to help mend her family. And she

couldn't be more excited to see what the future would hold for them all. She turned to Joseph. "And thank you, Joseph, for pushing me to do this."

"Hey, we're family," he offered with a smile.