

Falling leaves, crunching acorns under tough winter boots, the crisp chill of the changing season. Arianna called my name from across the street, beckoning me forward before the onslaught of traffic arrived. It was four, maybe five o'clock on the Wednesday afternoon before Thanksgiving, streets quickly filling with the pre-holiday traffic. The sky was clouding over, ominously surrounding the otherwise cheerful demeanor of our town. I jogged across, pumping my arms and legs lightly until I felt the lip between the sidewalk and pavement, stopping in front of the sign on the lawn directly across the street from the store. "FOR SALE", it said in confident block letters, red inked directly above the real estate company's number and smiling employee picture. I shook my head sadly; thinking about the Thomson's who've lived in that house before even my grandparents had moved here. I knew times were tough, but our town especially has been getting hit hard with the aftermath of the recession. The Thomson's weren't the first to have the real estate companies come knocking at their doors, with a tool set and sign in hand. I nudged Ari, but she had already seen the sign and was wandering towards the door when I called her name. I shook my head, and she came walking back.

"We'll come by later, when they've had time to deal with it. They probably don't even know the sign is here. Look, their cars aren't here and this sign definitely just got put up." It had been raining less than an hour earlier, on our walk towards the grocery store, and the sign was dry as could be. I grabbed the bags she had left near the mailbox, and kept walking down the block. Expecting a call soon from Gran, telling us the horrible news. Did I remember the Thomson's? How sweet they were to always bring by their extra cranberry pie?

Ari ran up beside me.

"Jaime, what should we do?", she questioned. I looked down at her walking beside me, just about to hit her growth spurt at twelve and a half.

"We'll wait." I told her, and rushed on home because that's what we were supposed to do, inclined to do, taught to do.

We lived in an old Tudor house on the corner between Sawyer St. and Railroad Ave. It constantly smells like breakfast food down our block, because of the diner less than two streets over, always flooded with early morning traffic. Ari tried to quiet her growling stomach, but I

handed her one of the peppermint candies I had taken from the dish at the bank. We hadn't had gone shopping for a week or two now, and the refrigerator only held a stale carton of milk and a few loose freeze-dried chicken nuggets. Gran couldn't even walk into the kitchen because she started crying, and Poppa was never home often enough to notice. Gran's check had bounced last week, so we'd waited until mine came in on Tuesday, from the grocery store, ironic enough, to get enough food, at least for Thanksgiving. Ari knocked on the door, though I had already yelled at her that no one was home. I struggled to grab my keys out of my purse, while carrying the grocery bags as well.

I yelled again, "Ari, Stop banging on the door, you'll break something!" I finally freed my keys and began the four steps to the door when it creaked open slightly, tentatively, shyly, and out peeked a vaguely familiar head of light brown waves.

"Hey girls," she said, staring down at me with her wide spaced grey eyes. My breathing sputtered for a moment.

"Mom!" Ari shouted before leaping up the steps to the now open door where our mother stood, readying herself for a hug. Ari turned back to look at me with an elated smile. Seeing my face she placed a hand on my arm, a gesture that has come to mean,

"Are you okay?", I shook her arm off, my features hardening before looking back up. "What are you doing here?" I asked quietly, like a muted bullet.

"Your Gran invited me over for the holiday season."

I pushed myself up the steps, past her and into the kitchen, though my legs felt filled with concrete.

"We haven't seen you in two years." My back faced her, but her stiletto heels filled the kitchen with a noisy staccato. She was never one for practicality.

"I know and I'm sorry honey, I've just been getting my life together, you know, soul searching and what not." She smiled contentedly, as if her answer was even remotely satisfactory, sitting down at our tiny, beaten up wooden table with as many overlapping water-marks as you could imagine. She tapped her long, red, bejeweled nails against the counter in time with whatever beat had taken over her in that moment, watching Ari flipping through channels in the living room. She turned towards me again, mouth parted like she wanted to say something. Someone knocked on the door, and the sound of a key fuddling with the lock in the

door rattled. Gran called out apprehensively, which was not an uncommon emotion usually adopted around my mother. She wasn't exactly easy to be around.

"Gran, we're in here." I said, before getting up and opening the cabinet in search of something to eat.

I heard her footsteps pad from her hospital loafers until she paused abruptly, making a pitiful sniffing noise.

I turned around, wary, cautious.

"What's wrong?" I asked, stretching a hand towards her. She pulled back in a cringe and sniffled again, tearing running down her cheeks, messy grey-brown strands in a bun.

"Have you been outside?" she struggled, before a fresh wave of tears seeped out. She never actually made a cry sound, attempting to hold back all noise, in fear of alerting Ari in the other room. "No. Gran, tell me what's wrong, you're scaring me."

"Our home is being taken in by the state." she whispered, but the sound got caught in her throat while holding back tears, and it came out as a gurgle. I didn't move. Mom shoved her chair back, standing up to hold Gran's shoulder's roughly.

"What are you talking about, put up for sale? I've been here all day and no one has come by except the girls!"

Gran's face paused for a moment, the crying halting before restarting even faster,

"They were at the wrong house for the afternoon. Someone had written down the opposite address numbers and gone to the Thomson's instead."

My hands were shaking and I didn't know what to say. I walked over to Gran, placing my hand on her shoulder, the only emotional connection I could manage in the moment. Up for sale? That's how bad it had gotten? Gran never told me there were any notices, never anything in the mail or bills so past due that could ever lead to this.

"How could this happen?" My mind still hadn't registered the information, and I stared blankly past her.

"I've been hiding the really bad bills for a few months from you and Poppa. They've been shoved behind the washing machine, until I could think of a way to pay them off. I didn't know

they were coming today!” she pleaded, clutching my hand to her chest, “I thought I had a few more days until my check came in.”

I knew I shouldn’t of, but involuntarily my hand ripped itself from hers and I stalked away, finally acting the part of the frustrated teenager. I couldn’t even bring myself to cry, so anger was the next best option. My bedroom door slamming in my wake, lights already off, I crawled under the covers of Ari and mine’s shared room and waited for morning, for a better day.

I came home from school the next day, seeing both the "FOR SALE," sign tacked up onto our mailbox, blocking the now dried-up Marigold’s Ari had taped up to make our barren lawn look less industrial, cold, ugly, and the Alert Notice, printed on blood paper, crumpled on the ground in front of our house. It was seeping onto the concrete, staining the ground like poison wine. The door was unlatched, and I mentally chided Mom for leaving it open again. Mom was sitting in front of the TV, as she has been for the last four days. Always dressed up, made up, as if she had somewhere to go. Oprah re-runs were airing this time, and she sat there engrossed.

“I’m home,” I called out, dropping my backpack on the kitchen table and heading into my room to get my uniform. Since we’d gotten an “Official” call from the State Loans Department, who apparently handles these sorts of issues, I’ve taken on another shift. Mom said she would start helping out, and she has, to an extent. After few days, on Thanksgiving she even went out and got some food. It wasn’t much, the two Mini Mart bags she’d gotten, since it was the only place that would except out-of-state food stamps. She said she’d get a job at the dealership, but the position she wants won’t be free for a few more weeks, and if the house gets sold before then...I can’t even consider it. We’ll get through this. We will, I know it.

When I came back a few hours later, Mom was on the couch, asleep. Ari was doing homework on the floor in front of the T.V and Gran and Poppa were spending a rare moment together in the laundry room. Work was anti-climactic, aside from getting reprimanded for asking for another advance on my check. Mom calls me from the living room, screeching so loud my ears begin to ring.

“I’m coming!” I scream hoarsely, my throat not cooperating with my bubbling anger. She has been nothing if not consistent with her complaining. Constantly screaming for a glass of water, magazine she left on the table, and If I would be so kind as to grab that remote on the

floor next to her? Christmas season aside, I wanted nothing more than to lock her outside during the rainstorm that was currently flooding the streets. Shoving my failed math quiz into my back pocket, I strode into the room angrily, my eyes slowly adjusting to the darkness only broken by the dim light from the TV.

“Hon, could you please go drop your sister off at her dance class? You know how my feet have been killing me and I wouldn’t want to endanger either of us.”

I’ll be honest, I tried. Tried to hold back that volcanic rage that had been gurgling and broiling, steaming inside my chest for the past week, but you can’t even imagine how irritated that one comment made me, enough so to do this:

I squeezed the remote I had gotten for her moments before tightly, rigidly, before slamming it into the ground. It smacked against the linoleum, forcing her to stare up at me from her perch on the couch with her small eyes, like a fox in a trap.

“Enough. Enough! No more of this. I am sick of you, and your high heels, and your laziness. Not to mention we haven’t seen you in two years and you greet us with ‘Hey girls’? Who does that? And what about that job of yours, huh? We’re *thisclose* to being evicted, and your lounging on the couch all afternoon? I’m done, I can’t do this. I thought you would have changed after some alone time, but...” I faded out, my anger boiling away into useless steam.

That’s the bad thing about anger, passion, emotion. In the moment it will feel as though you’ll burst, explode, melt from the fire, but afterwards...after you see the situation for what it was, you recognize your mistakes.

“You little brat!” she screeched, standing up in a rush and a hand coming out quick as light to slap me across the face. My cheek burned, my fingers cradling my jaw. Her stacked rings collided with my skin and left swollen red notches. “How dare you talk to me that way, I’m your mother!”

Gran rushed into the room, hearing the yelling.

“What is going on in here?” she asked concernedly, and saw our red faces, both from anger and pain of different sorts. “Get out,” she spoke, pointing at the door. I looked up, terrified for a moment that Gran had been speaking to me.

I can’t put into words how grateful I was for my mother’s incessant complaining, alerting me to her feelings about being, “Forced out of the room like a child!”

Gran walked over, and though she didn't rush me into an embrace, that look in her was all I needed. She didn't judge me or yell, only tried to understand from my point of view. Like the North Star for the Three Kings, without her I would be lost.

Things between my mother and I didn't change for a while. I would come home from work, or school and she would be blaring the TV, ignoring me with a surprisingly palpable venom. Minutes later, Ari walking through the door would be as if the world had turned completely around, Ari the bright star to Mom's Christmas tree.

Speaking of Christmas trees, we're not having one this year. The real estate agent that comes by almost every day and if not, never misses her seven o'clock call, mentioned in passing how, "Choosing one holiday to celebrate may ward off potential buyers. It's best to remain neutral, maybe some cinnamon candles in the living room at best."

Well that all definitely went down well. Ari didn't come out of the bathroom for an hour, making everyone late for the night shift. Everyone, that is, except for Mom. That indifferent smirk never left, as if she weren't related to us, a separate being on her golden pedestal. Even when Gran's daily tears from the cutbacks had turned into a hacking cough. Even after she was rushed to the hospital when the coughing mingled with blood, Mom never changed. Her doctor, Dr. Sam, a family friend, had no idea what was going on. She's a nurse, one of their best if you care to know, always helpful and calm at work, and here she is the one needing to be nursed. It was the week before Christmas when she began to feel better, her sallow cheeks turning a plump peach, and her smile coming back with a vengeance.

"Jaime, she hasn't stopped laughing since we've gotten back," Ari whispered to me the first day we were allowed to bring Gran home.

"What are you talking about? She's just happy to be with everyone who loves her. Hospitals aren't exactly the most jolly environment."

"I know, but it doesn't seem normal."

I smiled, elated to see Gran happy for the first time in weeks, barely hearing what Ari was saying. All of us, even Poppa, were sitting around the TV, watching those old Christmas classics. Gran sat on the lounge chair, swathed in at least twelve blankets, and a huge grin. Nothing else could brighten this room, this situation, more than Gran. Especially with the Grinch sitting on her

couch in the corner, Mom so negative she might as well be surrounded with black smoke. I got up to pour myself another glass of water, and on my way back I stepped on something sharp at the foot of the couch. I grabbed for my aching foot, but my balance was gone. I fell, leaning towards the couch, while the water left the cup in a waterfall and splashed all over Mom's cocktail dress. I landed on the floor in a jumble, but nothing was louder than my mother's shock as she sat there, soaking wet. She stared down at me in anger for a moment, before deciding to pounce on me in a flash, slapping me and grasping my shoulder's roughly.

"You think you can disrespect me like that, little girl?" she taunted, slapping repeatedly, over and over and over.

Poppa jumped up, and tried to pull her off me, but she screamed like a banshee and began to scratch at him too. Ari sat on the floor, surprised, and having yet to grasped what was happening.

Mom lunged for my face again, after Poppa had already managed to pull her off, when the most horrible of sounds came. Everything stopped, froze, and we all turned slowly to Gran. Her eyes were rolling back as she seized on the chair, the blankets constricting her arms and legs, forcing her to shake with drained force. Drool oozed out of her mouth and nose.

Poppa was the first to react, screaming for someone to call the ambulance. I lunged for Mom's shiny pink Razr a foot or two over, and dialed with a racing heart.

Nothing changed, if that makes any sense. An ambulance came, fifteen minutes, forty five minutes, two hours, who knows how long, later.

It felt like forever.

Once again, the hospital couldn't place her disease and she stayed there for a month and a half, past Christmas and New Years. We waited, trying to visit her everyday for hours on end. I lost my second job trying to visit her, choosing her bedside to the checkout station at the grocery store, while Poppa suffered another pay cut for always being late.

Gran didn't come back from the hospital this time.

Ari couldn't handle the change, the maturity and pity that came with being told by the much too emotional Dr. Sam, that Gran was dying, and no one knew the cause. Ari latched herself onto the hospital bed, and we literally had to drag her out of there, screaming and crying.

Mom never came by again, deciding that she loved Gran, "But I just can't take all of this negative energy."

No one answered her, allowing her to click-clack herself out the door.

Gran's still there, in that tiny hospital bed, the doctor's waiting for her to pass, for another available bed. All of us, Ari, Poppa and I, are on pause right now, waiting for either happy or sad news, emotions neutral, until the faithful day arrives that brings with it either celebration or destruction.

FROM THE DESK OF DR. PETER LEONARD SAMUELSON

Dear Roberts family,

I am so sorry to hear about your Wife and Grandmother's death. Mariana was a wonderful woman, and the hospital is mourning her loss. We would like to extend to your family, if accepted, her paychecks for the next three months. Though she had been planning on postponing her retirement money, we feel that it is only right to pass this on to you in your time of need.

Hope you enjoyed a happy holiday season, and a lucky year to follow!

Your dear friend,

Dr. Sam