Spirited Spaghetti

“Kaitlyn…Kaitlyn.. Kat… Are you still with me?” This question gets asked of me every couple of minutes during my therapy appointments. I can tell that my therapist wants to lose his patience with me, but knowing all I’ve been through, he can’t bring himself to it. My therapist attributed this to me leaving my body for long periods for survival, and now that it’s not necessary, I can’t stop; it’s become a habit. So he pauses for a moment, readjusts his very round and large spectacles, sets his pad down, and instead looks into my eyes and repeats the question, “So, do you think your mother raising you as she did contribute to the situation? Does that make you angry?”

 My blank stare prompted him to add, “Well, I know you told me your mother was part of a cult-like organization, let’s call it a religion with Christian roots, and they believed that you weren’t to challenge anything because life as it is is God’s plan. For example, you said she never locked your doors, told you to stay away from strangers, allowed you to receive medical care, or provided you with information about the real world to understand it… So, do you feel like her beliefs made you naive? Does that make you angry?”

 I suppose that’s why they pay him the big dollars; he always asks questions that show understanding and seem to lead somewhere important. He’s working with me pro bono; he is the best, and I’m the poorest. Yet my case has clear visibility, so I’m sure he gets something out of the arrangement. Still, I never felt overly wary of him because he genuinely cared for me, and I figure most things in life involve partnerships. So I get a world-renowned therapist, and he gets to try to fix the broken girl who returned an extremely damaged woman. Although, I’m not here by my choice as the courts mandate it. The alternative was to be placed somewhere more restrictive, and after being held captive for so long, I couldn’t bear that.

 I sat silently because I didn’t know how to answer the question. After all, like everything in my life, there are no simple answers or explanations; they are all highly complex and convoluted. So, while I could give the most obvious answer, “yes,” there was so much more history than one word can describe.

 My mother, Rosemary, was born in the most beautiful place on earth, near the Twin Lakes in Colorado, and the beginning of her childhood was also idyllic in circumstance. Her father, Blake, worked as a miner at Climax Mines, and her mother, Betty, was a homemaker. She never spoke in detail about her parents because she thought the best way to deal with things was not to. Still, I did get some information from my Aunt Jane after we were reunited. She said my grandfather was a great man who always said it must be divine that he should have twins near the Twin Lakes and treated his girls as little miracles sent from God Himself. She said that he was very involved as a father, hard-working, and frequently displayed affection for my grandmother, whom he loved deeply. And she said that my grandmother was a great homemaker who wanted the best for her daughters, often making her more strict than my grandfather.

 For ten years, they experienced the most beautiful plane of existence: togetherness and true happiness. But my family’s curse and theme seems to be, "All good things will come to an end."

 The first good thing to come to an end in my mother and aunt’s lives was losing their father to a mining accident; that loss tore the family apart. My grandmother could never be strong for her girls; instead, she went off the deep end. However, I don’t think it was a conscious decision, so judging her too harshly is hard. I believe my grandmother relied on her husband so much that she lacked the ability to be in control of her own life, much less anyone else’s.

 My grandparents met in an elementary school, which was extremely small because it wasn’t populated. This ended up being both a gift and a curse; the gift was that you became exceptionally good at compromising and conflict resolution because there would be no escaping anybody in that town; the curse was the lack of options and newness. Fortunately, while most local high school sweethearts settled while settling down due to the lack of options, my grandparents were not among them; they were soulmates.

 Once my grandfather finished high school, he went on to study mining, and a little after he finished his education, my seventeen-year-old grandmother found out that she was pregnant with twins. As the twins grew up, the lovers realized how blessed they were with their two adorable children, who were as different on the inside as they were the same on the outside, and for the most part, both girls were well-behaved.

 In my aunt's few surviving photos, you see the love and adventures they shared. The family enjoyed being together and was highly active; they loved to do anything outdoors. They didn’t have much money, but they made up for it with love and always found things to entertain themselves that didn’t come with a price tag.

 Of course, the loss of a parent and partner can devastate any family, but it was especially so because my grandmother never learned to stand on her own. She never learned practical things like managing the finances or the cabin's maintenance and had no job experience. She became so dependent on having someone to lean on emotionally, so when that structure was gone, she seemed to instantly and consistently fall to the ground. Still, everyone expected things to improve because they figured it would be a learning experience, and she would struggle while learning until she became self-sufficient.

 But they were not correct because my grandmother’s actual problem wasn’t learned helplessness, but that she refused to function without her husband. My aunt described my grandparents as “twin flames.” My mother and aunt understood how different that connection is for twins, which allowed them to give their mother incredible grace. My aunt said, “Only those so intertwined that untangling is impossible could ever understand the impact.” However, while her daughters’ grace was astronomical, others were running out of patience, especially since she did not care for her children or show any improvement with time.

 When the neglect turned into acting erratically in public, this gained attention. It was when she started walking around town speaking to her dead husband that my grandmother’s best friend, Melba, felt it was time to call my great-grandmother Shirley. My great-grandmother then packed two bags and moved in without warning.

 At first, my grandmother felt betrayed by her friend calling her mother. However, she quickly found it a blessing because my great-grandmother stepped in seamlessly and cared for the two girls as if they were her own, which allowed my grandmother to leave the family as if they were never hers. Still, the plan was for this to be temporary, as everyone hoped she would return after a more extended period away. Unfortunately, this was never to be, as the next good thing was about to end.

 While everyone in my family believed my grandmother was out partying when she was away, the truth was she was not partying but regularly sneaked into the mine to be closer to my grandfather or thought she could conjure him up there. The mine’s security, knowing the situation, was compassionate to her and would escort her out without consequence.

 Then, one day, while security was sleeping on the job, my grandmother went further into the mine and suffered a fate similar to my grandfather's. Mines are dangerous even to experienced miners, so she never stood a chance. And worse, because my grandmother traveled far into an unsafe and mostly unused part of the mine, she was considered missing; no one thought she was deceased.

 During this time, my great-grandmother was extremely concerned and stressed, but unlike my grandmother, she could hold it together for the twins’ sake; whatever she felt underneath the surface, the twins never saw it because she concealed it so well. In addition to hiding her concern, my great-grandmother tried to make up for how incredibly abnormal the situation was by bettering every area of the twins’ lives. When the twins did ask about their mother, she explained that their mother was on a special trip and would be back soon, which they accepted. And this wasn’t a lie, as my great-grandmother believed that her daughter had gone to Denver to deal with her immense pain by drinking and acting out. She never entertained the thought that her daughter would never return.

 When a week turned to two weeks, my great-grandmother had no choice but to report my grandmother missing. Still, she did everything to insulate the twins from this information and worry. But when she realized she would have to start hanging missing posters and letting people know, she knew she couldn’t protect them, so she had my great-grandfather, Fred, take the girls, which she hoped was far enough away.

 At first, there was some worry over the arrangement because my great-grandfather was a lovely man, but he never cared for children alone because he excessively leaned on his wife for this. But the worry left quickly because he always tried his best, and the girls adored their time with him. My aunt lovingly recalled frequently eating cake for breakfast and accompanying my great-grandfather to bars where they inhaled secondhand smoke and heard interesting conversations unsuited for young children. He also taught them how to shoot a gun, chop wood, set traps, and do many practical things their mother never learned.

 Once my great-grandfather got the hang of it, he realized how much he missed out on by not having as much of a role in my grandmother’s, his only daughter’s, life, which stirred up feelings of regret. Still, he figured he could take this opportunity with his granddaughters as a second chance since regret is useless. My great-grandfather also felt fortunate for the distraction from his missing daughter; he knew that his wife did not have the same gift, as she desperately searched for their daughter alone. He offered many times to switch places, but she declined as she wanted control.

 When the search near the Twin Lakes surrounding communities didn’t lead anywhere, my great-grandmother decided to change locations, as she now believed that her daughter was in Denver. She immediately found some inexpensive but seedy lodging and expanded her search to more dangerous and less desirable places. She also offered a reward to help obtain information.

 A month after moving to Denver, she realized she was spending most of the money they depended on in their retirement, but she just couldn’t let go. My great-grandfather, also seeing their bank account was rapidly depleting, wanted to be more forceful and ask her to come home, but he couldn’t bear it; he figured that if this was what she needed, then he would support her and his support meant he returned to work at his advanced age. My great-grandfather’s devotion and love were one of the remaining silver linings in this catastrophic storm.

 My aunt believes my great-grandmother would have continued the expensive search forever if fate hadn’t forced her hand with my great-grandfather’s stroke. My great-grandmother returned to care for the twins and her husband, even though she did not want to stop her search. Still, she believed that her husband was a strong man who would quickly recover from his stroke, and then she could resume the search.

 Unfortunately, this was not to be, as he passed away a little over three weeks after she returned. The girls were resilient as they assumed this was temporary before life returned to being good like it was before. My great-grandmother was now grieving the loss of her husband, consumed with her missing daughter, and caring for two very needy little girls. Still, she carried on because she was confident that God would bring her daughter back to her now that she had lost her husband.

 Sadly, a few months after the death of my great-grandfather, they discovered my grandmother’s body in the mine. My great-grandmother, who spent her life as a devout Christian, could not believe that God could be so cruel, so she chose not to and remained in denial. The investigators tried to reason with her, explaining how many documented times my grandmother had snuck into that mine prior and that no other missing person reports met the description. Still, she refused to believe this and would not collect my grandmother's body, which the coroner held; they waited as long as they could before burying my grandmother in an unmarked pauper grave.

 To make matters worse, my aunt and mother found out about their mother’s death by kids at school asking if their mother died of being crushed or of starvation. When the twins confronted their grandmother about this information, she denied that the person found was their mother because she honestly didn’t believe it.

 The twins were in my great-grandmother’s care for six months before being removed from her care, as she was unable to move past it all. Yet, even with the incredible misfortune, the twins felt lucky they still had each other.

 However, their togetherness was not to last; two months into their temporary placement, they were separated into different families when their grandmother was not well enough to regain custody. My aunt was placed in a home and later adopted by a kind attorney and his attentive wife. The pair had tried to conceive for a significant amount of time before they realized that it wasn’t in the cards and that they should adopt. My aunt Jane went on to have a wonderful childhood in Denver, Colorado not far from where she grew up. She was well cared for financially and emotionally. The family my mother was placed with, she initially figured, was nice enough. She held onto hope that this was temporary up until they packed up and moved to Nebraska. She was devastated that she would be so far from her twin, and she cried the entire drive.

 After my mother and her new family arrived in Nebraska, she realized that the family that adopted her belonged to a large cult-like religious organization where there were no individual family units, as everyone belonged to one family; she saw very little of the two people who adopted her over the years.

 Once at her new home, my mother was moved into a large converted barn with several other girls, ranging from kindergarten to high school. There were no dressers or decorum; instead, there were many sets of prison-style bunkbeds. The children were not permitted to have their own possessions, and their clothes were plain, worn, and belonged to everyone. They were told that possessions are problems because you become greedy and selfish when you have possessions. Also, the children were homeschooled, but the schooling wasn’t like what my mother experienced before, where she learned math and arithmetic; there, she learned servitude and God. My mother hated it there and often quietly cried herself to sleep as she remembered the family she had lost and better times.

 It wasn’t long before missing her twin became unbearable, and she begged and pleaded to write to her sister, but they refused, as “The Cognatio” did not allow contact with nonmembers. My mother broke this rule once when she stole supplies and wrote her sister; somebody found the letter hidden in the outgoing mail, and she faced corporal punishment. She had never been physically abused, and this was incredibly terrifying for her. She didn’t attempt to contact her sister again during her time there.

 Eventually, my mother assimilated into the community, finding peace and happiness. She found plenty of beauty in life that wasn’t self-centric and clouded by unclear motivations and intentions.

 Later, mother’s devotion to God was rewarded when, after her 16th birthday, she married a man a decade older, named Louie. There were many relationships within that community where women were being abused because of the power imbalance, but Louie was kind, patient, supportive, and attractive.

 Once married, they moved to “married housing," which was similar to a motel. They still worshipped, worked, and ate as a community, but this small amount of privacy felt like heaven.

 Louie did not grow up in “The Cognition,” but Chicago, Illinois, where his father was involved in organized crime. His father later recruited his older brother, and both disappeared after being accused of working with law enforcement, which Louie never believed was true. His mother was heartbroken and made it her mission to keep Louie and his sister far away from that life, moving them near her parents in Florida. After the move, Louie became extremely close to his sister, and they shared many years of happiness with their remaining family under the sun. However, things took a turn for Louie in his early 20s when his sister died of cancer, and he became angry and withdrawn. He began to live his life with little regard for it, as he abused drugs and alcohol while acting recklessly. It seemed like he was doomed and headed for death until a chance encounter with a woman named Jody, whom he found vibrant and beautiful.

 Jody was part of an outreach program for “The Cognition,” which serviced high-risk areas. They would preach God’s love and how living cleanly can open you to wonders greater than any drug. He initially didn’t believe any of it, but he went along just to be nearer to her. Surprisingly, after a bit of time, he was a true believer. So when Jody came up on her orders for marriage, he was sad to see her go but remained with the family.

 After a few years, Louie was called to serve in Nebraska; his mother was distraught at the news. She was happy that her son was no longer living a dangerous lifestyle, but she never trusted that group of people. She wanted him to stay, often begging and crying, but Louie left anyway.

 Shortly after Louie moved to Nebraska, he was discouraged from contacting nonmembers and lost contact with his mother. He was sad but understood that the outside world was tainted, and preserving the pureness and beauty was essential. His mother was devastated but believed that this was a phase that would end once he dealt with his trauma.

 But his mother was incorrect because he hadn’t spoken to her in seven years by the time he was married to my mother. Louie and my mother were confident they were soulmates. What were the chances that two people who survived similar hard lives would end up together? My mother never felt anybody could understand so many things until Louie because he lived them, and he felt the same; that understanding bonded them remarkably. It was easy for them to communicate, and they fell deeply in love. They hadn’t realized how much life had become enduring instead of living until then. Unfortunately, that love was so powerful that it spilled into other aspects their lives and gradually people took notice, which was their unraveling.

 In "The Cognation,” married couples receive a tiny bit of privacy not for the couple's benefit but for child-making. The couples were not supposed to fall in love because that separated them from the organization. They made the matches intentionally not considering the preferences or personalities of two strangers, so the matches rarely fell in love. However, they inadvertently put together two people with much in common who longed to be loved. As there love blossomed, the organization felt this was a problem that needed to be solved. They did not want the two to possess each other as if they belonged to one another, which separated them from the community; nothing was to be separate. So they responded with a plan to marry Louie and my mother to different people.

 The lovers were both understandably devastated. Neither could imagine being with anybody but their soulmate.

 After the announcement, Louie told my mother he could not bear being separated and asked her to leave with him to return to his beloved mother in Florida. Unfortunately, their faith and attachment to the organization differed because she came to it as a child, while Louie joined as an adult, so their mind frame was quite different. She loved Louie but felt she couldn’t leave because nothing was above God to her, not even true love.

 The last night my mother and Louie spent together before they were to be separated was the hardest of her entire life; they cried that whole night and held each other close. The next day, she was married to the antithesis of Louie, while Louie left the compound for good. She would miss him for the rest of her life.

 Ryan, my mother’s new husband, was immediately ruthless. He would consistently verbally abuse her in private or public, and his tantrum-like rages turned violent. It was about four months into their union that his cheating, lying, and abuse became too much, and she decided that she would leave for Florida and find Louie. But right when she planned to leave, she fell ill and discovered she was pregnant.

 When Ryan realized she was pregnant and preparing to leave, he beat her and threatened that if she left, he would find her and kill her, the baby, and anyone who harbored her. Then, he enlisted the community to beat her down to ensure she didn’t leave, so all of her activities also involved being taunted, mocked, and provoked.

 Growing up, my mother was distant because she was afraid that if her love for me showed separation from the group, then I would be taken. And my father was constantly cruel and abusive towards us. It was a nightmare.

 Then, after my sixth birthday, a man from the compound went missing and was later found dead. After the discovery of the body, law enforcement, who usually left us alone, started to come around much more. The investigation led nowhere because our community stayed silent.

 A year later, another man mysteriously disappeared. However, we found out later that it was by choice. The man was the brother of the missing man and an investigative journalist. When he realized the case was going cold, he decided to do some digging and realized a lot was happening in that compound. He figured he could infiltrate the community and do the job that he felt the authorities were not.

 The bereaved brother then broke the story that included child abuse, child sex abuse, coercion, tax fraud, extortion, and other mysterious disappearances. The pressure from the story resulted in quickly arresting my father and other top men of the organization and many members being forcibly removed by their family members on the outside. So, the number of members decreased as time passed, and only a handful remained; we were part of that handful.

 On the date for sentencing, we were surprised when the probation that the lawyers quoted ended up being decades of prison time. My mother and the remaining members put on a show abou how unjust this was, but if you could tell they were relieved. Unfortunately, we continued to stay with out resources, as my mother was stubborn and brain-altered. But staying wasn’t the worst thing because while we didn’t have money, we were not being abused; there’s hard and then there’s horrific and the difference is substantial.

 Then, one day, I noticed my mother sneaking under the gate. She looked healthier and blonder than in the morning, so I ran to her and said, “Mom, you look so pretty. How did they do this to you?”

 The woman looked confused at this statement and stayed silent until it became clear that if she looked like my mother, I must be her niece. My aunt, recognized her sister in me, swooped me into her arms and said, “Oh honey, I’m not your mother; I’m your aunt Jane. Your mother is my twin sister.” I didn’t know what to make of it because my mother had never mentioned having a twin sister. After embracing me for some time, she asked, “Where is your mother? Take me to her,” so I directed my aunt to my mother's work. When my mother spotted us, she had the expression of somebody who had seen a ghost, not a sister.

 After my mother sent me home, the two sisters spoke. My aunt Jane said she had never known where her sister had been all these years and demanded that my mother and I live with her. Even though my mother could barely feed us, she declined. My aunt refused to accept her declination and said she would take me if my mother didn’t leave. My mother knew her sister came from a family of attorneys, so she decided we would go.

 I loved my aunt's Colorado condominium; she had many possessions and loved color. That time with my aunt was magical; I will cherish it for the rest of my life. Unfortunately, while my aunt and I had a blast together, my mother became more withdrawn. My aunt said that my mom just needed time to readjust and we should give her space.

 Then, one day, my aunt dropped me off after our shopping outing, and I heard my mother sobbing, which she never openly did; so I hid until she left for a walk, then I snooped around her room and noticed a letter from a man named Louie addressed to her. It was a beautiful letter expressing the bond between the two and a wish that things could’ve been different, but he was married now, had two children, and was happy. He conceded that he believed she was his soulmate, but this was his life now, where he would stay. I had never heard his name before, but it was evident that this was somebody she loved profoundly, only to find out that time stands still for no one, not even soulmates.

 This letter exasperated the difficulties my mother was already experiencing with the loss of her rigorous, religious life. It was such a tragic fate that now she could do anything she wanted with anybody she wanted, and all she wanted was not to have those choices and be with the person she couldn’t. My mother initially sought out the branches of “The Cognation,” which she found no longer existed, so she settled on a religious group that demanded devotion and lifestyle but was not exploitative like the cult we came from. My mother relaxed much except for her hard stance in not intervening with God's will by overprotecting yourself.

 My mothers decision to not teach self protection left me unprepared and so when I was 10, I didn’t hesitate to enter a man's car when he asked me to help search for his lost puppy. I remember feeling excited to see a puppy, but the man’s demeanor changed once those doors locked. Unsettled, I asked him to let me out, and he said, “I'm going to let you out. We must stop to check for my puppy first.” I was relieved to hear that he would take me home soon.

 I became concerned and agitated when we were an hour in the opposite direction of home and insisted he let me out of the car. In response, he pulled out a gun and told me that if I didn’t stay quiet, he would shoot me and then kill my family. So I remained silent as the tears ran down my face.

 When the light turned dark, I had to pee, and I begged the man to allow me to use the restroom. He refused, so I had to sit in my urine for the next hour until we arrived at the remote location in the mountains of Colorado. No one could hear my screams from this place as no one else was around.

 Once there, he dragged me forcefully as I tried to fight my way free. When I wouldn’t calm down, he pistol-whipped me and knocked me out. I woke up freezing, with blood trickling down my face and into my hair, making it wet and sticky, but most horrific was the tight chain around my left ankle which anchored me to the dungeon I now found myself in. The only light was the small amount that escaped from the bottom of the ill-fitted old door at the top of the stairs.

 I screamed for help so loud that it surprised me, and the man with the lost puppy came after a few minutes. I asked him if he found his puppy and what happened to me. He laughed and said, “You are a little idiot, aren't you? There's no puppy; you are the puppy. And if you don't stay quiet, you will be a dead puppy that I will bury out back.”

 I stopped crying and asked him to bring me back to my aunt’s house because my mother and aunt would worry about me. He laughed manically and said, “They can worry all they want… They can search all they want… But you’re so far away from home they will never find you. You aren't the first… You are the eleventh, and no one has ever been rescued.”

 Being naive, I couldn't comprehend this, so I asked, “Where do you keep the others? Will they join me?”

 With a menacing look, he smiled and said, “The others are buried out back, and if you don’t keep quiet, you’ll end up there sooner rather than later.” This quieted me.

 He then said that he must get some sleep because we had a busy day tomorrow.

 It took me some time to fall asleep because I was afraid and uncomfortable on the cold concrete without bedding. I had only been sleeping for an hour when I felt someone tapping on my shoulders, which sprung me awake. Feeling the chain around my ankle, I realized it wasn’t a sleeping nightmare, just a regular one.

 I anticipated seeing the menacing man, but it was a boy. I couldn’t see well, but I guessed the boy was four or five years older than me. I asked him to get me out of there, but he fingered his lip and signed to stay quiet. He said, “I’m so sorry you ended up here. I hoped my father would stop when he got so close to being caught with the last one. He never had the police venture up here until then, and it seemed to spook him enough that it’s been a couple of years since then. When I heard your screaming earlier, I realized that he had just paused this, and now it had resumed. My name is Sam. What is your name?”

 I was relieved to see this boy because I felt confident he could help me escape. Quieter this time, I replied, “My name is Kat. You must return me to my mother and aunt as they will worry about me. Can you call the police? Can you get me out of these chains?”

 Now that my eyes had adjusted slightly better, I could see the pain in his eyes and the pity he took upon me. He said, “I’m sorry, Miss Kat, but there is no telephone here. Running for help isn’t an option because we are so far away. I can tell you that I ran once to save a girl, and that was the last time I'd ever run again; trust me. But don’t worry; I was at least able to figure out how to pry this basement door open skillfully, but I can tell you from experience that there will be no picking the lock around your ankle; it’s ironclad. But don’t fret; I promise to visit you each night because he sleeps like a baby by these early hours. I will also sneak you food.”

 I said I appreciated the offer but didn’t want company in my captivity as much as I wanted to be free from it. Sam’s eyes welded with tears as he said, “I know, Miss Kat. Like I said after the last escape, I can never do that again. But I’ll certainly do what I can for you. Do you enjoy stories?”

 I didn’t know what to say, as I didn’t want to irritate my only contact outside of the maniac, but I also wanted him to help me get out of there.

 I settled on, “I do enjoy stories.”

 He said, “That’s good to hear, Miss Kat. I have some books I can read to you, and I also like creating my own stories. I just started a book called ‘The Great Gatsby;’ I haven’t gotten far into it. Would you like to hear the story?”

 I could not see myself enjoying a story since my mind was still focused on wanting to escape, but I enjoyed the company. When finished, he handed me a container and said, “Oh, I forgot about this. This is for you, it’s spaghetti. It’s all we ever have to eat.”

 I hadn’t realized how famished I was until he opened the container, and I smelled the spicy sauce. I ate it with my hands. It made a massive mess, so he used the inside of his shirt to wipe me off. Once I was clean, he grabbed my hands and said, “Well, it’s been a pleasure to meet you, Miss Kat. I will ensure you at least have one meal a day and a story to go with it. I can’t give you freedom, but I will give you everything I have.” He then dog-eared the book page, walked up the stairs, and disappeared.

 After he left, I thought about him. Sam was a bright light to his father’s pitch black, so I wondered how somebody so good could come from somebody so bad until I remembered how vastly different I was from my father.

 I woke the next day to the menacing man standing over me. He said, “We have a long day ahead of us. You seem like a pretty tough little girl. Do you think you’re a tough little girl?”

 I wasn’t sure what to say because if I said “yes,” I felt he would work extra hard to prove me wrong, and if I said “no,” he would punish me for not being strong enough, so I said nothing, which was also the wrong answer.

 What happened next I have never spoken, even in therapy; the things he subjected me to were the things of nightmares. That day was the longest and hardest day of my life.

 When he was finished, he chained me back up; my body was so bruised and battered that even the floor touching it was excruciatingly painful. I lay there, and for the first time, cursed God.

 I was awake when Sam came down the stairs that night; he carried a little lantern this time, and I noticed tears running down his face at the sight of me. He said, “Oh, Miss Kat, I’m so sorry. He really did a number on you. I won’t lie to you and say things will improve much, but they will get slightly better. The newness always excites him and encourages his rage, but it’ll be less intense when that wears off.

 Then Sam put his hand on my bruised and bloody cheek and said, "I must say, not even a monster could mar your absolute loveliness,” then pulled a container from his back pocket and handed it to me.

 I immediately accepted and ate the spaghetti while he read me more about the eccentric Jay Gatsby and his muse and obsession, Daisy. As he read, it allowed me to escape; it was much more important than I could’ve ever expected.

 When he was finished, he said he looked forward to seeing me again and he would pray for me.

 I said, “Don’t bother praying; why would I ever ask for help from somebody who despises me?” I was shocked at the amount of hatred that came from me.

 In response, Sam grabbed my hand, kissed it, and said, “Oh no, Miss Kat, don’t think that. God has been my only friend for many years, and you always have God. We also have each other; we can make it through this together. God has never left me and will neither leave you nor will I.” Then Sam said he had to go and disappeared up the stairs.

 The following months went on worse than any scary movie you could conjure up. Luckily, I became exceptionally talented at escaping into Sam’s stories. Sam gave me something to look forward to and a reason not to quit, which I know are the only reasons I survived.

 About five years into my captivity, Sam said that he loved me. I should’ve been skeptical and scared for all his father put me through, but I wasn’t. Sam kept me soft and lovable for any hardened and jaded I could’ve been.

 Around two years after that, I was visited in a realistic dream by my mother, who apologized that she hadn’t given me the life that she wanted for me. She told me about her family before she lost them and how she ended up where she did, and the accumulation of the guilt she carried.

 In my absence, my mother was an emotional wreck; she stopped caring for herself, so when the warning signs of cancer appeared, she dismissed them. When she finally sought medical care, it was too late. But she didn’t fear death because she believed she would be with God and reunited with all the family she had lost.

 My mother said she knew I would be free one day, so she left something in a shoebox underneath her bed at my aunt's house.

 After that dream, I never had a dream about my mother again.

 Fortunately, as the years progressed, the menacing man’s health worsened, making it hard to exert himself, which meant longer breaks for me. Some days, he wouldn’t visit me at all.

 Then, when I was 21, the menacing man’s health took a drastic turn for the worse; it started with him coughing up blood and black matter. His health and vitality never recovered as I assumed it would, it only worsened. Astonishingly, having death on the menacing man’s doorstep changed him.

 The week before my rescue, he came down and did something he had never done before; he apologized and cried. He said his father did the things to him that he had done to me; it is all he knew. He felt the demon transferred from his father to himself, and he felt powerless to it. He asked for my forgiveness and hoped God would have mercy on him. He told me that he would be calling the authorities with my location, and then he would end his life and suffering. I never thought that I could feel sorry for somebody who did so many horrendous things to me, but part of me did.

 The prospect of finally getting out of that basement of horrors made hope radiate, but I was scared because I was concerned this was another game because I had never known this man to be humane or compassionate; he loved to torment and test me.

 Only a week after that confession and apology, I heard sirens and then the door being kicked in. Shortly after, I heard a gunshot as the menacing man ended his life. I could not believe I was finally saved.

 After they unchained me, I was loaded into the ambulance, where I immediately asked about Sam; I wanted to see him before we went to the hospital. The EMTs said we needed to leave, so this was impossible. Then, they gave me medication intravenously, and I slept for two days straight.

 Immediately after I awoke, I continued asking about Sam, but they wouldn’t respond to me; instead, they kept adding drugs into my system to calm me. I stayed in a drug haze for the two weeks that I spent in the hospital. I was grateful to be free and alive but felt lost without Sam; I missed him so much.

 When I was released, my aunt was ready for me. She swung her arms around me, pulled me close, started sobbing, and released me from the embrace. Then she drove me to her condominium and told me it was mine. She said she had a house, a husband, and twin boys, Chester and Lester, and she could never give this place up, so this was perfect.

 After we arrived at the condominium, I couldn’t find my mother, so I asked where she was. My aunt started to cry and said that my mother died. She didn’t want to tell me because she was worried about me. I told her not to worry; I had a huge reason to live. I believe the sincerity of my words and the look of hope in my eyes relieved her enough to leave me.

 After my aunt left, I looked under the bed in my mother’s old room for the shoebox that the apparition had informed me about years ago. I didn’t expect to find anything because it was too outlandish, but I was curious. I was shocked to see that small shoebox with the letter to me inside. It read:

*Dear Kat,*

*They tell me my time on this earth will soon end. I wish I could*’*ve seen you before I died, but I know one day you*’*ll be found, and we will eventually be reunited in Heaven*

 *I must tell you that your real father is Louie Lucci; onceI figured it out, I wanted to tell him, but he had his own family, so I didn*’*t want to disrupt that. But I believe he would like to know you, and he is worth knowing. I included his last address.*

 *I love you, my daughter, and I will see you again soon.*

 *Love you,*

 *Mother*

 The letter broke my heart; she said everything I wish she had said before, but hearing it now was just as good. Louie’s name was not new to me because I remembered finding the letter explaining he had moved on. I sat there frozen for a while.

 Then I went to the cabinets and looked for something to eat. Even though I now had variety, spaghetti was what I wanted. As I ate, I wrote Louie a letter.

 Louie set up to meet me a week later. He was skeptical about my parentage until we met and saw that we were the spitting image of each other. After the initial shock, we became more comfortable and sat down and chatted about my mother. The person he described was much different than the woman I knew; I believe she was only that woman when she was with him, because of him. He told me he never loved anybody in the way he loved my mother, and that might’ve been the reason for his divorce when his children were grown. Following his divorce, he looked for my mother and, upon searching, realized that she was no longer of this world; he was devastated.

 Louie beamed with pride as he spoke about his children and their plans. I could absolutely see why my mother would love him; he was tender, fatherly, and attentive.

 After he left, I thought about how much I wished I had a father like him growing up and how different I would be—but stopped myself because if this experience taught me anything, it’s not to wish for what could’ve been but to accept and make the best of what you have.

 After some silence, I realized that Louie had left his briefcase, and my curiosity and boredom got the best of me, so I opened it up. Inside was a bunch of paperwork related to his job and a newspaper that covered my rescue. I read the article, and it stirred up some powerful emotions until the crescendo, which was the revelation that his son, Sam, was buried in the backyard with the ten young girls. I was confused because why would the menacing man allow me to live and kill his son? I was relieved when I saw the estimated death date for each buried person, and Sam’s death date was listed as years before my abduction.

 The police said this was not their first contact with the menacing man; they once interviewed him after receiving a tip regarding a missing girl. The menacing man seemed normal, and his son was an endearing little boy, so without probable cause or alarm bells, they made one note in the file, and nothing else followed. They felt sad and ashamed the police missed an opportunity to end this sooner, but the man was clever.

 My heart sank when I read that Sam and a little girl shared a grave and death date. The police believe his father killed him to keep him quiet about the little girl, and she became a liability. With this revelation, Sam’s words came rushing back to me, “I escaped once to try to get help for a girl, and what happened was so bad I never did again… I never could.” But then I brushed it aside because I didn’t believe in literal ghosts. I was certain Sam would find me, and we would be together.

 I continued fighting to see Sam, which made everyone believe I had understandably lost my mind. The more I fought to see Sam, the more insistent people became that I accepted it was a mind trick, but I couldn’t because he was not an imaginary boy; he was Sam. I loved him.

 Eventually, I couldn’t stand to be without him, so I tried to end my life; that is what brought me into court-appointed therapy. Louie willingly agreed to watch over me and has supported me immensely. But this will be my last mandatory therapy session, as I have finally come up with a perfect plan.

 So, I focused on the therapist’s question about my mother and answered honestly, “When I first was abducted, I blamed my mother and God, but when I was able to escape into stories and love, it made the dark bearable, so I stopped blaming them.”

 Then I picked up my things and said, “I appreciate what you have done for me. I am excited for my future.”

 The therapist believed me because I was honest, but the truth was the therapy was not what unchained me, the cabin was. I decided to go there after my suicide attempt because I had nothing else to try or lose. When I got there, I looked everywhere but could not find him. So I sat there and cried.

 Then I heard, “Kitty Kat, what is the matter? How can I help,” and Sam embraced me.

 I then wouldn’t leave the cabin; giving up reality for Sam was easy. I was happy now.

 When Louie hadn’t heard from me, he became concerned and thought I might be at this cabin, so he went there to look for me. When I introduced Sam to him, Louie started to cry.

 I asked him, “Father, what is the matter?”

 It took a moment, and then he said, “Sweetheart, there is no one there. I cannot see him. Sam is gone, hun.”

 I hugged Louie and said, “Father, he is there. I can see him and speak to him. He is present now. It is a shame you can’t meet him because he is incredible and kind.I am sorry to have worried you. I have been despondent since this all happened… I got out, and I had issues, but more than the trauma, missing Sam was what I could not get past.

 “In the hospital, after I attempted suicide, I wondered if I would still be able to see Sam now that his body had been unearthed and respectfully buried. Thinking of breaking into that cabin gave me the first hope I had in a while; when you have been hopeless to suicide, having that back meant everything to me.”

 Louie paused for a moment; he worried about me as he considered this a delusion, not a spirit, but then he remembered his spiral into substance abuse and later joining a mob-like cult after the death of his beloved sister. He knew that you couldn’t use a formulation on what is normal or what to do in a situation where formulations would never work and “normal” would never apply. He then told me that if I wanted to stay here until I worked it out, he would support me. He was glad to see me happy.

 Louie purchased the cabin that week.

 In that cabin, we constantly prayed and created our own world. He told me once that he hoped my mother might appear to him; she never did, except within me, and he was more than happy with that. Louie and I would still go into town occasionally and visit with our families. We always made the most of our time outside the cabin.

 Louie stayed with me until many years later he died of old age. I never saw his ghost, but Sam said my mother was there to help him crossover and then created a story to cheer me up.