Kelly and the Spiraling Staircase

*I dedicate this story to my dear friend Kelly, who reminds me that support and inspiration are a bit of magic here on Earth.*

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**Part One: What Dreams May Come**

 Living in someone else’s shadow is a special limbo, especially when the shadow is so large; it becomes impossible to shine or feel the sun, and it is not for lack of trying or shining but rather the enormity of the shadow, much like a light being met by blackout shades. I always try to give my twin sister, whose shadow I live under, plenty of grace because I know that while I believe she loves the attention, that doesn’t mean she intends to cast a shadow over me. Sometimes, that shadow does bring resentment, but I try to remind myself that, while she may maintain the center of the universe, she is kind. I also consider the benefits of shadows; I realize that attention and light come with their own challenges.

 My sister and I are fraternal twins, and we look as different as our personalities, so no one realizes that we are even sisters, much less twins. My twin, while in high school, showed a slight aptitude for singing, so my parents invested all of our money in her fledgling pop career. The word aptitude, by society's standards, means a decent amount of talent that can be honed and perfected, but this word, applied to my sister, meant she could kind of, maybe, sort of, carry a tune while looking terrific. My twin was a beauty. She carefully highlighted her luscious hair, applied her makeup impeccably, and had large brown eyes that constantly looked like those of a princess in need of rescue, who would forever show her gratitude in any way she could if you were to save her.

This was my first lesson about beauty: if you have beauty, you need significantly less of whatever someone who is not beheld in such would. It was a tough but true lesson to learn. Still, I won’t fault her for capitalizing by using her strengths to her advantage, as we all do that in some way or another. So, my sister, with slightly mediocre singing ability, was groomed for stardom and didn’t disappoint.

 I found the whole experience entertaining and silly, but the joke was about what the public wanted, not her personally. To start with, her vocals were so subpar that they were overly used auto-tune, but with the addition of many sexy, moaning-type sounds of different scales, it always sounded like a few horny robots frequently met to tell each other how sexy or horny they were, or how good whatever they were doing felt. A little sexy moaning is cool, so is a little auto-tune, but way too much is silly as fuck.

 Also, the outfits didn’t disappoint; the first box she received from the marketing company my parents paid for had gems such as a ball gag, which my mother thought was a futuristic headband. The only person who knew what it was in my family was myself because I like to keep my porn varied, so I don’t get bored.

 One day, my sister wore this “headband” while practicing in our high school gym, which my mother had permission to use after school for a few hours every few days. During this practice, our principal, a short man with a perfect circle of hair missing from the top of his head, walked by, with my mother and me watching, and was stopped in his tracks by the sight. It was apparent that his mind was not prepared to see this, so it short-circuited and asked him to reevaluate, and once it did, he kept walking.

 Years later, I came across our old principal in our local “adult book store” stocking up on some BDSM products; they say students can’t teach their teachers. But the ball gag was just the cherry on top of my 16-year-old twin’s very inappropriate cake, as this joined 5-inch knee-high, bejeweled boots and a one-piece that was cut in a deep, upside-down triangle around her breasts and only held together by strips of shoestring fabric. Before her breast augmentation, the overly-sexy, one-piece outfits didn’t fit right, so she used to stuff her bra with these little silicone implants that looked like pieces of raw chicken to me, but inside her bra, they looked pretty convincing, as a breast job anyway. My favorite photo of us was on the day she purchased her faux breasts; she was dressed as a sexy unicorn, and I was in my olive green army jacket that I always wore, and we were so happy.

 Sadly, the fake breast met its demise after “The Mall Cutlet Incident.” On this day, my mom made me stop my homework, which I did not appreciate, to go to my sister’s set at the mall. They were opening up a “Sharper Image” and thought a night set would be just the thing to get the excitement going, and it seemed appropriate that a very sexual robot cut the ribbon. My twin sister had been more in demand and had gained quite the following, solely of teenage boys and older creepers, but still a fan base; plus, my mother was brokering deals and a formidable manager; she fancied herself Kris Kardashian, which I thought, sure, if she were from the Midwest and had the business sense of a squirrel.

 Still, I was happy I attended the show; it was like going to the zoo, but observing things that were even more bizarre. Sometimes, I would even trip on LSD and really have a blast; my mom would look over at me like, “That’s the spirit! Look at you supporting your sister,” as I watched the world spin in radiant colors while the robots made me wonder how they were having so much sex and how that would even work.

 On her third of the five-song sets, she sang her very popular “Tell Me How You Like It, Boi,” emerging in a nude body suit rhinestoned with black gems to resemble tiger stripes and matching bejeweled ears; this was her second wardrobe change, befitting a proper diva. I thought she was “greeeeeat,” as a very sexy tiger; yet, the costume was one part of this experience that was exceptionally bizarre to me, as she had costumes like that constantly, so it seemed that people thought that certain zoo animals were incredibly sexy. But I guess it only goes so far, because when I wore my sexy baboon costume to her Christmas party, people looked at me in disgust. However, maybe I should have rhinestoned it or added high heels, which was my mistake.

 Unfortunately, as the sexy tiger crawled around on the tiny stage and asked the crowd, “How they wanted it, yeah, yeah, yeah,” her left cutlet fell out of her bra, but the tiger was not hungry for chicken.

 My twin and I have that twin superpower of feeling what the other does, so I felt panic, embarrassment, and shock throughout my entire body, but I was not sure exactly what to do. I was only temporarily shocked before I knew what to do, and I removed my pants and began to streak around the mall while screaming, “Aha, aha, aha,” until everyone watched me exit the mall’s rear. It must’ve been that divine twin power that led me to do the only thing that not only distracted people but kept them talking of nothing else from that night. There was no word of the chicken cutlet, but only of the pop star’s crazy sister, Kelly, who, insane with jealousy, decided to go bottomless through the mall. It was also noted that I like to keep my beaver fully bushed, which I still enjoy.

 This was not done in vain, because my twin was definitely grateful to me and even seemed to admire me. At times like these, she was impressed that I didn’t care what people thought, given how entirely she did. My twin had a very fragile ego, which worked out for the most part because people generally adored her, but the few times she experienced sharp criticism or bullying, because some people can be cruel, she fell apart. I always tried to protect her as much as I could because I felt lucky enough to be treated like shit earlier in life, which allowed me to develop the ability to know firmly who I was, and this took power away from what people thought or said about me; I’d hear an insult, smile, and think, “How pathetic do you have to be to act that?” And be grateful that I wasn’t like that on the inside. This attitude earned me the nickname “Daria,” after a brilliant, self-assured character that I secretly loved.

 Unfortunately, my mother’s answer to “Chicken Cutletgate” was to allow my 16-year-old sister to get a breast augmentation. I’m not saying anything against it if it’s something you want and not what you feel will attract other people to you, but for her, I questioned the reasoning behind it. I tried to talk to her about it; I would say, “Sis, you don’t have to do this. You can think about it some more or wait until you turn 18. Just get a padded bra, or don’t. Don’t you think you would be attractive to these dudes with your B cup? You always had a following before.” My twin thought momentarily and said, “I do want this. Why wait?” I replied, “Why not wait?” In response, she laughed like I was a silly woman who said silly things, and later, she got them and then could bounce around as a very sexual zebra without worry. But while her life was improving, mine seemed to be doing the opposite.

 After the “Cutlet Crisis,” I lost my nickname, “Daria,” and gained the moniker “Donald Duck” due to the “Pantless Mall Incident.” A couple of creative boys even made very convincing Donald Duck impressions while they inquired if the reason I took my pants off was that I had shat myself. I couldn’t even get mad at the very boys who lacked as much maturity, so I decided to answer any of these obscure taunts by quacking maniacally because I don’t start shit; I end it.

 Yet, it didn’t matter long because not long after, my mom pulled us out of high school to homeschool us so we could tour the Midwest for my sister's pop career. I didn’t want this because I loved education as much as I hated most kids. I had big dreams; I wanted to be a chemist or a doctor, earn a high income, and be recognized for something. Maybe that was my equivalent to being a pop star. And I knew I wouldn’t get an education, traveling around so my sister could gyrate in spandex, because while I was smart, I could only teach myself so much. Still, the most challenging part was that, despite my intelligence, my sister somehow outshone me. Yet, I figured I could take this opportunity to learn as much as I could about people and the world before going to college, because fighting what is inevitable is a massive waste of time, so I tried never to do that. And what an education it turned out to be.

 Ultimately, I fully embraced this and took on the role of manager as a character I created. My character was no-nonsense and negotiated hard with a badass mullet, which I thought looked dope. As a bonus, my father kept trying to coax me out of a closet where I was not. He would say things like, “Honey, sometimes people are attracted to the same sex, and I want you to know that’s okay.” I would reply, “Dad, I am so glad you are discovering yourself.” To which he would say he wasn’t talking about himself, and I would wink at him and walk away.

 My dad was a good guy; he let my mother run the crazy circus and was always very patient. I also felt he and I were closest, while my mom was always closest to my sister, Lela. I often thought my mother was trying to be the other twin and edge me out; this became even more apparent when we went on the road, as she began to dress more like Lela and colored her frizzy hair to match. My mother’s makeover made her look like a sexy lion, which reinvigorated me to try to rejoin the highly sexual predators. However, my mom said the prosthetic teeth “scared people” and “she didn’t see how it was sexy,” to which I said, “To you!” And shook my fin right out of the coffee shop where we had a gig. Isn’t what is sexy subjective? Some like thigh-high boots, and others enjoy a good set of sharp teeth.

 Seeing how flustered this made my mother was so enjoyable that it became my thing; about every ten shows, I would show up as my version of a sexy animal or person; my sister thought it was funny, while my mom thought I was a jaded, sarcastic, asshole, and they were both right! I must say I did a very sexy Benjamin Franklin; pulling off a bald cap is a feat.

 As more time passed, I was glad I had participated in the journey and appreciated traveling and attending the shows; it was neat to meet different people and see various places.

 Yet, the more time we spent on the road, the more we found we were not even breaking even with all of the expenses. It would have been okay if we could have been sure that this was a stepping stone, just part of working one's way up, as we thought at first, but time was disproving this to be a fact. The real issue was that my mother wore these very special goggles when looking at my sister, as she saw something that was not always reality. While it was endearing, it was not practical. Still, it was hard to give up because you get “gambler’s mind,” where you figure you’ve already put so much in that walking away would be devastating, or you think, “What if we give up and the next gig is the one the talent agent is at and we miss out”; it is why the house always wins because someone understood this way of thinking.

 Initially, my parents had hoped that we would tour for less than a year before the bigger stuff came, and that’s the amount of money they had saved. It’s always easier to feel secure with a nest egg; when you start removing from it, it chips away at that security.

 Then, one day, we were working the numbers only to realize we had enough for a month of expenses left in savings. Still, even the hard proof and dire straits were not enough to bring my mother out of denial. In our meetings before a show, she always said, “The only people who succeed at their dreams are not the dreamers, but the ones that dig in deep to see those dreams come true, even when it is hard.” I agree with this, but I have also had many dreams that I had to give up due to reality; I am not a professional baseball player, comedian, DJ, or a dinosaur. Dreams need enough reality to work.

 When we held a family meeting about this, I had hoped that, although disappointing, she would see the truth; however, Mom refused. I couldn't understand how she could be so delusional until I examined the situation and concluded that this was not about my sister achieving her dreams, but about my mother achieving her own dreams through my sister. It isn’t unusual for a parent to try to live vicariously through their child, and I can understand that, especially since I was familiar with my mother’s life.

 Growing up, my mother had a lot of responsibility put on her from a very young age; her mother had bipolar disorder, which my grandparents ignored due to the stigma. My grandparents’ feelings were to ignore serious issues and pray they resolve themselves, yet anyone who has ever had a serious issue knows that they don’t resolve themselves; I believe they knew that, but still, they made getting help unacceptable and let my grandmother suffer in silence. All of this made my grandma feel like she was the problem, and since she was not able to get help, she started self-medicating early on.

 My grandmother was a lovely woman whose pictures reminded me of Judy Garland, who also battled many challenges in her life, which allowed men to forgive her temperament. My grandfather found her striking, fell in love with her, and married her quickly.

 It was a beautiful love story with plenty of support and potential, but my grandmother still had a problem and used substances to cope. She was never able to push past the stigma that her parents bestowed upon her, so she was too ashamed to ask for help, even when she could have.

 While my grandmother struggled, she had my mother and my uncle early in the marriage, wanting what other people had and wishing she could be happy. Sadly, it was clear that issues were worsening, and her depression became as devastating as it was debilitating. She was trying to pick up a hundred-pound rock by herself while people berated her for not being strong enough, so she was a mess. She spent her time drinking, crying, and generally feeling lost.

 Then, one day, my grandmother, Iris, told my 9-year-old mother, “Sometimes I feel like I’m screaming at the top of my lungs, but no one can hear me, and I can’t scream any louder,” and then my grandmother walked upstairs, put a gun to her head, and ended her life.

 Hearing the noise, my uncle, three years older than my mother, walked in immediately. Seeing the scene, he screamed, and then my mother joined him. I always judged Grandma for this because I thought, “How could you allow your children to see that?” Until I realized, with age, that she didn’t want that; she wanted someone to hear her screams. That’s why I always try to be kind and supportive; you never know who may be screaming at the top of their lungs, on the verge of giving up. It’s pretty simple not to be cruel, and it is essential that we don’t be.

 Once my mother’s mother was gone, life was always a struggle. My grandfather was especially despondent and began to drink to excess, and her underage brother followed suit. That environment was a darkness that smothered and weighed deeply on my mother. So, when she met my father, just as her mother had met my grandfather, she couldn’t wait to get out of her house.

 My mother met my father while he was volunteering at the flower gardens, which she enjoyed escaping to when the destruction at home became too much, and he truly cared for her. She felt heard by my father, so she never had to scream; she didn’t even need to whisper; he knew. I suppose if life is a book and much of hers was something horrible, he wanted to support her in her journey to write something better, as if enough good could drive out the bad, and, quite honestly, it seemed to work.

 Knowing the tragic beginning of my mother’s life allowed my father to be incredibly supportive, even allowing her pursuit of this pipe dream past what he knew was sound. So even as her hair became blonder, her dress much sexier, and her behavior less mature, he stayed supportive. So, we became poor, helping a wounded woman fulfill her dreams; we wanted to see her happy.

 For a while, Mom was very happy; she saw everything she ever wanted within reach and believed it was possible. Yet, as time passed, she became increasingly distant from that dream, and even she began to see the reality that her dream would likely be crushed.

 Unfortunately, the reality was that my sister didn’t have what people were looking for in the big leagues; still, she had plenty of people who enjoyed her at dive bars, malls, business openings, car dealerships, and trade shows, and quite honestly, that made me believe she was a success; success is such a subjective thing; no one would pay me to get up on that stage and prance around dressed like a sexy cat, and they certainly wouldn’t want to hear me sing. She did more than most people would ever do, which made me very proud of her.

**Part Two: What Dreams We Must Let Go**

Still, we tried to stay positive, because on the bright side, we had never been as close as a family, as we had all had busy lives and led them separately before; however, this forced us to spend all our time together, and in an RV, no less.

 Sadly, the honeymoon period of life on the road was coming to an end as we ran out of money. So, my mother found ways to cope with this, and it was apparent she was having some midlife crisis. Later, it escalated, and she began to act like a teenager again. I genuinely believe it was because she never really got much experience, because she skipped over some significant rites of passage being a young wife and mother, and now that we were old enough to be independent, she saw that she could have those experiences that she missed, and she started to rewrite her youth.

 Still, it became more concerning when she graduated from wearing bralettes and tiny mini skirts with high heels to binge drinking; it was not that she didn’t drink before, but not like this. She had previously been cautious because alcoholism ran in her family; her mother used alcohol to try to deal with the intense emotional pain that she felt, and then her brother and father did the same thing, and nothing good came from any of it. Yet, watching her dreams slip through her fingers was devastating, and it seemed like she couldn’t stop once she started trying to drink it away. Still, I had hoped my mother’s hard partying would be a phase.

 Sadly, it was not a phase; she became more distant, staying out early into the morning after the shows and then returning to the motel inebriated. Adding to my concern, my mother started smoking, which she had always detested. It was hard to watch this happen, but it was even more challenging not to feel hurt as she removed herself from us. It was such a change that you wouldn’t be able to recognize these two women side-by-side, physically or emotionally.

 Still, we all maintained that this would run its course, and then everything would return to “normal.” We truly believed it. Yet, with time, it was apparent that this wasn’t a phase but a metamorphosis. And the more my mother descended into this new person, the more I felt like I could see my grandmother. I had never met my grandmother, nor did my mother speak much of her, but I got to know her through my uncle, who would divulge much after too many drinks. He often told me that my grandmother was sometimes the most fun person he had ever met; she would play dress-up with them for hours and create her own original bedtime stories, incorporating them into the story. Yet, on the flip side, he said there were also times when she was so depressed she could barely even move, and many times when she was so sad that she scared everyone. Still, he always knew that underneath all of the darkness and mental illness, my grandmother loved them. I tried to remember that regarding my own mother.

 Sadly, the whole thing was a domino effect; my grandmother’s parents wouldn’t address the issue, and because of not being able to get support, my grandmother became dependent on substances and lived a turbulent life, and ultimately died as a result; her death then deeply wounded the three people in her family, which caused serious issues in the aftermath; even my mother who was initially success story, especially comparatively, now showed the effects of that loss of innocence and that deeply buried pain, which was now rising to the surface.

 Then, over a year into our grand American tour, my father had to call it; my father couldn’t work that much because we moved around so much, and he didn’t want to be in a stationary position and not be with us, so we didn’t have money and started to incur serious loan and credit card debt. I knew he would’ve never asked her to let go if he didn’t need to, but he had to. He hoped she would understand that not everything we dream about may come true, but if it doesn’t, you can find another dream until you find something that works. He also thought she would understand how far they were in debt and how hard it would be to recover if they continued to add to it. Yet, even with all the compassion, kindness, and reasoning, it was not enough to get her to let go, and that was a hard place for us all to be in.

 Then, when the debt collectors started to hound us and threaten to take our RV/house, my father truly put his foot down and packed up to head back home, where he could find employment again. He figured we could still do local shows and continue trying from a better place financially. He asked us to accept that this was a fun journey and not focus on the end result. Yet, this never penetrated my mother’s desire for this not to end.

 So, as we headed back, my mother stared out the window blankly, feeling numb; yet, we figured she would go through that hurt and grief and come out of it.

 Unfortunately, as my mother went through this grief, it became apparent that her attitude heavily influenced my sister, who felt deflated not from losing her dream but because it deflated our mother, whom she yearned for approval from. I had never seen my sister cry, but now she often cried.

 After we got home, my father and I were confident that my mother would return to her old self when she was back in the same environment, but my mother continued to live her teenage years. She also never really became close to my father again. She had changed into a new person, and that person was not as bonded to him.

 On the bright side, I was glad to get back into high school, and with summer school, I would only need two instead of three years to graduate. So, I devoted myself to my studies and readjusted. However, my sister did not follow suit as I had hoped; instead, she joined in with our mom; they would hang out with teenagers often, drink, and smoke pot, and have these secret moments and inside jokes. Initially, I was concerned, but I was also very focused on many other things.

 During this time, my father and I got close; he would tell me, “Kelly, I don’t know what I will do. Your sister is failing school, and your mother sometimes doesn’t come home.” I didn’t know what to say, so I said, “They’re just devastated. Let them deal with it for a while, and we can worry more later.”

 Unfortunately, my mother and sister later moved out of the house, which was not even something we had on our radar, so we were shocked. Even worse, rumor had it that both of them had teenage boyfriends, which broke my father’s heart. When this happened, I no longer believed Mom was trying to recapture the youth she lost, but instead, a woman with an illness that may have always been in the background, just waiting for the proper incantation to materialize.

 Still, it was harder for me to see my sister give up her education than to watch my mother self-destruct. I know my sister never loved school outside of the social aspect, so this probably felt like a huge win, but I wanted her to have options. You can do great things without an education, and not all important lessons are taught in school, but I didn’t know that this was what she wanted or if she would regret it later on; however, I was certain that this was her acting out because she failed at something so few people can make a living at, and I knew the appeal of being able to drink, stay out, and not go to school would trump what the future her would want.

 After they had moved out, the divorce papers came, and my dad was despondent, but he still went about his life, likely for my sake, and we hung out a ton. He was always committing us to cumbersome projects, which I was happy to do with him because I knew he was doing it to keep his mind occupied, and I learned a lot about him and his valuable skills.

 Then, one night, he and I were working on a small motorcycle that he would teach me to ride on when the phone rang; my father went to answer the phone and was gone long enough that I went looking for him and found him sitting on the floor with his head in his hands, crying, with the phone beside him. I sat beside him and put my arm around him. “Dad, what’s wrong?”

 He took a moment and then said, “Your mother and sister are dead.”

 I never would have expected that would be the response, and so it felt like I had been sucker punched. It was so unbelievable that my mind refused to believe it.

 Then, after a good half an hour on the floor, my father spoke, “Your mother was drunk driving with your sister, and they hit a woman and her seven-year-old son. There were no survivors.”

 It’s the hardest thing to comprehend that you will never see someone again who was so recently alive, and there is no warning; there was so much unfinished business. My sister was supposed to get her shit together, and I was going to get established; we were supposed to go to twin conventions and raise families someday together; we were supposed to have fucking time. Then I started feeling angry at my mother until I thought this was a tragic end, just like her mother; maybe she had been screaming for a while, and we didn’t hear her. It was all bad. So, my father and I both went numb; we couldn’t speak or interact; we just stayed in the type of silence that only people who have experienced extreme pain know.

 As we headed to bed much later, my head spiraled out of control. I admired my twin’s beauty and charisma, even if I never admitted it, because she was incredibly popular; the boys just constantly fell in love with her. I never felt ashamed of this wish because I know she wished she could be more like me, self-assured and not giving a fuck about what people think. She made me feel like I was the funniest and brazen person alive.

 I remember protecting her from predatory men; I’d pull out a knife and yell, “Hey, mother fucker… I just got out of jail, and my girlfriend is in there, so I’m looking for a reason to go back,” which always did the trick, except for one man, who said, “Me, too!” We then just ran because that was scary as hell, and when we were far enough away, we erupted in laughter on the grass; looking at one another, she and I increased the other's laughter. She giggled, “What are the chances?”

 I said, “You have enough followers that there was bound to be one.”

 She smiled, helped me off the ground, and said, “Loose Cannon… Let’s go get some ‘Raising Cane's,’ my treat.” It was moments like these when I realized that being her also meant being incredibly exposed and fragile.

 Obviously, we both had what the other lacked and secretly wished for. If we were to be combined, we would be the perfect person, but it was close to perfection when we were together. Our differences made our bond exceptional, but it was also why we didn’t have much in common and, therefore, didn’t spend much time together. Regardless, we always shared something powerful; the tie that twins have is absolutely real. It’s like our personalities were made to support each other. In many ways, we only made sense as a set. I felt like our last Halloween costume together said it all; we were Lucy and Ricky from “I Love Lucy”; my sister finally let me choose. I made a damn fine “Ricky,” and after drinking a fair amount of alcohol, I got on that bongo, and I sang “Babalu” loudly. I should mention that this was a party that only she was invited to, and she could barely get me in. She basically ended up selling me as an accessory to her costume. I didn’t get offended; instead, I partied on their dime. I was used to “Maddog 20/20,” so champagne was an upgrade. This is one of my favorite memories because my sister was not as embarrassed as I expected; she felt like maybe they deserved a little disruption for my exclusion.

 On the way home, I left a trail of vomit; it was my own “Handzel and Gretel” moment. My sister comforted me while trying not to laugh at a drunk man with a bongo, loudly puking in the streets.

 Later, I took the toupee off to puke in it, so I had a fishnet stocking cap and fake eyebrows that looked terrifying without the matching toupee. She made sure that we both got home safe, and when we got in bed, she said that we were just like Ricky and Lucy and could never be half of that and make sense. She also told me I was her best friend, and we made a great pair.

 Then, my mind wandered to my mother; I remembered who she was before her mid-life crisis, and it was very different from the person she became. Our mother was always supportive and allowed us to follow our paths and be our own people. She was very strict, but there was plenty of fun. I frequently made her exhausted, but I always made her laugh. She always had double duty because she took us to all of our events, and we shared none of the same interests, so she was constantly just driving, but never complained. She was a great cook and an avid reader. So, it was beyond understanding how someone could break down like she did, where the new person is unrecognizable from before. It was tragic that our mother came unhinged and then died as a result, but at least I had the luxury of not being a small child and not being there to see the accident as my mother had. It’s strange to watch patterns repeat because you would think you would want to do things differently, but then perhaps she felt compelled; the siren was singing, for how long is a mystery, and she followed the voice and ended up dead on the rocks with four other people she took with her.

 Once that thought came to mind, I imagined the head-on collision. All of them were fine, but then they recognized, too late, what was about to happen. Still, there was a moment of absolute fear before they collided and stepped out of this life and into the next. And once that started, it seemed to play in a loop.

 When I finally fell asleep, I could feel my twin, but couldn’t help her; feeling stuck was terrifying. I missed her so much, and I had so much regret. I wished to go back in time or be dead with her. Love is the only thing that can destroy you so badly.

 After that night, time became a blur; it felt like the world was quickly spinning around me while I remained still. People would talk to me, sounding like gibberish: “Blah… Blah… Holding up… Blah… Blah.” What do you say to any of it? I lost the person who stole my resources in the womb and with whom I had created my own language; I was a sock without the other… useless. I lost everything. So, I said what would get me out of the conversation as quickly as possible.

 Through all this, my father stayed strong and became very worried about me, so he took a job in Virginia at an ancient hotel that reminds me of the “Cecil Hotel.” Researching this, I found that it was older than dirt and in disarray. The owner had passed away shortly after losing his wife, and it was inherited by their grandson, who was in over his head; he had wanted to flip it quickly. So the owner offered room and board plus a salary, which was much less than market value, but my dad wanted to leave our hometown.

**Part 3: The Dreams We Lay To Rest**

Packing up was hard because there were so many memories in that house and our town. Four was cut to two, and we both felt like our other half was gone. It was like saying goodbye to one life entirely.

 Once we reached our destination a day later, it was worse than expected; it was rusted, water-damaged, smelled musty, and hadn’t had regular maintenance in years. It was the type of place that could only attract serial killers and people hiding from something.

 When I got to my room, I found the bedding disgusting; the comforter reminded me of a horse blanket and appeared never to have been laundered. Taking stock of my new accommodations, I walked to my father’s room across from my own and gave him a look, so he said, “Let’s go get our own bedding,” which was a relief. Still, I kept the old bedding just in case I ever got my hands on Luminol.

 In the pursuit of bedding, we had a tough time finding a store. This town had no supercenters or malls and seemed stuck in the past; we had to travel another hour south before we found something. We got bedding and snacks there, then headed back “home.”

 After we got home, I asked my father if anyone else lived here, and he said we joined only two other people who resided in the hotel year-round: a woman named Anastasia and a man named Todd, who both worked at the hotel, and we would occasionally see them in passing.

 Once we had settled into our new adventure, my father dug into the large job ahead of him; distraction has always been his drug, and I often read, but then I got tired of my favorite pastime and started to explore. There were many rooms in the hotel, 650 to be exact, and I loved going through them as there were many treasures, books, letters, jewelry, and clothes still in them. I have always believed that we are all made of energy, and some of that energy gets transferred to our possessions. If enough of that person’s energy is transferred, then you can feel it. I suppose the only good thing about an unkept hotel is that things get left behind and never make their way to the nonexistent “lost and found.”

 During my treasure hunting, I found a small rubber duck that felt like a mother running scared from something, lipstick that felt like waiting for someone who was never going to show, and a note with the tone of someone undecided, “I hoped that someday I could see you do the right thing. You broke me in a way that cannot be repaired. You watched me fall apart and did nothing. So I had no moves.” The note was signed by Rachel Lindmeiher, whose surname was also the hotel’s name, “The Lindmeiher.” That couldn’t be a coincidence.

 In all my exploring, one theme became clear: this was many people's bottom or last stop. I wondered if it would be mine; it would either be the worst before it got better or the worst before it never did. This place had seen its share of tears, hopelessness, and pain, which became what this hotel was: desolation personified. It was apparent that the more the hotel was neglected, the more it attracted people like it.

 Still, it was obvious the hotel was once something grand; you could see that under all the disrepair and damage. The hotel had excellent detailing and used to be a majestic maroon with a huge sign that was now a rusted safety hazard, but once lit up gloriously enough to belong in Las Vegas. I knew the hotel was nearly 70, but why was no care put into maintaining it, or at what point did that stop?

 I was still pondering the intriguing hotel’s history when I heard a noise like someone was in the bathroom of the room I was pillaging. I believed that I was alone, so I was pretty startled.

 I asked, “Who's there?”

 Then there was more rustling, and I said, “This isn’t funny. Who’s there?”

 There was no response, so I left and passed through the coldest air, out of place in the mugginess. The door slammed behind me. I ran until I heard Anastasia yelling, “What were you doing in Rachy’s room?”

 I replied, “Oh… shit. I thought there were only four of us here.”

 She looked at me, assessing me, then replied, “I did not say that there were more than four of us. That room has always been off limits after she passed away.”

 “Rachy died in that room?” I asked.

 She looked concerned and said, “Well…no. She died in the hotel’s spiral staircase.”

 I asked if that was gone since I had never seen it, and she replied, “No. It’s locked up in the east wing. It has never been opened since her death.”

 “Spiral staircases are dangerous,” I remarked.

 “The staircase didn’t kill her; she killed herself by jumping from it, many floors above,” she answered.

 “Oh…” I said, shocked at the intense information that had just been provided.

 Then I asked, “I saw a note from her with the same last name as the hotel. Is she related to whoever owned this before?”

 She looked at me like I had some audacity and replied, “You shouldn’t be snooping around, especially in a place like this.”

 I nodded, and she said, “Her parents became the owners 50 years ago, purchasing it to create a legacy for their family. She moved in on and off, but 20 years after they made the purchase, she started having difficulties in her marriage. She was in an abusive relationship, one that was full of violence and emotional pain. She would live with it for as long as she could, then leave for the safety of her parents, but for only so long before she would be ensnared in his trap again, and the cycle would repeat. All she wanted was to feel safe; all he wanted to do was take that safety. She hated living that way but felt powerless to escape it.

 “So it came to a point where it was too painful to live, and she didn’t feel she could escape, so she dove from this life into the next, leaving her son behind. He inherited this hotel when both grandparents passed; they all never left this place, and many claimed they could be seen on that stairwell at moments of the day. The grandson then became quite mad after inheriting it. He had been previously sheltered from the painful parts of life, living with his paternal aunt. He never knew his grandparents, his father never cared about him, and he never knew his mother's true fate. But coming here, he heard the stories. So he ended up frequenting that stairwell, and guests would say they heard him talking to the walls. Then, he refused to leave that stairwell. At this point, this place had already become nomadic, and people were cruel to it; without supervision, many people showed who they were inside. The destruction and disrespect were awful, especially while a lost young man was losing his mind.

 “Later on, they found his body in that stairwell. This place then solidified the sadness that it was formed into, and once it became that way, people coming here to die became a real issue. Over 100 people have taken their lives here in a variety of ways. It’s so sad to think of how bad your life must be to end it. There’s so much pain in the world, and they came here… the most hurt and depressed.

 “When the ownership changed to a family member later on, the current owner made some changes. He changed the windows to prevent jumpers, he changed the fixtures so no one could hang themselves, and he took many precautions, but people found a way. He wanted people not to die here, and yet, he couldn’t get it to stop; this place has absorbed so much loss, grief, and desolation that they have fused. He felt it, which scared him, so he left before it consumed him. So, while initially he wanted to restore and flip it, he has decided to demolish it.

 “I must say that I am terribly sorry to see this place go. None of the original owners would’ve wanted this building to be torn down; it was once every dream and wish they had. I planned on living here for the rest of my life; still, I can see the owner’s side. I know well what this place has become and that the people who stay here sometimes don’t leave here alive, and like the forest in Japan, it has almost become a destination for this reason.”

 I didn’t know what to say, but she smiled and said, “I know it’s a lot. This place is complex and condemned, but before that, it was magnificent and represented many dreams.”

 It was easy to imagine this decaying structure, once fancy and full of travelers, honeymooners, people working on moving into their first house, and many happy reasons. With an active imagination, you could play the video of its downfall in reverse and see it go from being considered a total loss to being less so and then back at the start, perfection: people laughing, dancing, and falling in love. You just never know when things will go bad, but you can’t think about that constantly, or you’d never enjoy anything. I wanted to go back in time badly to happier times before the end of a dream. I wanted more time. I needed more time.

 Anastasia interrupted my deep thoughts, saying, “You want to help me with some things? It will appeal to your detective nature?”

 And how could I turn down an offer like this? I replied, “Definitely.”

 She asked me to follow her, so I followed her to the elevator and then to the ballroom. She said, “The boss wants us to get rid of all of this, but it’s so lovely I thought we could sell or donate it. I hate to pitch crystal or anything fine; dust is not permanent. With a little care, most of this can be restored, and if not, I think it gives it some character, and I hear character has made a comeback. Perfection has a place, but imperfection does as well.”

 So we started to go through it all. I love going through other people’s belongings so much that before high school, my dream job was an estate sales representative because thrift stores are only a small piece of many different people, but estate sales paint a complete picture, plus you know who it all belongs to. I’ve always loved being a voyeur; I want intimacy, but traditionally, it wasn’t in my skill set, so observing gave me a sort of intimacy without needing the necessary relationship. I used to love to pick pockets and steal purses from drunk people at shows, look through them, and then return them to the lost and found with all of the contents. People often edit their lives so you see what they curate for the world, but without the editing, true intimacy can be found. Looking through everything, I realized how badly I needed this distraction, and the fact that it appealed to me so personally immersed me in the task.

 As I collected the alcohol bottles, many of which were no longer produced, Anastasia told me that she wouldn’t have a problem if I pilfered some wine. Still, she would need to select it because anything else would likely kill me. I thought that was pretty cool since I was only 18. I believed she figured I’d lived through some very adult experiences, and I was technically an adult, so what did it matter?

 I was unsure of Anastasia’s age; she was older but also took exceptionally good care of her appearance, so it was hard to say. She had waist-length hair I had only seen down in passing once; it was a lovely shade of light brown, shiny, and very healthy looking. Usually, she kept it up in a top knot, a popular fashion long ago, with a gold bracket cuff and a large gold pin with a butterfly that secured the hair into the cuff. Her facial features were lovely; her face was flawless without sun damage or scarring, which made me a little jealous. Her cheeks were full and high, and her skin was milky. She wore very natural makeup that gently enhanced her near-perfect features and had hazel-colored eyes that were almond-shaped and soft. She smelled like the hotel with the addition of a perfume that smelled like ylang-ylang and bergamot. I found her to be the most elegant woman I have ever seen.

 As the day continued, it didn’t disappoint, as there was much more of a variety of “doo-dads” than I anticipated, with it being a bar. I especially enjoyed the incredible amount of detailed gold owls I packed up. There were so many that it made me curious, so I asked about them, to which Anastasia replied, “This ballroom’s design personifies an owl’s extent of vision and grandness; owls see more than we ever could. The hazard of a chandelier above us used to swivel like an owl’s neck and could be lowered and raised to reflect light differently, and what cannot be seen is that all of the gold pieces are owls, watching over unseen. The owls and much about this hotel were inspired by the beloved owner’s daughter, Rachel; the fine details and elegance were her influence. The hotel was a living love letter her parents wrote to the child they never thought they’d have due to fertility issues.

 “After Rachel was born, she was a miracle that restored your faith and made you believe in magic. There’s something extraordinary about beating the odds, and that something brought deep gratitude.

 “When Rachel grew up, her parents didn’t want to let her go, but she did; her leaving was very hard for them. Still, they knew she had to find her way.

 “Unfortunately, she didn’t find her way; instead, she found someone who hurt her repeatedly, which changed her tremendously for the worse. Previously, Rachel was a dreamer who loved creating and was a light, but after she entered the abusive relationship, she became depressed, terrified, and broken; love is supposed to make you feel supported and special, but he just made her feel alone and that she was nothing. She wasn’t herself anymore, and therefore, this place wasn’t. It is too bad she never got free of that until she was free of this life. Her death had a negative domino effect, this hotel being just one of them.”

 I absorbed this information and replied, “The amount of knowledge you have is incredible.”

 She nodded and said, “It’s worth knowing. We will be the last to stay here, and this place has a story and a message.”

 I nodded and continued going through the treasures from another time, styles from each decade in the hotel that became a time capsule. Time is quite interesting; watching the world advance and evolve is unbelievable, but watching how time through experiences changes a person is even more so. You start one way, then time passes, and you are different. I missed how I used to be, and while I was broken for various reasons, I could relate to Rachel. I felt so stuck in this sadness for long enough that it was hard to imagine that life would ever improve. It was a type of hopelessness that scared me.

 We worked for five hours straight and then called it a day with a fair amount organized neatly in different boxes. I met up with my dad later that night, and we made an oven lasagna, which he cooked in the old kitchen area after spending about two hours making it safe to eat or cook. My father, looking exhausted, asked, “How was your day?”

 I replied, “Anastasia asked me to help pack some stuff up, so I had a productive day, and honestly, it was just what I needed.”

 He smiled and said, “That’s great to hear. I bet there’s all sorts of neat stuff in this hotel.”

 I agreed and then asked him how his day was, and he replied, “It was a hard, long day. I can’t ever do things half-assed or incorrectly, so I am trying to help see that the boss's expectations and timeline are not feasible, but he is standing firm. I keep hoping he comes around because his “my way or the highway” mindset will have catastrophic results… Sorry, I didn’t mean to vent so much.”

 I was glad he was opening up, and our relationship had evolved into more of a friendship. I said, “That’s totally understandable; things should be done correctly if you want them to go as such. Stand your ground. You can vent to me anytime, Dad.”

 I could tell my validation made him feel better. I was so lucky to have my father because we went through something not many people understand. We were both experiencing the same great void of the loss of companionship; there’s power in permanence. Yet, while it was horrific, we were together.

**Part 4: Dreams Deferred**

After eating, I retired to my room and lay on my bed. I closed my eyes and had deep philosophical thoughts; my thoughts spiraled about family, regret, death, and the future until I fell asleep.

 In my dream, my mind restored the hotel; the colors were bright and no longer dingy, the smell in the air was that of the fresh flowers placed everywhere, not of smoke and decay, and the carpets were clean and free of burn marks and deep stains. Here, time had never brought the pain that changed the hotel; the transformation was quite something to see.

 Then, people appeared and danced around in the ballroom, all in interesting masks. They were all celebrating and never experienced the haunting that came later. It was the most vivid dream I have ever had.

 When the dream ended and reality set in, I was devastated. That was the most peace and happiness I’ve had in a very long time, and it was gone.

 After getting up and moving, I went down to the kitchen to make some coffee and ran into Anastasia. She said, “Thank you so much for your help yesterday. Would you be willing to do this until the place gets torn down? I can’t pay you, as the owner won’t allow it, but I can allow you to keep some of what you find.”

 I smiled and replied, “Honestly, I do it for nothing,” and offered her a cup of coffee, which she accepted.

 After we finished our coffee, we worked hard and sometimes talked, starting with surface-level conversations such as where we were born and where we had lived, our hobbies and interests, and things to do around this area. She was as hard to get to know as I was, which made things challenging. Yet, the more we explored this vast and mysterious place, the more we bonded.

 I eventually divulged more about my situation, and she said, “I am very sorry to hear that. Losing someone is the worst experience you can ever go through, but I’m sure with you being twins, that pain is much more extraordinary. Still, I hope you know this is not the end or the destination but a stop along the ride to someplace much better.”

 I agreed with her even though I consider myself an atheist. I always lived by the rule of doing no harm and doing my best, so if there were a heaven, it would be a bonus to a life lived well with honor. However, after the accident, there were many times when I hoped that I would get to see my family again, so although I may not have absolute faith, I do have hope, which made me more open-minded to religion and the afterlife.

 After days of packing the ballroom, we moved on to the billiards room, which was fun. It was interesting to see the games and books that entertained people once upon a time; time in this place added instead of updating itself, so varying products of different times were present, which I found fascinating. I asked to keep all the books.

 Then, in month five of our work, we were given a set demolition date, so the countdown began; we knew it was coming, but the set date made it real, which was depressing.

 The night we found out that the end was near, we drank Absynth and danced the night away in the ballroom under the chandelier that, by some miracle, she got to work. It was ethereal as we danced with the dancing lights, and for the first time in a long time, I felt life breathed back into me. I realized then that I had unintentionally taken for granted the life I had before it was sucked out of me and wished I return to it.

 After we were worn out from dancing, we silently lay beneath the chandelier. I wondered about her when we lay there. I had shared so much about working with her, but she never said much about herself. So, without her words, I tried to fill in the blanks with the pieces that I had; she never had any suitors or friends around, and she never seemed to leave the motel, which appeared to be a large part of her identity. I know that if you truly love someone or something enough, the permanent loss of that changes you. I often wondered if she was breaking down privately, since she had never done so in my presence.

 Then, she put her hand in mine and said, “I wish life could be more like this: more light, laughing, and happiness.”

 I rolled over and said, “It can be; we have each other,” and then puked on the floor.

 After I was done vomiting, I immediately started laughing, and so did she. She then helped me to my room, and her care for me reminded me so much of my beloved sister.

 Once we got to my door, she hugged me and whispered, “You know they say you can communicate with the dead from that staircase.”

 I couldn’t reply or think because I had to puke, so I smiled and went to the bathroom.

 Although she was gone when I returned, her last words about the legend that you could speak to the dead from that staircase remained.

 When I awoke, I felt horrible; my nausea somehow became worse, and my head felt like an army of tiny, little Luci-less Rickys were playing bongos in my head. I tried to go back to sleep, which felt impossible, being so sick, but I also couldn’t read or do anything, feeling so bad. So, my mind returned to my life before being immersed in cold water flung violently from wave to wave until I fell asleep much later.

 Later, I was awakened by knocking at the door. I looked at the clock and realized it was nighttime; I had slept the entire day.

 Looking like a zombie, I answered the door, and my dad came inside and said, “Kiddo, I brought you some pizza. I didn’t want to wake you earlier because I figured you were exhausted from helping Anastasia. I’m glad you’re helping her since this has been hard on her; it’s always hard to say goodbye, but even more when you desperately want to stay. Does she know what she will do next?”

 I replied, “She hasn’t said anything to me.”

 He smiled, handed me the pizza box, and said, “Have you given it any thought?”

 I had nearly a whole piece of pizza shoved in my mouth and mumbled, “I haven’t. Have you?”

 He grabbed a piece of pizza from the box and said, “I was thinking we head west. We lived in the Midwest, and now we’re in the East, so the West could be a new experience. By the way, your Mulder looks good grown out.”.

 I laughed, “My what? That is an X-Files character. Haven’t you ever heard of a mullet before, you know, ‘business in the front and party in the back?’”

 He said, “Well, it was kinda out of this world, kiddo, and that sounds like it would be both a horrible party and business.” I was lucky I had a dad like him; he was such a “dad.”

 The next day, I woke up much earlier than usual, likely because I had slept the previous day away. So, waiting for Anastasia to awaken, I pulled out one of the books, “Anna Karenina,” which had “property of Rachy” written on the cover.

 Once I started reading, I became engrossed in a complicated love story from a much different time. The story follows a distraught woman who is a mother and wife. The woman doesn’t feel passionately about her husband, so she falls for another man who is not necessarily bad but more self-important and oblivious to her needs. The whole story presents as a metaphorical cage created by society’s rules and expectations for women and the experience of being a caged woman in a time when women were unable to make many life choices and had much fewer rights. This book sadly made me realize that in many years, some things never change or do so very slowly. To be a woman is best described as being a beautiful butterfly who constantly has to defend your wings from being clipped; in the best-case scenario, you spend your life doing just that, but if you are unfortunate, your wings are clipped, and you now know that you once had wings and now have limitations.

 A few hours later, I found Anastasia making coffee in the strange contraption that she preferred to a more modern appliance. The first time I drank it, I felt like the beans were over-roasted; it reminded me of cowboy coffee, but the more I drank it, the more I fell in love with it; it had a robust taste compared to the deeply filtered coffee that I was used to, and what I thought was overly roasted, I realized, was adequately and fully roasted. There was sophistication to it that I loved, and she served it on a tray with a pot, creamer, and sugar dish that were all real silver and quite heavy. I had never had such a heavy cream as what she served. It reminded me of the boy I lost my virginity to, Gerald, who, the first time we had sex, banged into me violently, and so I gave him the nickname “Jackrabbit Jerry,” but only between my sister and me.

 After Gerald banged me, pun intended, for a short time, he finished before I even became aroused and yelled, “Success,” as he wildly sprayed cum all over his bedroom. One man’s success may be another woman’s failure.

 I could’ve stopped at that unsatisfactory experience and lived happily ever after with the shower head, but then part of me thought, “That must have been a fluke… Maybe it was also his first time… Maybe he was nervous.” I just had to see, so I came back for a second round like a scientist. He lasted a little longer the second time, but when he came, he yelled, “I am the lord.” I was so shocked to hear that I couldn’t even be my quick-witted self with a reply.

 After “the lord” came all over his stuffed animals, I pulled up my pants and down my top and wiped the tiny bit of cum off my nose, and left “the lord” with the small amount of dignity I had left, yelling, “I am the Kraken!”

 I then went to my favorite restaurant, “Raising Cane's,” which was a billion times better than sex with “the lord.”

 Surprisingly, “The lord” later called me and said he wasn’t aware I was into role-playing, which he was very much about. To which I thought, “Clearly, I bedded a maniac,” because I had no clue what he was talking about.

 When I did not say anything, he replied, “You know… The Kraken thing.”

 After a moment, I said, “Oh… So you want me to dress as a Kraken? What will you be, a mermaid?”

 He replied, “Well… I was planning on being a sailor or pirate, but that sounds even better.”

 How could I turn this offer down? How many times in your life do you get to be a Kraken that gets to overpower a horny merman? This was literally the only scenario that would ever get me to enter that room again.

 I showed up a few days later for our “date.” I made a great kraken, but he said that my method acting scared him, so my mask and his fin never came off. But boy, did I have some swagger going to get my fried chicken.

 I was smiling stupidly, thinking of this memory, so Anastasia asked me, “What are you thinking about?”

 I said, “Losing my virginity to the lord and becoming the Kraken.”

 She smiled and said, “You are one of a kind. You must share this with me.”

 The retelling of this story and my relationship with Anastasia made me miss my sister terribly. So, I let it all out and started crying, which I never let myself act upon for fear of not being able to stop.

 Then Anastasia, missing the mother she described as her best friend and number one fan, began to cry. We then both cried for a while. She held my hand during this, making me uncomfortable because I was not used to that closeness; holding someone’s hand while crying felt more intimate than even sex to me; there’s no facade or walls when you think of the worst and most sad things while experiencing the effects. But after a while, I relaxed and realized that intimacy is good. I had avoided intimacy so much in my life that I never realized what comes after that vulnerable intimacy, and that is deep connection and bonding. So, we held hands, and I faced a huge fear with someone beside me, which was much easier; I didn’t have to go it alone any longer, and that realization was impactful.

 As we meditated through those hard feelings together, she put her lips close to my ear and said, “You know… They say you can speak to the other side from that staircase.”

 I didn’t know what to say, so I nervously laughed. However, this seemed to hurt her, so I adjusted and said, “Oh, yeah?”

 She nodded, and I didn’t see the harm in humoring this, so I asked, “OK. So when would you like to do this, and what do we need?”

 She replied, “I will need to sneak the key from its very concealed place, and we need five short and five long candles… And a knife.”

 I raised my eyebrow and said, “A knife? Are you a clever serial killer?”

 She laughed, “If I were going to kill you, I would have done it by now; I’ve never heard someone listen to the same songs on repeat as much as you?”

 I didn’t realize she could hear my room so well and said, “Fair enough. Let’s do it. When?”

 She answered that we would do it tonight and told me she had some chores, but we would meet at eleven PM in her room.

**Part 5: Life is but a Dream**

When the time came, she led me first to the elevator to the basement level, then through a locked corridor that went on for so long that I couldn’t believe it, and finally to a door with many locks.

 After we entered through the door, she pointed her flashlight up. This spiral staircase was quite wide and extended so far up that the light could not reach the top. The steps were covered in the maroon carpet found in the rest of the hotel, but much cleaner from much less use. The wood was darker and appeared hand-carved, which must have cost a fortune. It’s too bad this had been hidden all this time; this was art.

 Then, she asked me to hold the flashlight so she could set up. She set five candles at what I can only assume would be the points of a pentagram and then five of the taller ones behind each of the shorter ones, about two feet apart.

 Once they were lit, she requested that I turn off the flashlight and sit in the middle with her. We sat across from each other with a silver dish in between us. She said, “Now, cut off some of your hair.”

 I replied, “Ummm… but I’m growing my Mulder out.” She looked at me, confused, and said, “What? You are so goddamn silly.

 So, I cut a good amount off, and she did the same.

 Then she said, “Kelly, take this knife and cut your wrist deep enough to produce a small amount of blood but not deep enough to require stitches.”

 I could only say, “Um…” again.

 She saw my hesitation, and she said, “Watch me,” and she cut herself.

 In my head, the neat freak and sane person inside of me said, “Don’t you use that bloody knife to cut yourself.” But then we were incredibly bonded, so another part of me thought, “Just do what she asks because when you love someone, you will undoubtedly have to bleed for them sometimes, and she is worth bleeding for, and I am certain she would bleed for me. If sacrifice is what separates love from anything shallower, then it must be love.”

 That’s when I realized I loved her, as she understood me. She peered into my soul and didn’t hate what she saw, which means she could see the mix of good and evil and all the many other contradictions that I am composed of, and loved me for me, not in spite of me. She was all of the best things, but not solely those, as they were mixed in with many more complicated characteristics, which I could relate to. And so I cut myself and let myself bleed into the silver dish, slowly mixing with the blood she had let. She then handed me some Gauze, and I wrapped up my wound.

 Once my wound was wrapped, she said, “We call to the spirits of the ones we love, who we have lost, and wish to communicate. We ask the Great Ones to channel the dead for the living. We ask because we are stuck and wish to move forward.”

 Then she paused, put my hands in her own, and chanted, “As love is, it is forever. Death does not end that forever; it’s just a part of it; let us see the other side as part.”

 She asked me to repeat this, and once I did, the taller candles on the outer circle blew out simultaneously. I could not believe my eyes. How could all five candles go out at once, and the inner candles remain? I was still skeptical, but now I was scared.

 Then, after a moment, she said, “Let the dead channel the living,” and the other candles went out simultaneously.

 We sat in complete darkness now, and I hated how terrified I felt. Her hands in mine brought some comfort, but not much. She said, “I will let go of your hands, but I will be near; we both have reasons for being here. Once you’re done, you’ll find me again.”

 When she said those words, my heart sank. It was pitch black, and now I was alone. I stayed frozen, hoping she would realize this was silly and we could leave the darkness and the creepy relic staircase. I wanted to tell her I didn’t want to do this any longer, but I wanted her to respect me.

 After a moment, I felt the candles light again, but I was alone in the center until I felt a tap on my shoulder, making me jump out of my skin. This was the scariest experience of my life. Then, my sister entered the circle, and I was certain I had finally gone mad. My sister then sat across from me and held my hands. She said, “Sister, I have missed you. I cannot apologize to you enough. You were always so cool and sure of yourself, and I wanted to be those things, but I felt trapped by expectations and opinions. I hate what I have done to you. You didn’t deserve that. Please forgive me. Please...”

 I still could not believe it, but I answered, “I cannot express how much I missed you. I can’t believe you are here. This is my only wish. I love you. There’s nothing to forgive. You’re my best friend, and you’re my family.”

 She then held me tightly, and we both wept. It could just be the two of us forever, and that would be fine. I couldn’t go back to life without her; I was resolved to live in the paranormal staircase with her forever. Then, she squeezed me tighter and said, “I love you. No matter the lifetime, I love you.”

 When she finished, all of the candles on the outside went out. I was devastated; I didn’t want to let go of her. What would I do now? Then the candles all relit, and I felt a tap on my shoulder again; it was just as terrifying as the first time. I expected to see my sister, who was worth the abject horror that I felt. But then my mother entered the circle and said, “Hello, sweetheart.”

 I said, “Hello, Mom,” not with coldness but more from being emotionally removed from her. I loved my mother, but she also took several people down with her, making my feelings for her incredibly convoluted and complex. It’s hard to love and hate someone simultaneously; it’s a roller coaster of emotions and a spinning of thoughts. My mother started to cry, sensing that there was a barrier between us now.

 Her pain made her more human, so I was better able to recall the best parts of my mother. I recalled her painful and scary pregnancy since there were two of us, and she had dangerously high blood pressure; because of this, the big dreamer then had to be on bed rest, which, if you knew my mother, then you would recognize the enormous sacrifice this was. Then, she continued to sacrifice as she became a mother. I also recalled the fact that she had a mother who was unstable until she no longer had her at all, with the memory of her dead body etched in her mind. This led me to recall that she was a kind, encouraging, and devoted mother for many years and that her downfall was mental illness. So, at the end of the tennis match of feelings, love won out. Love is powerful, and forgiveness and empathy show the magnitude of that power. So, I felt compelled to let it go and comfort her. I hugged her and told her, “Mom… you made so many horrible choices, and those had consequences for other people, yet at the end of the day, I know your heart; I can look at you as a whole. I do love you.”

 Being met with compassion over wrath only made her more emotional; having mercy granted at a vulnerable point must be the power of love amplified, and that power was overwhelming. Once my mother could speak, she said, “I don’t deserve your forgiveness. I killed you. You died at my hands. How is that forgivable?”

 My mind thought of this metaphor, and I hugged her and told her, “I love you and forgive you entirely.” My mother then said she loved me and escaped my grasp.

 Then, all of the candles blew out, and I sat there alone. It was impossible to process everything. While feeling intense emotions, the candles lit again, and Anastasia was there.

 “Are you ready to cross over now?” she asked.

 I replied, “You mean go home?”

 She seemed surprised I was not catching on and said, “No. I mean, are you ready to leave this place?”

 Seeing that I didn’t get it, she explained that it was my father and I who were the casualties of that car accident, in addition to the two strangers. Then it started to come back to me like an amnesia wearing away. I remembered that my mother and sister had invited my dad and me to dinner to ask for a loan. We underestimated how much my mother had to drink because she had done most of that in secret, so when she insisted on driving, against better judgment, we got in the car.

 After our deaths, my mother and sister, unable to escape the guilt, had been paying to try to contact me. The medium has, for many years, used this soon-to-be condemned hotel to reach people who are stuck because of its strong ties to the afterlife. Anastasia explained, “You and I were both stuck. It took you being incanted to realize that the pain and regret that held me here now no longer needed to. I waited until I believed you could forgive, accept, and move on, and I could tell you were ready. And I wasn’t ready before you. This is where I died many years ago, jumping from the top because I loved a man who loved to torment me.”

 It then registered why she knew so much about the hotel; she had a massive influence. Anastasia and Rachel were the same. Then, all the lights came on, and my father, her son, and her parents were there, inviting us to ascend. She grabbed my hand, and we walked up those stairs together. We then moved up into the light, and I knew it wouldn’t be long before we were all together again.

Kelly and the Spiral Staircase