

# **The Lies You Paint**

Taff Sample

1. Half-Truths Suck

I often take time to wonder what sensation would accompany falling to my death. However, this morning's meditation is dead and gone. My time was instead filled with the police, who interrupted my usual routine with the news of my mother's untimely demise.

Don't get me wrong, I love my mother. Or I used to, I think. But it's hard to be overcome with a tidal wave of grief for a woman who force-fed you nightmare bedtime stories with a course of abandonment via a public library on the side.

Looming over the couch I'm sitting on, an officer clears his throat loudly to get my attention. As if I didn't already know he was standing there. I'm not sitting down because I'm having a breakdown, I'm sitting because they barged in with their famous, *You should sit down for this Miss*, catchphrase.

"Miss Blakey," he grunts, "did you hear me? I asked when you saw your mother last."

"December 8th, 1975 at Fresno County Library," I say, reclining into the cushion, arms crossed. "But you already *know* that... Funny that you came here to tell me she's dead on the same day that she first kicked me to the curb. How horrifyingly ironic. Happy Birthday to me... again."

He shifts his weight from one foot to the other awkwardly. I smirk. Truth be told, I kind of enjoy making people squirm, especially when the topic of discussion is my parents. If people are going to be on edge around me, why not return the favor? It's just a fun personality quirk that I picked up. To be fair though, who wouldn't be nervous around the alleged daughter of the most infamous serial killer of the last decade? Even if his prowling grounds were a couple of towns over, and even if her mother *may have* fabricated the tale.

“Did she tell you anything important or give you anything before she left for Delray?” he asks, seemingly done with my attitude.

“Just some bullshit about –” I stop short as Mrs. Sterling whips around giving me a death stare that threatens to vaporize my head. For a widowed, aging, ex-teacher, foster care guardian who looks after twelve children, she is mostly okay, except for when it comes to ‘language.’ Now it’s my turn to shift awkwardly. “I mean, just some nonsense about *never forgetting where I come from*, and the usual hodgepodge about my dad. Why?”

“Rya’s in shock,” interrupts Mrs. Sterling, waving the officer out like he’s her student. “She’ll give you a ring if she remembers anything.”

I’m not in shock. I’m pissed off. I tend to stay clear of adults - they pretend I don’t notice them lying - and that’s the third person in the last hour who’s berated me like I’m part of some underground mafia. And yes, I’ve been counting.

My gaze snaps to the newspaper spread out across the coffee table from three days ago. I’d planned on ignoring it. But I can hardly do that *now*, can I? My eyes flash over the headline for the thousandth time.

**The Kid That Escaped.**

Yeah, I think to myself. He’d better be.

## 2. Decisions Are So Inconvenient

Dinner's awkward as hell.

After the police stormed out the constant small talk started to sound like the droning of that shoddy fan I lay in front of on balmy afternoons. The majority of it was Mrs. Sterling yelling at the other kids to mind their own business. They didn't like that.

Mrs. Sterling's one rule for the summer is simple: all kids have to be back in the house at five sharp for dinner. Usually, we were all out of the house by nine in the morning, playing, adventuring, doing, well, who knows what, but the police had the audacity to show up at eight. The result of that was, the kids, all eight of them, including me, not slipping a singular toe out of the house – the entire day.

The great outdoors was replaced by quick glances at me, back and forth, and the pitter-patter of little footsteps trailing me around. They all wanted to know what happened, but at the risk of unleashing Mrs. Sterling's wrath, none of them dared to ask directly. They knew it had something to do with me, and my weird situation, but none of them knew for sure what it was, or why it was such a big deal, and I had never been particularly interested in telling them, especially since there's only one kid older than me.... I don't particularly try to be in the habit of scaring the literal crap out of children.

The clanging of spoons against glass bowls fills the air as I pick at my tomato basil soup. Dinner was late today, and Mrs. Sterling had spent at least three minutes at the start apologizing to us for not having enough time to make a 'proper meal.' A collective groan rang out...but not because we agreed. Because she had made this soup from scratch. From scratch. Enough said.

In my three years of living here, I've never been in a room so silent. I can't tell if it's better or worse than the incessant screaming of children that I'm used to. However, when the twenty-minute marker hits, I decide it's worse.

Fortunately Jack, an eleven-year-old hothead whose flaming red hair and bright freckles, that definitely match his personality, breaks the noise barrier. "So are we seriously not gonna talk about why the police were here earlier?" He blurts out, slurping up orange sauce at an annoyingly fast rate. "Cause I'd like to."

Lighting bolts practically shoot from Mrs. Sterling's eyes. "Jackson Parnell, don't you start. Would you like me to let the other children go poking around in *your* personal business?"

"No Mrs. Sterling," he says grumpily, with a defeated shoulder hunch.

"And don't mumble," she scolds. "It's horribly uncivilized." She stands suddenly as if electrocuted, causing my eyebrows to jerk up with her. I can never tell what she's up to, it's maddening. "Now, we've all had a long day, so I think it's best if we turn in for the night and start fresh tomorrow."

Mrs. Sterling claps exuberantly, as shouts of protests erupt. I can hardly blame them, it's barely seven-thirty, not exactly the prime time for sleep. While Mrs. Sterling tries to tame the kerfuffle in a calm manner, I make swift eye contact with May, who's slowly getting up from the table to put her dish away.

May came to live with Mrs. Sterling about a year ago and immediately attached to me like glue. I don't really know why, but we became inseparable immediately. Ever since I met her she's been more than a little sister to me, she's been my best friend, and by far the coolest eleven-year-old to ever grace the town of Murrieta, California. She also happens to be the only one in the house who's updated on my dark secrets, other than Mrs. Sterling, of course. And no I

didn't trauma dump on her, I wouldn't do that. She waited me out, actually, and eventually, I made a bit of a confession to her. She has an old soul, for someone so young, and is probably more mature than me, if I'm being honest with myself.

I asked her once why she was so unfazed by my past, and she replied with a simple sentence, *I watched someone I love leave once; nothing much bothers me now.*

She told me a little later that the someone was her older sister, whom she watched die. May's family life was anything but happy and peaceful, with her parents being less than kind. Her sister 'left' while attempting to shield her from them, which cost May not only her sibling but her home. Although, I have the feeling she missed one a lot more than the other. May's parents were now serving twenty-year sentences. At times, I think her story might even be darker than mine. She actually understands what it was that made her parents so awful. Poor kid, she deserved better.

"It's supposed to be a beautiful day tomorrow," Mrs. Sterling's voice sings into my thoughts, breaking my eye contact. "And I expect you all to be out bright and early soaking up some Vitamin C. I don't want to see anyone spend one more day of summer indoors, it's bad for the soul."

Like those final words settle the matter entirely, Mrs. Sterling proceeds to her next task of shooing the kids up to their rooms, throwing out paraphrases of encouragement along the way, such as: *the longer the sleep, the longer the energy*, and *earlier sleep causes higher brain function*. I don't know if she really believes any of it, but she's selling it with expert elegance. She counts each kid by name as they walk up the stairs as if we're in some kind of military roll call.

“All right, there we are. Patricia, Monique, Caleb, Sebastian, Jack, Thalia, May, – Rya stay with me here for a moment, please,” she says, catching my arm as I’m ascending the stairs with everyone else. I stop. May’s amber-gold eyes pierce mine as she looks back at me. I nod, mouthing ‘see you soon’ to her. I haven’t been able to tell her all that happened this morning, but now she knows to stay up. I’ll come talk to her as soon as I fend off Mrs. Sterling.

When the last person disappears into the second story, Mrs. Sterling turns on her heel and stares at me hard, her stern face and steel blue eyes boring into me. She looks a bit disheveled. Her peppered-gray hair that’s always pulled back in a tight bun now has strands falling off the sides, and the sleeves of her white blouse are laced with remnants of tomato soup.

I begin to sweat. Once again, I can’t tell what she’s thinking. Why does she do this?

My nerves rise as the silence thickens. What if she tells me I have to come clean to everyone in the house and ask them if they're still comfortable having me around? Or worse, what if she tells me that this is the last straw? My past is too unstable, I’m too unstable, and she has to send me to some facility that can *deal* with kids like me. It’s not like I haven’t heard it before.

She chooses to bamboozle me instead.

“What are you planning?”

I pause. “Well,” I say slowly, confused by the bluntness of her question. “You said no one in the house tomorrow so I’m going to go to work. I already missed my shift today. That’s money I won’t get back.”

“I know,” she breezes, waving her hand like she’s beating away an annoying fly. “That you don’t honestly believe I’m speaking in general terms. And I never should’ve let you get that job in the first place. Not only do you spend the whole summer there, but you insist on picking

up an obscene amount of shifts during the school year. I don't know when you sleep, but it can't happen much or often."

I half-heartedly roll my eyes.

When I was thirteen I begged Mrs. Sterling to let me get a job. Did I necessarily need one? No, but I guess I wanted something in my life I knew would be consistent. That, and because when I was on the road with my mother *I* took care of things. It was my job. Nothing felt more obsolete and deeming than foster care. I couldn't even tie my own shoes without multiple sets of eyes on my back. Besides, the idea of having something that I personally owned was more than appealing to me.

Mrs. Sterling told me that people my age didn't need one, but unfortunately for her, I'm relentless. I persisted for weeks and weeks until finally, she gave in. She didn't give in the typical way though. In her own Mrs. Sterling style she went above and beyond. She got me set up to be a waitress at Chelsea's cafe, about an eight-minute walk from the house. Normally the cafe wouldn't have hired a thirteen-year-old, but Chelsea, the owner, had known Mrs. Sterling and her husband – before his passing, since she was a little girl, so Mrs. Sterling had called in a favor. Maybe if Murrieta was a larger town, or if its fine residents weren't obsessed with Mrs. Sterling, it wouldn't have worked. But in this case, it did.

I remember the exact place and time when Mrs. Sterling told me what she did. No one had ever gone to bat for me like that before. I had never loved anybody more than in that moment.

"I know you, Rya," she sighs, going on in the face of my utter lack of an answer. "You've been quiet ever since the police left. That's not normal. You always have some choice words when someone brings up your mother."



I have two options in this scenario. Lie, dig a grave, and throw myself in, or tell the truth. “My Mom’s dead,” I blurt, choosing the vaguely less dramatic option. “What else is there to say, to plan? I shouldn’t feel any different. It’s not like she was going to come back anyways.”

Mrs. Sterling purses her lips, a disappointing grimace playing upon her face. “She was still your mother Rya. You’re allowed to be upset. Sad or angry.”

She’s right, she was my mom. But she’s also wrong, I’m not allowed to be upset. Or maybe I just don’t want to be. After all, I haven’t seen her in what, seven years? I don’t know her anymore. And when I did know her – well that wasn’t much better either. Fifty percent of the time she acted like a schizophrenic, constantly fleeing from ghosts that I never saw myself. Forty percent of the time she was drunk or nursing her cigarette so dearly that she wouldn’t have noticed me falling off a cliff. And the other ten percent of the time, well, she was my favorite person in the whole world.

We did everything together. She was everything to me, even if living with her was a bit glum. What would it matter to tell her that I would’ve never left her side? Clearly, she didn’t feel the same. She told me that she’d never leave me in the dark. I still haven’t forgiven her for that – now I can’t.

“Yeah, well, it’s not going to change anything,” I say a little too harshly.

“Right then. So you’re not thinking about the coincidence between your mother’s death and that boy in the papers. Or have I mistakenly noticed you stalking the mailman for the past two days?”

“No,” I whisper, my head slowly dropping down with my words. When I finally decide to lift it, she’s giving me the *do-you-think-I’m-an-idiot* face. “Okay, yes, but it only happened a

mile away from each other. In Delray, where she said my father is. Don't you think that's weird?"

"Don't call him that."

"Why not?" I say loudly. "I'm not a child anymore, Mrs. S. I can accept the truth."

"Rya," she says gently like I can't understand her, placing her delicate hand on my shoulder. I force myself to face her. I get her intentions, I really do, and words can't describe what she means to me. But always being treated like I'm gonna fly off the handle every time something goes wrong, is not something I appreciate. There's nothing like trying to fight off the feeling of complete insanity while the world is pushing it onto you as well. And yeah, my mother was a paranoid disaster, but she was cognizant, and at least she tried to treat me normally. She and Mrs. Sterling were alike in that way. "You can't keep dwelling on all of this. I know you don't want to hear it, but frankly, there's nothing you can do about it."

Tears well up, and I instantly push them back down. I have been able to stay unemotional all day. I'm not going to break now. I'm not even sure what I'm trying to prove by not crying, but I can't seem to let it go just yet.

"You aren't your parents," she prattles on in her lecture style. "You can be your own person."

If only it were that simple or easy. Especially when everyone who knows my background treats me like I might murder them in their sleep.... Okay so maybe that's dramatic but it's basically true. They look at me like I've committed war crimes and deserve to be exiled for it.

Maybe I do. I don't know... maybe the only way to *be my own person* would be to move far away and come up with some cover story for myself. But that would feel like cheating to me. It's too late anyway. When you grow up believing something about yourself so deeply, it's

virtually impossible to completely move on, and running away from it won't help me. That I know.

“But, what if – ”

“Rya. You're a special young woman, and you've been through much in your young life. But if you don't stop this soon, you're going to end up wasting your potential. You need to move on. Forget about your parents. Forget about the sins and blood of that past. Please – just think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, because I don't know what else to say.

A numbness engulfs my body. How am I supposed to forget the thing that's informed every decision I've ever made? I can't even imagine that type of existence. Mrs. Sterling has always been the *I'm-gonna-be-blunt-but-I'll-make-you-a-pie* afterward type. I appreciate it. I don't know how she does it, but she creates balance when I need it most. I respect her, and her advice.

Which is why I'm deciding to wait at least a week before going to Delray.

“Oh, and, Rya,” she whispers, as if she's unsure of her words, stopping me mid-step and utterly obliterating my train of compulsive thoughts. “Happy Birthday, sweetheart.”

I turn away, unable to look her in the eyes. “Thanks, Mrs. S.”

Don't most kids have a big party on their sweet sixteen? I guess I'm out of luck in that department too.