

To Forget

by Chantal Walker

The day is burned into my mind as if there hasn't been ten years since my life completely fell apart.

My mom was downstairs on the phone trying desperately to find my dad. It was normal for my dad to not be home, but for some unknown reason, it upset my mom tonight. I was only seven, but I was perceptive enough to notice when my father stopped coming home at night. My mom cried herself to sleep for weeks, and then finally—one day—she was fine. I had started to believe her. I began listening intently when her shrieks on the phone were too shrill to ignore.

“No, David. You will come home right now! I don't care if your *whore* wants you over there.” There was a pause that wasn't long enough for my dad to get a full sentence in before my mom continued, “No, you belong here!” She began sobbing with her screams, “If you are not home in thirty minutes, I will pack Gabby's bags and we will be out of your life within the hour. I will not have another day of this mess. You leave her or we will leave you!” The phone slammed down roughly onto the cradle and my mom's sobs got louder first and then muffled when—I assume—she remembered that I was upstairs.

After a few short minutes, there was a loud racket below. I listened intently. She was still crying, but it sounded like she had begun to pack—expecting the worst.

A few minutes later, I heard her slow footsteps on the stairs. The door of my darkened room opened quietly and I closed my eyes lightly, but not all the way, feigning sleep. My mom glanced at me with the deep brown eyes that I had inherited from her and sighed. She walked to my closet and opened the double doors quietly. I watched—careful not to be caught awake—as her tiny frame reached up to the top shelf and pulled my purple polka-dot suitcase down. She grabbed nearly half of my clothes off the hangers, shoving them into the suitcase without bothering to fold them. She went to my drawer and

pulled out several more handfuls of clothes and put them in the suitcase as well. Then she turned and tiptoed out of my room as quietly as she could.

The front door boomed open and my mother's footsteps paused just outside of my door before she headed quickly down the stairs.

I eavesdropped as she gasped, "David, what are you doing?"

My heartbeat skipped as my dad answered, "Stopping you from ruining everything!" He was slurring his words to the point that I could hardly understand what he was saying.

My mom started crying again, "You're drunk!" she managed to get out between sobs.

"What the hell is it to you? I want you out of my life, and this is the only way to do it!"

She was in hysterics. "David, No! Think of Gabrielle!"

I couldn't take it anymore. I got out of bed and opened my door, about to go downstairs and tell my dad to stop yelling at my mom and plead with him to stay. I stopped at the top landing, wiped the tears from my cheeks, and went down a few steps. I remember the next moments in a silent, vivid, slow-motion nightmare. Something about the way they were suddenly silent made me halt my decent. I crouched to look through the wooden bars on the stairs at the exact moment to see my mother's head snap back with the deafening blow of the gunshot and her body slump to the floor directly beneath me on the stairs. Revealing my father, arm extended, with his revolver pointed to where she previously stood.

Right there on the stairs, my entire stomach contents came up in a violent rage.

I have tried, almost successfully, over the years to block out the image of my mom lying there on the floor looking up toward me, but my dad's face when he looked up to the sound of my vomiting is another story. His face was full of fury that immediately transformed to horror when he saw me on the stairs. He gasped, "Oh my God, Gabby!"

I turned and ran up the stairs and around the corner into the bathroom, fumbling with the lock on the door behind me. The waves of nausea weren't stopping. I barely registered the pounding feet following me up the stairs, and the sound of my dad's fists hitting the door when he realized that I had locked it.

"Open up, Gabby!" he yelled through the door.

"N-n-no," I stammered.

I heard the sound of something metal scraping up against the lock on the bathroom door. My entire body was shaking convulsively. My hands were trembling uncontrollably as I tried to grip the sides of the cold toilet bowl. I was much too weak to hold the door closed if he managed to pick the lock. I was too weak to even move.

It was only a matter of seconds before the door boomed open, slamming against the yellowed wall so hard that it left a hole in the shape of the doorknob. I looked at the wall, and then my eyes slowly moved to my father.

He was holding the revolver at his side, facing it toward the ground. I gulped back the fear that consumed me and continued moving my eyes up to his face. It was my face looking back at me. His hair was several shades lighter than my black color, but my face was a mirror image of his. The only difference was the eyes. His were a deep, jade green. His eyes—in that moment that they met mine—only held anguish.

"Why?" I asked, breathless.

"Gabby...I..." he hesitated.

"Why?" I said again, with more force than I thought my seven-year-old voice was capable of.

"She was going to take you away from me, Gabs," he tried to explain. His voice became softer, but I couldn't—wouldn't—let it radiate too far into me. It's no excuse for what I did—I know, but there was no other option. I needed to keep you."

“All you had to do was come home!” I yelled. I stood up from my hunched position, finally gaining my equilibrium with the anger. “You disappeared from my life for months!” I paused, sighing deeply. “Just leave, Dad,” I whispered. I shook my head from side to side at him. It was a warning for him to give up.

For the first time in my life, I saw tears spill from my father’s eyes at my words. He nodded his head slowly, drawing the unsaid affirmation out longer than necessary, before backing out of the bathroom and closing the door behind him.

With the near-silent click of the door, my heart dropped. I realized suddenly that I was alone in life. My mom was gone forever, and I had just purposefully pushed away the one other person that ever meant anything to me. In that moment, I knew that I forgave my father. Forgave, but did not—could not—forget. What I would give to forget...to forget the dead look in my mother’s brown eyes that I would have to face in the mirror every single day for the rest of my life. To forget the look in my father’s grave eyes that screamed of a broken heart. To forget this appalling day altogether.

I took a deep breath. It rattled in my chest. I took the two steps to close the distance between the door and myself and placed my still shaky hand on the knob. As it turned, I heard the sound of another gunshot.

Everything went black.

My memories of that horrible day end there.