

WALKING AWAY

BY

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A Memoir

*“What we resist, persists.”*

-Carl Jung

*If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride...*

-Scottish proverb

## Prologue

Summer, 1971

In a rural west valley neighborhood, narrow, twisting roads with names like Cornell and Mulholland streak through white fenced horse properties, open pastures, and acres of rocky chaparral. The roads rise, descend, and curve around to reveal sparkling blue water. Cabin style buildings nestle in the hills, and a small island fills the middle of the lake.

My mother and I live alone in a faded white cabin that overlooks the water. My daddy used to come visit us on Saturdays before he died, but that was a long time ago. Now, I spend most weekends with my grandparents. Today we are driving out to meet them at the Denny's in Redlands. We drive for a long time, and then we pull into the parking lot just off the freeway. The air conditioning was on full blast in the car, and it feels scorching hot outside. My mother lugs my suitcases over to the walkway on the side of the building, sets them down in the shady part, and looks out at the road. She has her long black hair pulled up tight in a ponytail, and she's wearing her blue one-piece shorts outfit. She puts her hand like a visor over her eyes and squints, looking both ways.

“They should be here any minute,” she says, and then she pats me on the back. She’s going to keep driving all the way to Tehachapi, where her friends are having a party. Gramma and Sammy are picking me up here, since it’s on the way to their house in Palm Springs. When I was still learning to talk, I called it “Pom Ping,” and sometimes I still call it that.

I sit on my suitcases and she bends down and kisses me on the top of my head, right where she put my white barrette this morning.

“You wait here, sugarplum.”

“Okay,” I say. Then she walks away, gets in our Impala, and drives off. I stay where I am, and all the people walk right by me on their way in to eat lunch. They turn their heads and look at me a little before they go inside, but nobody talks to me. They seem like they want to say something, but they don’t, and after a while, I try not to look at them. Instead, I concentrate on the plaid pattern in my outfit. It’s yellow and orange and red, and the shirt matches the pants. My suitcases are made out of a reddish flowery fabric and they’re all different sizes. I got them for Christmas last year.

I’m sitting and waiting, and even though I’m in the shade, the cement is warm when I put my hand down on it. It’s a hot-hot day, the kind where parts of the air make waves, and I feel scratchy in my outfit. I watch the cars go by and I play the alphabet game with the license plates. First I find an A, then a B, then a C and I get all the way to K before I give up. It’s more fun when someone else is playing, and I can race them to Z.

Pretty soon, people stop coming and going from the restaurant because it’s too late for lunch and too early for dinner. I watch every car that drives up the street, to see if it’s

Gramma and Sammy. I wait like that for a long time, thinking they should be here any minute.

When the sun is lower in the sky, two grown-up ladies wearing perfume walk up to the Denny's. They look over at me right before they open the door, and seem surprised. I have to go to the bathroom, so I walk away from my suitcases and into the restaurant. The man at the cash register points to a place across the room when I ask him where the bathroom is. Inside, the two ladies are looking at themselves in the mirror. Their faces and hair remind me of the colors in my Crayola box – burnt sienna and rouge and violet. I pee and then I wipe. While I'm washing my hands, I can feel the two ladies staring at me.

"Where are your mommy and daddy?" one of them asks me.

"My mommy went to see her friends." I tell them. They seem surprised at this. I start to tell them that I'm going to Gramma and Sammy's for the weekend, but they hurry out of the ladies room before I can say anything else.

After that I go back through the restaurant, on my way outside, and I have to pass by the two ladies, talking to the man at the cash register. They all look at me and then he bends down in front of me and asks, "Are you all by yourself, little girl?"

"My mommy dropped me off," I tell him. "I'm waiting for my Gramma and Sammy." He seems like he is thinking hard about that, and he looks at the two ladies, who are still looking down at me. They all seem upset about something now.

"Why don't you stay inside here with me, then," he says, "What's your name?"

"Candy," I tell him.

"How old are you?"

"Five."

After that I don't feel like talking anymore. I can feel something sad and worried in the air that wasn't there before the two ladies started talking to me. I just want my Gramma and Sammy to come, so I look out the window, but all I see are my suitcases, sitting right where I left them. The cash register man picks up the phone, dials a number, and talks to someone quietly, with his back to me. I sit on the cool brown vinyl bench where people usually wait to be seated. I try to sit very still. It seems like I have been here forever.

Pretty soon, a policeman comes into the restaurant. He's very tall and his clothes look heavy. He smiles and bends down. "Hi," he says.

"Hi," I say.

"How'd you like to come with me and play down at the police station?"

I don't really want to go anywhere until my Gramma and Sammy come, but he's a policeman, so I do what he says. I start wondering what kinds of things there are to play with at the police station.

He picks me up, and the next thing I know we're riding in his car. We only drive a few blocks and then he takes me inside a square building. Inside the police station, there are orange and yellow hard plastic chairs against the walls. It's quiet in here, like my school is when everybody else's mothers have come to get them and I have to wait with my teacher for a while. I look around and see that mostly everywhere there's nothing but beige and black counters, metal knobs and objects, cement walls.

The policeman asks me if I want a Coke. My mother has never let me have a Coke before, so I say yes, and right away he brings me a cold glass bottle. He says the cash

register man from the restaurant is going to tell my grandparents where I am and they'll come get me here.

“Okay,” I say. I take a sip of the Coke and feel bubbles burn my nose. Suddenly I am excited about being here.

He asks me if I want to take a tour of the building. He holds my hand and shows me all around the station, and then he takes me down some dark steps to a place that's colder. There are small rooms lined up along a hallway. He tells me this is the jail, and those black things going up and down are called bars. There's nobody in here right now, but he says this is where they put the criminals.

“It looks like the zoo, but without any animals,” I say, and that makes him laugh.

Then he takes me into the radio room to wait for my Gramma and Sammy. It's a small, open area off the main hall. All the counters have black phones sitting on them. One wall is covered with speakers and dials and handsets. In the middle of the room, which has a very high ceiling, there's a tall roller chair that somebody usually sits on, doing police business.

But today I get to sit on the tall roller chair, holding my bottle of Coke. The seat of the chair spins around and around and around. I could do that for hours. I get to meet the other policemen who keep walking by. They all smile and wave and ask my name when they see me. One of them stops walking and looks at me.

“You're the best thing that's happened around here all month,” he says, and winks at me.

I almost forget about Gramma and Sammy, but then I see them coming down the hall and I jump off the chair and run over as fast as I can. They look just like how I felt when

I found my doll that I'd thought was lost for good. They say thank you to the tall friendly policeman over and over again. They seem embarrassed, and my Gramma's face is a little red.

She shakes her fist and says to Sammy, "that mother of hers."

I realize my mother did something she wasn't supposed to do.

Sammy never gets mad at anything, but he seems a little tired when he says to my Gramma, "Okay, all's well that end's well, right?"

His voice is a little higher and more full of breath than usual. He holds out his big soft hand and I grab it. I look up at his face – leathery and sunburned – and I smell his lemony scent. He seems somehow happy on the outside but sad on the inside. I smile at him so he will know that I am fine.

I hold up my bottle of Coke and tell them all about my adventures. They think it's funny that I had such a good time, and I do too, because I know people aren't supposed to have fun at police stations. When the tall policeman hands them my suitcases and says how much I brightened up their dull day, Gramma and Sammy both raise their chins a little, and their eyes have smiles in them.

Then Sammy picks me up, and that feels good, because he hugs me better than anybody. His neck has a warm, sleepy smell and now I'm in his arms, getting a kiss, and I wrap my arms around him tight. I wave good-bye to the policemen as we walk down the hall to the front doors.

Gramma grabs Sammy's arm and squeezes it tight. She looks like she's going to say something mean.

Sammy shakes his head, and then we go out the doors to the bright parking lot.

Pretty soon, we're on our way to Palm Springs. I sit in the back like always, so I can stretch out. Gramma says my mother shouldn't have left me alone like that. Sammy looks back and says the cash register man from the Denny's thought I was a runaway, because I had my suitcases. But I think that's silly. Everybody knows it's only big girls who get to run away.

January, 1998

From my deck, I can see a sliver of ocean, the Spanish tile roofs of apartment buildings, and chubby palm trees filled with sparrows' nests. A sharp, clean breeze is blowing, and I can taste the salt and seaweed thick in the air. I bend down to my terra cotta pots, all in a row against the wrought iron railing - parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme. It's silly, but I planted them that way because of the song. Carefully pinching off the fragrant herbs, I feel a sense of limitless time and space, infinite limbo.

New Year's Day is such a quiet holiday. Maybe it's because of all the parties the night before. But it also seems like, on this one day, all the machinery of civilization shuts down, as if to cool off, before the whole thing starts over again. I have some lazy plans in mind, like making spaghetti sauce from scratch, listening to all of my Joni Mitchell albums in sequence, and painting my toenails. *Clouds* is playing on the CD player, and I sing along to "Chelsea Morning."

"...And the sun poured in like butterscotch and stuck to all my senses." It makes me feel warm and hopeful, like anything is possible.

I'm staring into the refrigerator vacantly, wondering what else to put in my sauce, when the fax machine blares out its shrill ring. I decide not to look at it right away, and stay in the kitchen for a while instead. Maybe it's one of those mortgage companies offering me a new life, with no money down. Or someone trying to get me to order my credit report for free. But there is a familiar anxious feeling, and my nerves are jangling even before I walk the five steps over to my desk and tear the slinky paper off.

Huntington Memorial Hospital is typed in all caps across the top of the form, and my mother's handwriting is scrawled in the blanks. Shit, when was this? Day before yesterday. I consider throwing it away. I could pretend it didn't come through. That I was out of paper. Or out of town. I could be out of town, with my new boyfriend Greg, except that he didn't actually invite me to go with him to Lake Tahoe for the holidays.

I take a closer look at the discharge form. At the bottom, there are instructions for home care of a bruised and swollen knee. A checkbox marked "discharged into own care" glares at me from the page. There are some other remarks, referring to my mother's knee, but I can't make out the handwriting. The fax came from her house, so she's home now. I can't put it off any longer. I pick up the phone and call her.

When she answers, she greets me with a squeal. As much as I hate to admit it, I'm always strangely satisfied by her elation at hearing my voice on the phone, as if it can briefly fill the cavities in my soul that still remain.

"Hi, sugarplum!" my mother says.

"Mom, what is this fax?"

"Oh, did you get it?"

“What happened?” I feel a hot poker in my gut – a flare up of the ulcer I’ve been managing for the last two years. I open my sliding glass door and move nervously onto the balcony, staring out at the sea, as if the fog could wipe away my angst. The strong ocean wind beats at me every which way.

My apartment is only a block away from Main Street in Santa Monica, and on most days, all the half-clad Hollywood hopefuls are breezing by on rollerblades, latte in one hand and cell-phone in the other. Everywhere you look there are tan, sporty-looking people on the lookout for familiar faces, sharing news of the latest callback, script deal or casting coup. Everyone always moves at a brisk pace, because there’s always someplace better to be.

“Ugh, it’s the stupidest thing! My knee is all swollen. I must have banged it somehow when I was carrying my fax machine out of the car. I took the damn thing to get it fixed, but I could kill them, because it’s still broken. I’m trying to fax this letter to the editor at the L.A. Times in response to their piece last week on prisons. Those idiot politicians think if they just lock up everybody, it’ll solve everything...”

“Yeah, but I’m more concerned about your knee right now. Did it swell up right away?”

She makes a little noise that I guess means she’s annoyed with me for changing the subject. “No. At first I thought I just bruised it. It wasn’t until the next day that I couldn’t walk. I was crawling around on the floor. That’s when I called 911 and the paramedics came, took me to Huntington.”

“Is it any better now?”

“Not really.”

“What was the actual diagnosis?”

“I don’t think there was one.”

I open the medicine cabinet and grab a bottle of Tums. “Can you walk now?”

“A little. Kind of,” she grunts, then yells sharply, “Ow! Fuck.”

“Why didn’t you call me?”

“I’m not supposed to, remember?”

“No, you are supposed to call me if it’s an emergency. That’s the whole point. Just because I don’t want to talk to you ten times a day doesn’t mean I don’t want to be able to help you when you actually need me.”

“Oh...sorry.”

“Do you want me to come over?”

“You don’t have to. I’m...crawling around.”

“You can’t crawl up and down the stairs to the kitchen. How are you supposed to eat?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“I’ll be there in a little while.”

I hang up and rub my neck to work out the cramps. I look around for my purse and find it hidden under paperwork on my unruly desk. It’s covered with piles of notes and research material, bits of dialogue, character notes, and scene ideas. Inspirational quotes such as, “Leap and the net will appear,” are scribbled on Post-Its and stuck everywhere.

My career is kind of on a precipice now. I’ve built a good reputation as a script reader, and worked for some of the best agencies and production companies in L.A. But after about ten years of working in development, I decided to walk away from the

glamorous but grueling world of megalomaniacs and twisted priorities. It was time to focus on my own writing instead of constantly reading everyone else's.