

“The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another’s desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.”

- Erma Bombeck

[Chapter 1]

Monday / December 24, 2007

I should not have yelled at the nice lady behind the ticket counter.

Incidentally, I also should not have thrown a piece of luggage at a fellow traveler, cursed at a young skycap, taken a swing at a security guard, and basically caused a disturbance that brought the entire ticketing lobby of the Jacksonville International Airport to a standstill for half an hour on one of the busiest travel holidays of the year—Christmas Eve.

I have come to these conclusions by way of a long, quiet hour of reflection, which I have observed in near monastic silence and solitude. Of course, by solitude, I mean controlled confinement inside some sort of holding cell reserved for potential terrorists and unruly travelers such as myself.

It's possible that I might have arrived at said conclusions sooner if I'd been able to pace around and contemplate the many mistakes I've made this evening. Unfortunately, such pacing has been rendered impossible by the small size of the room and, to a greater extent, the giant, plastic zip-ties (handcuffs of the new millennium, apparently) that have me bound at the wrists and ankles.

Unlike the interrogation rooms you see on television, this room has no two-way glass or glaring light to point in someone's face. Instead, my cell is disappointingly bland and vaguely disgusting--sort of like a public restroom. From the cinder block walls to the cracked ceiling tiles and linoleum floors, the room's overall color scheme is a dusty, white hue, just enough so that even the air inside feels dirty.

Even less pleasant than the dingy appearance of the room is its rather distinct odor, which falls somewhere between cat pee and dead bodies—with just a hint of strawberries (which is also similar to a public restroom).

The off-white folding chair I'm zip-tied to and another just like it (though with

notably fewer stains) sit on opposite sides of a vinyl-covered card table that's pock-marked with deep gashes and stains. Just those three pieces of furniture (if you can even call them that) take up almost the entire room, the rest of which seems to be filled with the incessant buzzing of the lights that would be driving me crazy if it weren't for the fact that I passed crazy and entered sheer insanity when I attempted to throttle several people at the ticket desk.

Hence the reason I'm here in the first place.

But before you rush to judge me, let me say that I think I have a pretty damn good defense. I know things aren't looking great for me right now, but I assure you that I am typically a very docile, laid-back individual, not unlike yourself. I consider myself friendly, intelligent, and well mannered in most situations.

My biggest vices in life are chocolate, good books and *Dog the Bounty Hunter*. I'm a twenty-three year-old recent college graduate who borrowed more money than I care to think about in order to buy a creative writing degree from Boston College. A degree that now collects dust in my apartment, where I work as a struggling freelance graphic designer.

I'm not saying all this to pat myself on the back (literally speaking I can't pat myself on the back thanks to these handcuffs) I'm saying it to try and make you understand that it would take a series of extenuating, unusual, and chaotic circumstances to send me into a tailspin like this. In fact, it would take something along the lines of a Perfect Storm of events to bring me across the border of sanity into my current predicament—and that's exactly what has happened.

If you think I'm being overdramatic and you would like a little evidence to back up my claim, feel free to soak in my current attire from head to toe.

Although my taste in fashion is somewhat quirky, I would not ever voluntarily dress myself in a shapeless, ankle-length, long-sleeved dress, covered in blue sequins and lined at the hem, collar, and cuffs with faux white feathers. With its NFL-sized

shoulder pads, it looks like it came straight from the back of Bea Arthur's closet circa 1983 (where it was buried along with the things even Bea herself would never wear).

This outrageous outfit is part of a costume I was forced to wear for my stepmother's blasphemous Christmas parade float entitled: "Jesus Through The Years." I know you're just dying to know more about that, and I assure you, I will get to it in time.

But the point I'm trying to make right now is that if I was still the same, sane person I was when I arrived in Florida four days ago, I would not be wearing this attire. Unfortunately, I lost all the clothes I brought along for my trip in a tragic *hujta* (that's *hoo-ta*) fire within my first twenty-four hours on Sunshine State soil. Therefore, my wardrobe since then has been largely sculpted by need and not fashion.

Now, I don't think I need to go into more details beyond "blasphemous float" and "tragic *hujta* fire" for you to understand what I've been dealing with for the last few days (which, for the record, have felt like decades). Nor do I need to explain further why I was so irritable when I arrived at JIA by taxi just after dark and saw fit to skip the switchback line of customers piled in front of the ticket counter.

In a tone just a notch below hysterical, I informed the woman behind the counter that I needed to be on the next flight to Boston (or anywhere between here and Boston) at any cost. I had my credit card out, ready to charge my way back to sanity, when the woman informed me (in a rather sassy tone, I might add) that there are no more seats available on outgoing flights tonight. She said if I wanted to get in line and wait like everyone else, she could see about putting me on standby.

At that point in time, my only intention was to utilize a firm, but compassionate touch to convey to this woman how urgent my request was. However, some of the people in line who saw me climb across the counter, seize the woman by her ridiculous bowtie, and lift her off her feet, seemed to think that what I was doing actually fell under the category of assault.

The security officers at JIA apparently believed that to be the case, otherwise I don't think they would have used a TASER gun to subdue me (I suppose I should be thankful it wasn't a real gun). Nor would they have dragged me into this little room, handcuffed me to a folding chair, and left me to sit here alone with my thoughts.

Although I can see how my actions may have been misconstrued, I maintain that I am an innocent person who was driven to the point of desperation by forces out of my control. It is not my fault that there are no lifeguards in the gene pool. I did not ask to share DNA with a troupe of individuals whose light bulbs have been permanently dimmed. I am the lone Halogen among them and I have paid the price for it.

These are the same people that I ran away from to go to college in another state. I haven't been home since Christmas four years ago when I spent nine whole days (eight days too many) visiting my family and getting a refresher course in why I decided to go school in Boston in the first place.

Okay, you're judging me again.

I am not a horrible person. Do I need to reiterate my previous paragraph of self-praise? I'm a good person, I swear. I love my family, I really do, but they're crazy people. All of them. They make me, even in my current state, look like I'm as put-together as a Martha Stewart gift basket (pre-prison Martha, not the new Martha).

I know you're mumbling to yourself that all families are a little crazy and maybe I'm just over-exaggerating, but who are you to judge levels of craziness if you're talking to a book?

Listen to me, okay, I'm not completely uncultured. I know that everyone's family has a little craziness to it. Everyone has skeletons in the closet, everyone has a black sheep, everyone has a few family gatherings that go awry. I know that. But my family has storage units full of skeletons, a flock of black sheep, and not one family gathering that has ever, EVER gone well.

E-V-E-R.

Including this very Christmas.

Although technically the holiday is not over yet...which is something that scares me more than the current odds on me getting a cavity search sometime in the very near future.

Just as that disturbing thought passes through my head (though not for the first time in the hour or so that I've been confined to this place), than the door to my tiny cell flies open and the hulking frame of Tony the Security Guard takes up a position in the doorway that completely eclipses my view of the hall behind him.

"You still thinking about taking a swing at me?" He asks. I shake my head vigorously.

"No sir, Officer," I reply. "I apologize for that. I got a little carried away."

"Just a little," says Tony with a short chuckle. He moves into the room and shuts the door behind him with a thud. I reflexively kick my feet out as much as I can in an effort to move my chair as far back into the corner as it will go. It feels a little bit claustrophobic in here now that Tony (who I'm sure someone at some point in his life has dubbed "Big Tony") has cut the size of the tiny room in half.

"Listen, Officer," I begin, "I know I caused a major spectacle out there at the ticketing counter, but it's been a long couple of days."

"Tell me about it," says Tony as he sinks into the folding chair across the table from mine. The chair creaks loudly and I'm terribly afraid it's going to explode, but Tony seems unconcerned. He reaches across his inflated body to pluck a candy cane from the breast pocket of his uniform.

"I really don't want to waste your time," I insist from my side of the table. "I'm sure there are much more dangerous airline travelers out there that you should be questioning instead of me." Tony peels back the plastic wrapping on his candy cane and happily shoves the straight end into his mouth, leaving the curved portion to hang off his lips like a festive cigarette.

"You're not wasting my time," Tony says with a crooked smile. "I'd rather be in here eating my candy cane than be out there listening to all those people bitching and moaning about getting to wherever they're going. Matter of fact, I'm good to sit right here with you until my shift ends."

"And when might that be?" I ask hesitantly. Tony glances at the silver watch on his wrist that would probably fit around my thigh, then folds his arms across his thick chest.

"About six hours," he replies. His smile doubles in size and the candy cane moves from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Well, Officer, as much as I would like to sit here with you for the next six hours and watch you eat that candy cane, I really need to be getting on my way. I'm not sure if the nice lady at the ticket counter had a chance to put me on the stand-by list for the next flight to Boston before I threatened her, but at any rate I need to be making the necessary arrangements to get on that flight as soon as possible." I offer Tony a big smile of my own, hoping to come across as pleasant and completely sane. He doesn't seem convinced.

"You have some explaining to do first," Tony says in a serious tone.

"Like what?"

"Well for starters," Tony clears his throat, "what the hell are you wearing?"

He has a valid point there. My outfit is cause for concern.

"It's a costume," I tell him. "I was in the Christmas Parade in St. Augustine earlier today and I haven't had a chance to change." (That's not exactly true. I did have a chance to change, but believe it or not, that outfit would have been more disturbing than this one.)

Tony doesn't seem swayed by my rebuttal, but he lets it go for the bigger issue that I was really hoping wasn't going to come up.

"Alright then," he says. "Then how about you explain to me why you were all

over the news a few days ago for punching Santa Claus in the face?"

"Okay, first of all, he wasn't Santa Claus. He was an alcoholic homeless guy in a Santa costume."

"Oh really? And here I was thinking Santa took time out of his busy day at the North Pole to hang around outside a mall in Boston ringing a little bell for charity."

Tony's sarcasm is palpable.

"The bottom line is, no charges were filed," I insist. Tony hesitates before he poses his next question.

"You know what the problem is with people like you?" Tony leans forward and places his forearms on the card table. "You can be in a crowd of hundreds, and yet you can't see past the three feet of space you're taking up on this Earth."

"I don't think I'm one of those people," I reply a little tersely. I'm in no mood to be patronized by a giant, candy cane-eating security guard.

"Of course you don't," Tony says coolly. "But you are."

"If I was one of those people, I wouldn't be here right now."

"And why's that?"

"Because if I was one of those people—a selfish person like you're implying—I would be in Boston right now enjoying my Christmas holiday with my friends and a good bottle of wine."

"I see," Tony says with an amused raise of his eyebrows. "And for what unselfish reason did you come spend Christmas with us Florida lowlifes instead of your pals in Boston?"

"Well, it's sort of a long story," I say. "I guess I came down here to give my family another chance. I wanted to see if they'd really changed since the last time I came home four years ago."

"How does that lead to you trying to throttle one of my fellow airline employees?"

"My family is crazy. Absolutely, unequivocally crazy. I would have sworn them off years ago if they hadn't still been helping me pay for my college tuition."

"That sounds totally unselfish to me," Tony says sarcastically.

"It's not what you think," I tell him. "My parents are divorced—"

"So are mine."

"—and they've both remarried."

"So have mine."

"I have ten brothers and sisters."

"So your family is large, big deal."

"I also have an adopted African boy living in my dad's backyard." This gives Tony pause. His jaw goes a little slack and the candy cane slips forward a bit. He quickly regains his composure and leans back in the chair, which elicits another loud creak.

"Okay that's a little strange," Tony admits, "but that still doesn't give you cause to disrupt airport travel on Christmas Eve."

"No, but the events of the last four days do," I reply.

"Like what?"

"Where do you want me to begin?"

"I suppose the beginning would be a good place," Tony says with that nasty tone of sarcasm again.

"You mean the beginning as in my parents' marriage at a shady wedding chapel in Daytona, or the beginning as in when I accidentally burned down my adopted African brother's tribal hut?"

Tony tries hard not to show it, but he's definitely intrigued.

"Wherever you need to start to convince me that I should let you out of this room so you can get on a plane and take your crazy ass back to Boston."

"Alright then...we'll start at the wedding chapel and work our way forward."

"I've got six hours, let's go."

"Tony," I reply sincerely, "I'm not sure that's enough time."

[Chapter 2]

Christmas 1982

I suppose it goes without saying that anything with roots in a lean-to wedding chapel sandwiched between an IHOP (site of the rehearsal dinner) and a bar (site of the reception) is probably destined for disaster. Unfortunately, my parents were so blinded by the powerful trio of love, rebellion, and alcohol that they failed to notice the army of red warning flags crowded into the hallowed halls of Wally's Wedding Wonderland with them on that balmy summer night.

To their credit, my parents did not go down to Daytona Beach (St. Augustine's sin-city neighbor to the south) on the night in question with the intention of getting married. My dad, Jack Hamilton, was a college sophomore and my mom, Liza Jane Bailey, had just finished high school. They were two years into a relationship born strictly out their mutual goal to upset their fathers, though I don't think either of them knew how successful they would eventually be.

Along with several members of the 1980 state championship offensive line and a contingent of recently graduated varsity cheerleaders, my parents had made their way south for a long night of good old-fashioned bar hopping. In between drinking establishments number three and four, the underage drinkers stumbled into a nearby IHOP for fuel to continue their quest. Over pancakes and orange juice, the group happened to spot the neon pink sign for Wally's. It was a little white chapel that would be washed away in a hurricane the following year, but in 1982 it was the only 24-hour wedding chapel on Daytona Beach. Someone (it's still unclear whether it was a friend of my dad's or my mom's) made a joke about Wally's that turned into a serious conversation that turned into my dad writing Wally a check for \$25—the cost of the Spring Break Wedding Special--champagne and solo cups included.

In less than twenty minutes, papers were signed, a ceremony was performed

(I've seen pictures, there's nothing like a wedding party comprised of three drunk cheerleaders in halter tops and short skirts and five drunk football players in swim trunks and tank tops, all of them clutching red plastic cups and flashing crooked smiles at the camera), and a surprisingly legitimate marriage license was issued.

It's my understanding that there was a tiny moment of clarity about a month after their impromptu wedding ceremony when my parents realized their secret marriage might not have been such a great idea. I try not to dwell on the fact that the chaotic circumstances which I now call my life might have been avoided entirely if that moment of clarity hadn't been so rudely interrupted by the sudden appearance of my older sister, Becca.

Just a few weeks before she was scheduled to move into her freshman dorm at Florida State, my young mother saw her worst fears illustrated by two lines on a stick. Before she could even wrap her mind around the sudden change in her future plans, however, my Nana Jane came flying through the front door of my grandparents' church-owned home in a blind rage. Apparently, the pharmacist who worked at the local drugstore where my mother bought her pregnancy test had immediately called his wife (as anyone would have if they saw the preacher's daughter buying such an item). His wife answered the phone on her way out the door to meet her Sunday School group for afternoon tea. It just so happened that the pharmacist's wife's Sunday School group included Nana Jane.

So much for living in a small town.

A conflict of epic proportions, tantamount to the battles fought by the French and Spanish when St. Augustine was first settled hundreds of years ago, erupted inside the tiny house. I've been told by several witnesses that the shouting grew so loud my Grandpa James actually heard it a mile away, inside his basement office at the First Baptist Church of St. Augustine.

By the time he arrived home, my mother and grandmother were in separate corners of the living room, squaring off like prized fighters across the shag rug. Somehow, Grandpa James managed to fling himself in between the two women and bravely hold them off long enough to discern what their argument was about. Without saying a thing (my grandfather has always been a man of few words, except when he's in the pulpit) Grandpa James left the house, climbed into his aging Buick, and drove six blocks south to the waterfront Hamilton estate.

For centuries, the notorious Hamilton family had been sculpting the history of St. Augustine through politics, justice, and the power of an iron fist. People held passionate opinions about the Hamiltons in only one of two directions--adulation or fear. Many people who subscribed to the latter belief (including Grandpa James) felt that the family was a long line of criminals who forced their way into the city's political landscape.

That's not an entirely false perspective.

By 1982, my paternal grandfather, the honorable Judge Raymond Q. Hamilton III (known to most as simply "Judge") was the reigning patriarch of the family. He had already ascended to the highest-ranking judicial position in all of St. Johns County, but his eyes were focused on a seat at the district court bench that was slated to open up before the next election. In fact, he was relaxing on the veranda of the family's bayfront estate, sipping cognac, smoking a cigar, and discussing his political future with my uncle, Ray IV (my dad's older brother), when Grandpa James pulled up.

According to Uncle Ray, Grandpa James started shouting at Judge that he was going to chop off a favorite appendage of his no-good son and toss it into the Atlantic. Judge unfolded his massive frame (he's well north of six feet tall and beyond three hundred pounds) from his rocking chair and took a wide stance at the top of the porch steps. He issued a stern legal and physical threat to my maternal grandfather should he attempt to lay even one finger on my Uncle Ray.

Confused, Grandpa James explained that it was Jack, not Ray, that he wanted

dismember. Suddenly relieved, Judge downed the rest of his drink and told Grandpa James that Jack was upstairs, have at it.

For years, the relationship between my father and Judge had been growing sour. Not only was Jack uninterested in the family business of law, he had turned his one good attribute in Judge's eyes (his prowess on the dewy grass of a football field) into something of a shame.

An ardent Florida Gators booster, fan, and alumnus, Judge had nearly suffered a massive stroke when my father announced he was accepting a scholarship to play football for the Florida State Seminoles. My grandfather would sooner have seen his youngest son walk through town in full drag carrying a Jimmy Carter campaign sign than see him don a Garnet & Gold uniform. To Judge, it was an embarrassment, a crime, and an act of pure betrayal for Jack to march off to Tallahassee and play football for Bobby Bowden.

Distraught beyond words, Judge had all but cut my father from his will when Jack went away to school. Hence the reason Judge found no need to stand between his youngest son and my Grandpa James.

Who knows what would have happened between the men if my paternal grandmother, Paula, hadn't stepped out of the house at that moment to see what all the fuss was about. When she saw the Baptist minister in a rage on her front lawn, Paula (who refuses under any circumstances to be called Grandma, Granny, or any other derivative of the word for fear that it might make her sound old) wrung her hands on her apron and in the spirit of southern hospitality, offered my Grandpa James a drink. Any other woman might have been scoffed at for interfering at that moment, but with her Alabama drawl, red lipstick and preference for low-cut house dresses, Paula tends to have a way with men.

Over a pitcher of sweet tea, Grandpa James calmly explained the situation to Paula, who immediately summoned her youngest son into the kitchen. If Jack was

curious as to why his girlfriend's father was seated at the table, he didn't ask any questions. Brandishing her famous beauty queen smile, Paula poured her son a glass of tea, added a splash of vodka, and told him he was going to be a daddy.

Half an hour later, Paula had everyone--including my mother and Nana Jane--situated on the antique furniture in her living room. While the rest of the group sat with their shoulders stooped, already bearing the burden of the news, Paula drew on her hereditary, matriarchal, southern need to keep the family from drowning. She quickly began to draw up plans to salvage the wreckage left by Wally's Wedding Wonderland.

First, Paula said the family would tell everyone that my mother had purchased the pregnancy test for a friend, not for herself. Then, just before they were to leave for Tallahassee, my father would perform an elaborate wedding proposal in my grandfather's church during Sunday services. When my mother accepted, they would announce plans for a lavish Christmas wedding during their holiday break from school. Jack would go on to Tallahassee, while Liza Jane would stow away at her parents' house to hide her growing belly.

The lynchpin of the plan was what inevitably doomed it to failure. Paula selected Christmas Day for the wedding because she assumed that most people in town would not skip out on time with their families on such an important holiday to attend a wedding. Therefore, the locals would know that the couple had been officially married in my grandfather's church, but no one would be there to see the uninvited guest of honor at the ceremony. I'm not sure what the plan was for how to explain the baby that would come along three months after the wedding, but I'm sure Paula had something in mind.

Settled on a plan of action, the group dispersed and began playing out the roles that Paula had created for them as part of her elaborate scheme.

While some people in St. Augustine were encouraged by the sudden softness of the relationship between the Hamiltons and the Baileys that followed my parents' very

public engagement, most folks just saw cause for suspicion. Once that ring went on my mother's finger, a very visible battle should have erupted between the two families that would have put the Capulets and Montagues to shame. When no guns were drawn nor police reports filed, people grew certain that something sinister was going on behind closed doors.

To add fuel to the conspiracy theorists' fire, rumors flew around town about the mysterious disappearance of the bride-to-be at the end of the summer. Though she was supposed to be away at school, people still expected to see her in the front pew of First Baptist on an occasional weekend visit. When she wasn't spotted over Thanksgiving break either, every beauty parlor and poorly lit bar in town sounded the alarm.

With all the gossip slipping through the cobblestone streets, it was no surprise that Paula's theory on a small turn out for a Christmas wedding was blown to pieces. On the day of the ceremony, a massive crowd began to build hours before the doors of First Baptist were even opened. So many people lined up along the downtown sidewalks that the police had to come out and close down several streets in the interest of public safety.

Panicked, Paula tried to find someone who would stand at the door and at least keep out those who had not been invited. Unfortunately, no one was willing to stand between the gossip-fueled mob and what had turned into the social event of the year. Therefore, just after noon on Christmas Day, the large oak doors of First Baptist Church swung out into the chilly December morning and invited half the city into its warm chapel.

A sea of ruby poinsettias, ivory candles, and hunter boughs of pine set the scene for what was to come. Amid hushed voices and urgent whispers, the crowd of regular parishioners, gossip mongers, and other interested parties vied for the best seats in the house.

Meanwhile, downstairs in her father's office, my mother Liza Jane donned her

wedding gown. It was everything that an eighties wedding gown should have been from the puffy, Cinderella sleeves made of white satin to the v-necked, beaded bodice and overindulgent lacework. (I am forever thankful to my parents' first dog, Skippy, who had the good sense to shred that dress one afternoon while he was home alone so that I would never be offered the chance to revive its glory.)

Moments before the ceremony began, Grandpa James stepped into the room and instantly burst into tears at the sight of his only daughter in her full wedding day regalia. To an uninformed bystander, it would have seemed he was overcome with joy and nostalgia, but in fact his true emotions were shame and embarrassment. Grandpa James knew that once he stepped into the chapel with his daughter on his arm, his life would be changed forever.

Just before the doors swung open and the crowd leapt to its feet, someone shoved a bouquet of red roses mixed with holly into my mother's hand and wished her the best of luck. She would need it.

In the front pew, Paula stood up along with everyone else and tugged her skin-tight red dress down to reveal more cleavage than the Baptist church had ever seen. She held her head high and pasted a bright smile across her red lips, which she was prepared to maintain throughout every painful minute of what was to come.

Upon her first step into the chapel, my mother was greeted by a chorus of gasps and murmurs echoed by the high arches of the church ceiling. Jaws dropped to the floor as Liza Jane and the watermelon-sized bump beneath her dress began moving down the aisle. For all their careful planning, my family had only managed to postpone the inevitable growth of a tiny flame into a massive inferno.

As my mother and grandfather neared the altar, Paula continued to smile on bravely while Judge stood beside her and dabbed at the sweat on his brow. Across the aisle, Nana Jane closed her eyes and started to pray out loud as her sobbing husband and chagrined daughter drew near.

From his spot next to a foursome of grizzly-bear sized men (the same offensive linemen who were present for the first wedding), my dad decided to adopt his mother's approach. He too plastered a bright smile on his face, even as his heavily gelled mullet started to condensate with sweat--all of which made its way down the collar of his suit jacket. He was sweating so profusely, in fact, that his dark jacket was noticeably damp when he accepted his bride's hand from her weeping father and turned his back to the crowd.

Grandpa James took his spot at the altar where he paused to gulp down a glass of water and make a futile attempt to collect himself before beginning the ceremony. Fortunately for him, the crowd was still so stunned at the sudden turn of events that few paid any attention to him as he stumbled through the service.

By the time everyone re-grouped at the VFW for the reception later that afternoon, the truth had been set free. Some claimed to have known all along what the two families were hiding, but most admitted to being completely caught by surprise. Either way, much like those star-crossed lovers of Shakespearean fame, my parents' ill-fated love affair was destined from its onset to become an iconic tale of romance and tragedy

Over boxed wine and fried chicken, people began to rehearse the newest story added to St. Augustine's history books, just behind Pedro Menendez de Aviles' 1565 founding of the city itself and Ponce de Leon's endless search for the fabled Fountain of Youth.

In my own personal history books, that day marked the start of my lifelong aversion to the Christmas holiday. That one little event--my parents' second wedding in six months--began the avalanche of truly disastrous holiday shenanigans that would shape the first twenty-three years of my life.