

1. Leaving -- September 2005

I told him I was only leaving for one night, and I kept repeating that lie as I stuffed a few essentials--diapers, wipes, duck-print onesies--into a backpack with my free hand, my daughter's infant body held tight to mine with my other hand. I tried to appear calm, casual even.

"It's just one night. I'll be back tomorrow," I said. "I'll need the truck."

"You're not havin' it," he said, his tense face and fists too close to me.

"I'll ask my parents to come get me."

"I don't want them here," he said. "Take the truck."

That night he had followed me around the house in a menacing way, as he always did in his rages, which were like this: eyes hardened, shouting so intense spittle flew, accusations and belittlement aimed at me and all the world. It was an anger so outsized I would question my safety. I cannot remember what set him off that evening, nearly two decades ago. But I probably couldn't recall what it was even two months after it happened. It was never about what set him off. It was always about whatever burned inside of him. His core had been glowing red hot since long before me, and it sometimes erupted without any warning, lava bursting out of his mouth and scorching everyone in its path. Once, he flipped out because I failed to put a card in the mailbox while he was at work and I was home with our days-old newborn, battling the high fevers and wrenching pain of a breast infection.

As I grabbed underwear and nursing bras from my top dresser drawer, his fury turned to a sort of angry crying. He sat on the edge of the bed, his face in his hands. "I don't know what to do," he said. "Some people in this situation would kill their wife and kid."

"Are you threatening me?" It surprises me now that I had the nerve to ask. But maybe it wasn't courage at all. In that moment, I think I simply wanted to know whether I was about to be

murdered alongside my child. He denied that he was going to hurt us and trailed off into one of his lengthy, meandering monologues that often ensued following a rage. These ramblings did little to instill confidence in his having regained his right mind. On the contrary, they were equally terrifying--just another flavor of unhinged.

Downstairs, in the open-concept space between the kitchen and family room, the aroma of curry lingered from the previous owners. Standing there, fifteen feet from my exit, I managed a truth: "I'm leaving because you're out of control."

"I'm not out of control," he said. "If I was, your head would be bloody and bashed on the floor."

Bloody and bashed on the floor. I can still hear the words like it happened just this morning. I can still see his face when he said this most gruesome part, the words spilling out naturally, like he was simply letting a familiar fantasy take flight from his lips.

I swallowed, turned, and walked to the front door, willing my legs to hold steady until I could be locked in the cab of the truck. He followed at my heels, spewing words that seesawed between despair and anger, love and degradation. My hands shook as I clasped our baby into the five-point harness of her car seat and hoisted her into the oversized silver truck.

"I'll tell her you took her from me!" he said. "You took her from her daddy!"

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said. I feared the truth--that I was never coming back--would have led him to make good on his threats. I shut the driver's side door, depressed the lock button, and backed out of the driveway of the modern, four-bedroom colonial we'd bought just a few months earlier, the largest space I'd ever lived in but the only one that never felt like home. Driving through the neighborhood's wide streets toward the exit, I checked my rearview mirror to be sure he was not following in his work truck.

At a red light, I called my parents. “I’m on my way with Jessica. Can we stay with you?”

“Yes,” my mom said. “What’s going on?”

“I can’t do it anymore,” I choked out between sobs. “I’m so afraid of him,”

“Focus on driving. We’ll talk when you get here.”

Twenty minutes later, I pulled into my parents’ driveway to the house they bought just outside of Newark, Delaware when I was four. I was thirty-two years old. They lived next to a patch of woods with a stream, in a small neighborhood built in the 1970s. I asked if my daughter and I could live with them for a while. “Of course,” they said.

The worst was over, I thought at the time.

2. Meeting -- February 2004

I was in my last semester of law school at Temple University, living in a leaky studio apartment I adored with an oversized window overlooking an alleyway dumpster in Center City, Philadelphia. I’d grown accustomed to the woman who rifled through the garbage, and her daily visits and conversations with herself became as usual as the morning chatter of birds. I was a block and a half from Rittenhouse Square, a pretty park with wooden benches and old trees lining bits of green space. Everything I’d come to understand about the city, I loved. I learned the city was wondrous in the winter after a snowfall, the white powder transforming dirty streets and sidewalks into an impeccably clean slate--even if for just the space between waking and lunch, before cars and boots rendered it all a gray slush. I learned to look forward to the warm months, when MLK Drive was shut down on Sundays, and I could loop my bike around the river, passing Boathouse Row on the east and the Philadelphia Zoo on the west. I learned the joy of running up and down the Art Museum steps, something I did a couple times a week and which thrilled me not because of the

movie “Rocky” but because of the massive, columned architecture and the cool view down Ben Franklin Parkway, Philly’s version of the Champs-Élysées in Paris. I learned I was not an anonymous person in a city of anonymous people. Impossibly, I would recognize a face from the laundromat while at the gym. I began to understand the routines of strangers. The tall gentleman who once eyed me up and down and asked if I was a dancer--indicating my legs with his long, wrinkly forefinger--walked through the square nearly every afternoon. Slowly, the big city had started to feel small, in the most comforting way. It became home.

After backing out of dinner plans with a classmate, I sat alone at my computer on Saturday night, Valentine’s Day, intending to make headway on a directed research project: drafting a petition for certiorari to the U.S. Supreme Court for a guy on death row.

Dan, my brother, had just gotten married a few weeks prior. He had been dating his wife Rhonda for four years, and together they had weathered a motocross accident that left him paralyzed from the chest down. At their wedding, I felt alone in a new way. Not lonely for another warm body. But lonely for a partner. Thirty--inconceivably now--seemed a significant milestone, and where was I? Nearly \$100,000 in debt from law school and had never in my life had what would qualify as a long-term relationship. I didn’t know what that was supposed to look like, despite my parents having been married since 1967. It wasn’t that I was lacking love interests. I just could not find a solid match, despite my efforts and despite my wide net, even disregarding physical attraction on occasion.

Late that night, hunched over my compact, particle-board computer desk, I clicked open a new browser tab and navigated to Yahoo Personals. It was free to look, scanning through pages of faces and reading their profiles if one caught your attention. If you wanted to reach out to anyone, however, you had to pay a monthly fee. My eyes bleary from sifting through reams of case law, I sat there scrolling, halfheartedly, and chastised myself for veering off task.

I stopped when I saw his picture. A fair-haired Hugh Grant--that's what came to mind when I studied the photograph. He wore a baseball cap and a smile so wide I sensed an openness, which intrigued me enough to click on his profile and read what he had to say about himself. He sounded optimistic, funny, and humble. New Jersey was listed as his location; English and French, his languages. His bio contained enough of the right words for me to pull out a credit card, despite my frugal nature. I joined and dashed off a message to him.

When I woke up, he had already written back. He seemed overjoyed to hear from me. Thus began our daily, lengthy email exchanges, which quickly became more of a priority for me than my school work. After class, I would hurry home to my dial-up internet to check my inbox, my heart rate increasing every time I saw his name attached to new mail. I asked him all kinds of questions designed to probe his character and his stance on important issues, like discrimination and the environment. His answers all checked out, and my excitement grew tenfold.

Our emails quickly progressed to phone calls. I learned he was actually in England, living at his parents' house. He had been engaged to an American woman and had sold his house, car, and all of his belongings in England to move in with her in the United States at the end of the previous year. But they had broken up right before the wedding and now all of his possessions, including a new truck he had purchased with cash, were in a storage unit in New Jersey.

Within two weeks he told me he loved me.

I told him I loved him, too. A very tiny part of me questioned this swiftness, but the larger part recalled Bette Midler's story--tying the knot six weeks after meeting--and thought, why not me?