



HEIDI CAVE

Lacey
feet

turning my tragedy into hope

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fancy
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*For Scott
for always, always believing in me*

and

For Betty

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Acknowledgments

Prologue

The Red Shoe Box

I picked up a red shoe box at the bottom of an old suitcase. My nose wrinkled as I blew the thin layer of dust off the lid, the dust motes dancing in the afternoon light streaming through my bedroom window. I lifted the lid enjoying the anticipation of discovery. I was nine again, searching for buried treasure.

Scott and I were moving. I was going through boxes of my things, sifting through memories, deeming what was to be in the keep or throw-away pile. I had no trouble throwing things out, not being one for clutter. This time was different. I don't know if it was that I was thirty-four and feeling considerably more grown up, or that I had just not looked through these boxes in years and needed to remember. But I found myself placing my hands on the past, wrapping myself around a long time ago.

For weeks, I unearthed old journals, cards, words I had forgotten, and pored over it all, caught up in my eight-year-old, fifteen-year-old, and twenty-year-old selves. Moving from journal to journal, cringing at some of what I wrote, I was reminded of who I was back then, and that I wasn't entirely different at nineteen as I was today. Seeing in my small pinched handwriting, "I'm tired," "I'm bored," "I want more," over and over again had me shaking my head, wondering if I should feel bothered or relieved that I continued to feel this way. Books of poetry, letters that I had written but never sent proved I had always been a lover of words. I indulged in them.

In the red shoe box, among cards with get-well wishes and aged brittle roses, was an envelope with *Heidi* written across it in my mom's handwriting. I opened it eagerly like I was unlocking a secret.

There were a few cards from stores I had been to, a business card I didn't recognize, and a coffee card with a few cups punched out on my way to a free cup of coffee. Resting between the cards was

a five dollar bill. I noticed the edges were brown, framed by fire, perfectly preserved. My hands shook as I held it by its burnt edges, marveling that it had come this far.

My mom handed me that five dollar bill as I flew down the stairs and out the door eleven years ago. These things were tucked in my wallet, in my purse, in my car as I headed toward a destination I didn't think possible, something childhood dreams are not made of.

I placed the red shoe box beside me on the floor, against my leg, careful not to disturb its contents, as if somehow I could jiggle and disrupt my past by doing so. I noticed a familiar book in the box. It was Scott's favorite childhood book, *The Magical Drawings of Moonie B Finch*. I flipped through the pages and noticed that between pages five and six were folded pieces of paper. I smoothed out the pages, ran my fingertips along the creases, and saw they were letters addressed to me, written by Scott.

I kept still, my breathing shallow, as I remembered.

June 26, 1998

I know we're going to have some tough times adjusting to all of this, but I know we're going to get through it all. I love you, Heidi, and I don't care what you can or can't do. I don't care what you used to be like, or how you are now. I just love you, and I want to be with you. I need you. I need to hear that you love me, too.

Today you opened your eyes and, for the first time, you were in them. Your spirit was in your eyes. It was like hearing from a friend that had gone away for a long time and for a long time you hear nothing. Then one night you get a phone call and they just say, "Hi," but it's the best "Hi" you've ever heard. You were more beautiful in this moment than any other.

He began writing the letters the night after the car crash. Scott and I had been dating a very short time, only six weeks, when time was divided into Before and After. It felt as though a hush fell over the house, over me, as I read the final two paragraphs of the last letter he wrote, the day I came out of my coma.

1

“Do You Want To Live?”

I blinked, my eyes blurred by tears and bright light.

Mom and dad were near, soothing me, but I couldn't understand what they were saying. I knew something had happened. Something bad. But I couldn't remember. I didn't know. My face hot and stretched tight, the tears kept coming. I heard a door open and close.

“Heidi.”

My cries turned to sobs.

“Heidi.”

I can't stop.

“You were in a car accident. It's bad, Heidi.”

It's Scott.

“You've got to fight. Do you want to live?”

Live or die, live or die. I knew it would be easy to die. I was close to it. My parents, Scott, the sterile room, my tears told me death wasn't far.

I answered, “Yes.”

I slipped into unconsciousness.

~~~

Pain bled into my dreams, having its way with me. Held captive in cages, I traveled great distances over mountains and through valleys. Hitched to wagons, in truck beds, I bumped over rough terrain and climbed steep hillsides. I was always on my back, unable to curl up or turn to my side; my body stretched out, palms up, and tied down. No time to stop. I slept, but never rested. Sometimes forgotten outside in the cold, I saw my breath and wished someone would take pity on me and bring me



inside. There were people everywhere, but I couldn't reach them and they couldn't see me.

Reality crept in once in a while, life and dream crossing lines, blurring together.

A young girl kneeling down, touching my hand, whispering, "We're praying for you. Please be okay." Radio stations being switched and the sound of static. A song I'd recognize, a gentle warning, "Heidi, we're going to pull this out now," as a tube was pulled out of my throat, my body arching and then sighing. Desperate prayers uttered, familiar voices singing to me. These moments formed lullabies breaking through my medicated terror.

Unable to move, my dreams held me under. Throughout my childhood, I was plagued by nightmares, and I learned the art of escaping when I found myself in one. I opened my eyes and shook off the night. But this time, I was trapped in whatever hell my body was in, and my mind refused to let me go.

~~~

Scott returned. "Heidi. You've been in a car accident. Do you know where you are? You're in the hospital. Your right leg is gone. They're trying to save the left one, but it doesn't look good. Heidi? You've been badly burnt. Betty's gone. Heidi?"

My name was a question with no answer. My boyfriend, Scott, was the messenger, and he was forced to repeat this news until I understood, as if I could ever understand. I was told later that morphine made my memory hazy, and I had trouble retaining information. I believe I rejected my messenger's words. They couldn't belong to me.

The extent of my injuries came to me in pieces, in a fog. I saw the wounds on my abdomen first. My skin was red, angry, and gaping. I had smooth skin, a little tanned. It was June, and I had been spending time at the lake.

Why is there a bag over my belly button? Why am I so stiff?

I couldn't move my right arm.

There was so much white—white rolled around my arms, white sheets draped over me, white walls.

I lifted my hand to my face. Something hard and plastic hung from my nose. I tugged on it and gagged. I reached around to my neck, my fingers traveling up, up behind my ears until I felt bandage and skin where my hair should be. Machines surrounded me, pinning me to the bed. They were alive, whirring and flashing, bags of fluid hanging from them. My sight was blurred, fuzzy. I needed my glasses. My hands slid from my bald head and felt long thin tubes attached to my neck near my collarbone.

There was a dull ache at the back of my mind—a memory struggling to free itself.

Car.

Fire.

Betty.

Betty?

Fire.

My legs.

The words flashed through my brain, devoid of images. I didn't remember how, or why, or when it happened, only that I was here, in a hospital, and these words had been given to me, offered up as explanation. I let the words slip through me—one after the other—each word grappling to land, to fit. But, they never found a home.

2

New Life

Scott's mouth moved, buzzed. *This is important, something I should hear.*

"You've been in a drug-induced coma in ICU for two weeks. The doctors thought it was the best thing. They could work on you as often as they needed to. It gave your mind protection and your body a chance to recover."

I tried to nod, but it hurt. Everything hurt.

"You've been moved to the burn unit."

Burn unit?

"You had a punctured lung due to broken ribs..." He gave me a run-down of my injuries. A long list of what had gone wrong. "Burns to over half of your body...Suffering from smoke inhalation...Blood transfusions...Infection...Colostomy bag...Right leg amputated...don't know if the left one can be saved."

Hold on. What? Focus.

"We were worried you wouldn't make it." His voice was calm and even, which I'm sure was an effort.

I made it. Did it matter? The list is so long.

I whispered, "I'm here." I closed my eyes. *No more. No more.*

When my messenger's words sunk in, I gradually became aware that my injuries were serious and devastating. It was a sentence handed to me, and I didn't know what I had done to make me guilty.

I had never broken anything. Not even so much as a sprained ankle. Only a few weeks earlier, I had been grumbling about my foot bothering me when I ran. I went to a walk-in clinic to get to the bottom of the problem. Running was something I did regularly. I

loved the rhythm of it and how my mind kept pace with my feet. I learned I had plantar fasciitis, and was told to wait it out. It might go away on its own.

Rest and waiting it out weren't going to heal me now.

My parents didn't have the luxury of a choice when it came time to have my right leg amputated. They signed off in submission to the doctor's decision, a necessity to save me. My leg was a liability, and so it had to go.

Fire had snaked its way to my feet and legs, blazing through muscle to bone, as I hung upside down in my car, suspended by my seat belt. The vinyl seats melted in my red 1988 Nissan Sentra, a car I'd had since I was seventeen. Stringy and sticky, it adhered to my skin, melting me. Fire crept and crawled until it covered 52% of my body. That was the statistic I was given. Just over half of my body burnt. What percent would be erased completely, I wondered. 13%, 18% of a body I could no longer lay claim to.

The crash had taken Betty, my beautiful dark-haired, freckled friend. Betty was gone. Numb, the words zig-zagged through my mind. *Betty is gone, Betty is gone.* She died on impact. These words joined the others. *Betty is gone. She died on impact.*

Betty's earnestness was gone. The way she looked at me when I talked, like I was the only person who mattered. Her smile, her laugh. Gone.

~~~

Scott filled me in on what happened the night of the crash. It was the responsibility of a trauma surgeon at Vancouver General Hospital to fill my family in on the course of action they were taking.

He spoke to my dad, Theodor Kroeker, and Scott. "Heidi has sustained incredible trauma to her body. The back of her body has been burned from her shoulder blades down and the front from her lower abdomen down."

They were prepared to hear this. The doctor in our hometown's hospital had warned them before I was transferred by ambulance to VGH.

“The swelling in Heidi’s legs was so severe that we were afraid it was cutting off her circulation, so we cut into her legs to relieve the pressure. What we discovered is her left leg is severely damaged, but may still be useful. However, her lower right leg is damaged beyond repair.”

He stopped speaking to both my dad and Scott, and turned all his attention to my dad. “We believe it is necessary to remove Heidi’s right foot and part of her leg below the knee, in order to give her a chance. And we need your permission to perform the surgery.”

My dad sighed deeply. He squeezed his hands together as his eyes roamed around the room. His heavy German accent broke the silence, “Are there any other tests you can do? Maybe there is something that can be done.”

The doctor was compassionate, “Mr. Kroeker, forgive me for being blunt, but Heidi’s right leg is literally cooked like a piece of meat. There is nothing that can be done to save it. If we don’t remove it, it will kill her.” After a moment, the doctor looked down at his clipboard to give him the space he needed.

My dad turned to Scott, “What do you think?” The doctor’s gaze followed.

Scott responded, “If it’s like he says, I can’t imagine anything else that can be done. He’s the doctor. If it were my decision, I would let him do whatever he thinks he should do to save her life.”

My dad thought for several more seconds. “Ok,” his focus returning to the doctor, “please do whatever you can to save her.”

“We are, Mr. Kroeker. We’re doing everything we can.”

I was unconscious as a shaky signature sealed the inevitable, unconscious as surgeons forced their way through muscle and bone to set my new life in motion.

### 3

## Survival

I braced myself. It was morning, nearly seven o'clock.

The small army of the gloved and gowned was about to march into my room. Their accompanying smell of antibacterial soap and the snap of latex gloves was the precursor to sheer agony.

The threat of death was pushed back, and it was time for damage control. Dressing changes were done each morning with the help of strength offered by many hands. I lay on a thick white pad that began at my shoulders, making me look like I had sprouted wings, and stopped at the end of my spine. White gauze surrounded my arms, the remainder of my legs, and my torso; only leaving room for a colostomy bag that sat smack dab in the middle of my abdomen. The thick plastic bag attached to a large pancake-sized beige sticker that lay against me and a stoma, an opening in my body, constructed to collect, well, poop. There was so much damage done by fire, so much grafting, that it was the best solution. I was told it would be temporary. A temporary poop bag.

The pad and gauze were slathered in medicinal ointments the consistency of butter. The ointments dried through the day and night, which affixed the gauze to my skin. Debridement was the term used when nurses ripped the material off, taking healing skin with it. You tear away old skin to make way for new skin.

They could do it slowly or quickly. It didn't matter. Either way, I was in pain. It wasn't like ripping off a band-aid. I wasn't a little girl with a scrape on my knee, my mom crouching, soothing me with promises of, "It's just a quick tear, and it only hurts for a second." No, it wasn't like that at all.

My body was open, raw, and about to receive pain. I wanted to flee, to run. My stomach clenched, and I felt the bile rising in my throat. I thought about people who walked on hot coals, who sought out and welcomed this act of overcoming, like there's nothing you can't do once you've walked on fire. I wondered what they would do if they were in my position, in my bed, living in this near-corpse. They had the luxury of choice, to bear their chosen burden for a few seconds and finish it at will. Would the smell of blood and burnt flesh haunt them? If pieces of them were missing, would they feel like a hero? When my skin was ripped from me each day, I didn't reach a divine place; I couldn't find another entrance to my soul. I was in the dark, torn again and again to create a new body. Not a better body, but a shell that was barely enough.

I'd heard when pain only touches the body, it doesn't interfere with your soul—that time would numb the agony and I would soon forget. What I'd heard was wrong. Suffering sears the soul, and it shreds into a million pieces, just as if I was on fire all over again.

The nurses spoke behind their masks, "Okay, hon, you know what to do. You're going to need to breathe through this."

My body was rigid. My teeth clamped down on the insides of my cheeks.

Rip. Pull.

Lightning quick, pain struck.

*I want to scream.*

"Breathe, Heidi."

*I can't.*

Fists clenched, tears rolling down my cheeks, the nurses turned me.

The anticipation of what was coming rivaled the tearing, but I never shut my eyes. I had to see hands land on my body. I had to see the blood-stained gauze.

Rip. Pull.

"In and out. Breathe, sweetie."

I gave in. My breath escaped in short, sharp bursts.

Rip. Pull. Rip. Pull.

This is how I came to love morphine.

In addition to the steady stream of morphine I received, there was a red button on a narrow gray handle I could push to top me up at six minute intervals. It was my very own magic button. It didn't eliminate the pain, but it took the edge off, a faint beep letting me know help was on the way. Inside torture, I clung to control with my left hand. I was a child gripping my security blanket, tethered to the Great Morphine Machine with its promise of comfort and steadfastness.

After debridement, a new back pad was settled into place and fresh gauze wound around me. The nurses turned and adjusted me until I felt comfortable. Comfortable was a relative word here, a fast and loose word I couldn't put any stock into. It was not a simple task. *I* was not a simple task. I often wondered if they dreaded coming into my room, drawing straws to see who got me today. I felt like Humpty Dumpty, cracked open, and everybody scrambling to make the pieces fit. The nurses were gentle and kind, always encouraging, but I'm sure they had to suck in their breath as much as I had to suck in mine whenever they opened my door.

Dr. Brown, the resident doctor, and his students were next. They made their rounds at the burns and plastics unit, checking in with each of their patients. I was in Room 1, the isolation room. I was moved there after being in ICU, and was usually seen last. Sometimes I wielded my patient seniority, having been here for two months, and requested they see me first, so I could speed up the humiliation of seven pairs of eyes of seven strangers seeing me naked and hardly at my best.

Every day, it was the same question. "How are you doing today, Heidi? What's your pain like on a scale of 1 to 10?"

I gave it a beat of thought, pausing to scratch the tip of my nose (morphine made my nose itch), before I measured my pain and answered. "I'm about a 7." It was my standard answer. Not too high, but high enough. I was in considerable pain, even with my friend, morphine. Desperate for relief, my thumb was on that magic button again and again. The pain wasn't as sharp and all-encompassing



then, but it never disappeared. It just lay low until the next surgery, the next dressing change, when it jumped high and fast through my body. Pain and I weren't going to be separated anytime soon. 10, 8, 7...did it matter? Pain was everywhere all the time.

I used 7 because I didn't know how I felt anymore. I stuck with 7 because I was resigned to pain. *This is how it is.* If I was lucky enough to be near *okay*, I dropped my number to a 4 or a 5. Those were good days.

Sometimes they didn't believe me. "Heidi, if you're in a lot of pain you need to let us know. We're here to help."

There were times my pain shot sky-high and pain was all I could see. "10. It's a 10 today." Since I rarely used the 10, I was taken seriously.

I was inspected and prodded, checked off and whispered about. I only spoke if I had a question. I tuned them out and willed them away, staring longingly at my TV. The doctors and students were good to me, doing their job, but I was still reeling from the small army of nurses, while trying to catch my breath. Blinding, exploding pain required all of my energy, and being discussed and dissected made me feel like a science experiment. Even though my injuries and the precarious skin grafts required close attention, I couldn't help but feel exhausted, dehumanized, and naked.

When I was given showers while anesthetized, the nurses strategically placed cloths over me as they washed me. I laughed when my nurse, Kathleen, relayed a conversation she had with a doctor. He was puzzled as to why they were doing this. Her response was defensive saying, "Heidi is very modest. We're trying to give her some dignity."

Personal space was a luxury one didn't have at a hospital and I gave in to the fact that I would be seen without a stitch of clothing on regularly, and sacrificed dignity for health. I was a patient, therefore I was defenseless. Removed of my clothes and skin, I had no armor. Cerebrally, I knew the staff was here to heal me, so I contributed by staying still, remaining polite, and being a good girl. I needed them. However, I loathed being the freak show on the table, and my only

defense was to turn off my brain, to become numb to my surroundings. The more dependent I was, the less human I felt, and I found a space inside my soul where I clung to choice, even if the choice was to *not* feel.

Once everyone filed out and I wasn't slotted in for surgery, I filled my day with distraction.

Friends and family brought me books, but I was too weak to hold one, and too fragile to read some of what was sent my way. I supposed Christian literature and Christian fiction were meant to cheer me up, but I couldn't take happy endings and girls with heavy hearts, weighing their options only to always come to the right decision after seeking the Lord, and having their problems simply slide off their shoulders as soon as they gave them up to Jesus.

Verses declaring I should "Trust in the Lord for He is the Most High!" didn't interest me. It was brought as provision for my soul with the best of intentions. Ply me with verses and meditations until it would fill in the wound, fill it up and fill it in, until the wound didn't exist anymore. "Let go and let God." Peace would sustain me.

I wanted to be peaceful, and wished I could be comatose along with it. I counted myself among those who believed, but syrupy spoon-fed Christianity wasn't going to cure what was ailing me. I needed love without an agenda. I needed for people to simply be there, and not try to fix me. This wasn't the time to be concerned about my relationship with God. God and I were fine. I was broken, and I would be broken for a while. If I had enough strength, I would have chucked some of those books across the room.

Instead, I invested in television. I used to be too busy to watch TV, and now I had more time than anyone needed. I hadn't watched *Young and the Restless* since I was a girl with my mom. The characters were still here years later. Victor, Nicky, the Abbotts. I picked up where I left off eight years ago. Nothing had changed in Genoa City. I caught up on *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. I

watched a travel show religiously. It was on each morning at ten. I never missed an episode. I traveled to India, Israel, Morocco, Thailand... I stayed in out of the way Bed and Breakfasts, rode gondolas, and "tried" the local food. TV was my solace, my reprieve. I didn't have to think. I avoided anything that made me feel too much. I didn't want sappy or anything emotionally charged. Comedy, travel, and over-the-top soap operas were all I could handle.

Visitors were another distraction, something I sometimes welcomed and, at other times, could have done without. With all the people in and out of my room, I couldn't keep track of the new faces I met. I forgot the names of my doctors, and it seemed someone with an important position introduced themselves to me nearly every day. I wanted to stop meeting people.

The resident psychologist popped into my room from time to time, sitting in a chair against the wall next to the door, ready to talk. It was mandatory that he be there, but I had nothing to say to him. His obligatory questions were met with my obligatory answers until time was up. I'm sure I frustrated him with my non-answers, or perhaps I was pretty typical in my unwillingness to "go there" with him.

In a hurry to shoo him out, my replies to his questions didn't matter to me. I doled them out without thinking. I showed optimism during one of our talks when I said, "Things will work out."

He seemed curious. "What do you mean, 'Things will work out?' "

"They just will. I'll be fine."

I didn't know if it was a knee-jerk reaction from Sunday school lessons, that God was in control and I "shouldn't worry about tomorrow because tomorrow will look after itself," or just my great need to be alone that provoked my response.

I offered him the very thing I hated about the verses and books people gave me. I wrapped myself in faith to deflect his questions. The truth was I didn't know what happened. I didn't

know how I wound up here. My life was going along just fine until I was hit by a car. One of my very best friends died, and I was here with so much loss, while tied down to a bed. My heart was going to crack wide open if I allowed it. I was its guardian and I believed in *things will work out*. It's all I had left.

Nearly two months had passed in a blur of unconsciousness and operations, and my goal each day was not to make sense of what happened, or even mourn my losses. My goal was to make it through each hour, each day, each surgery, and reach the other side. I needed to get through. My goal was survival.