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## MISS ST. HELENS ERUPTS

I picked up the phone and said *hello* really quietly, assuming it would be some giggly friend of The Girls, but was surprised to hear a somewhat familiar-sounding voice on the other end: deep, rich, and male.

“Oh. My. God,” the voice said. “Is this my Ashley Ellen?”

“This is Ashley,” I said cautiously. No one had called me by my full name since—well, since Dad died. “Who’s calling?”

“It’s me, Harry.”

“Harry.”

“Your Uncle Harry. You know, Harry, your Godfather.”

Now, a bell was ringing. One of those gigantic church bells, like the Liberty Bell, like a gong going off in my head. I called him uncle, but he wasn’t really my uncle. He had been my mom and dad’s best friend when I was a kid. I hadn’t realized, at the time, that he was also my godfather. I just remembered him as part of the scenery. So I started sputtering like an idiot.

“Harry...um...oh my God. Father...I—I remember you...I wondered what happened to you...I haven’t seen you since my mom....” memories flooded my mind...playing “Alley-Oop,” being tossed through the air upside down...walking holding hands between him and my dad, shouting

“ONETWOFREESWING!” ...dancing on his toes at a Christmas party...sitting with him at my mother’s funeral...being mad at my dad when he didn’t invite Harry to his and Sylvia’s wedding...missing him, barely glimpsing him at my dad’s funeral. I said, “What happened to you?”

“You poor doll,” Harry said, his voice sounding like he was remembering, too. “Well, a couple of things happened to me. One: your stepmom kind of took a dislike to me. I think because of two: well, let’s just say you could call me Harry *Godmother* as well.”

“Ummm,” I said as he laughed heartily. “Okay,” I mean, how are you supposed to respond to something like that, when you’re seventeen and talking to a grownup (who’s practically a stranger now) and you were raised to be polite? I was not sure what he meant. Fortunately, Harry did all the talking. He started telling me about my mom, and how great she was, and how my voice sounded just like hers. It felt so good to be able to talk with someone about something that felt normal! I had never really even been allowed to mention my mom in this house. *It will just upset your father*, Sylvia had insisted at first; then it became simply another rule to follow. “Harry...,” I just had to ask, “Why haven’t you called me before?”

“Honey, I call maybe once a month,” he answered, “and I have been for years. They keep saying they’ll give you the message. I thought it was *you* not wanting to talk to *me*.” This news stunned me. I had no idea. How many other

family friends were out there, trying to connect with me? I pulled a pair of skinny jeans out of the dryer. Their name: *Guess?*

Just then, the line clicked and I heard an extra-breathy version of Debra's voice. "Is it for me?"

I lifted my voice to sound like Donna's, hoping like heck she'd buy it, so I could continue my conversation. "Nope."

"Well, I'm *expecting* a call," Debra said, dropping her sexy voice and changing to her big-sister show-off voice. "From my *prom* date." She clicked off.

"Prom date?" Harry said. "Oh, my. Are you going?"

I couldn't help but snort. Not that I hadn't thought about going, but for God's sake, what would I wear? It's not like Sylvia would ever take me shopping. I was thinking about sewing two or three of Debra and Donna's old gowns from the Goodwill box together, but when would I find the time for that? Harry listened while I said all this stuff. Of course, I said it like I don't care. Totally a defense mechanism. Then he asked me how I got on with The Girls. I held back a snort, this time, and then took a breath, and rather than going into the scene with the underwear, just told him there was a little sibling rivalry. But now it was his turn to snort.

"OH, you are TOO KIND!"

"Well, I try to be understanding," I said, a little defensively; I really wanted to make a good impression on him. The truth is, I always try to make a good impression

on everyone. I had never, ever, told anyone, at that time, what really went on at home or how I felt about my stepfamily. On the outside, it looked like we all got along just fine. So I said, very thoughtfully, “They’re all right. They just act a little insecure sometimes.” But Harry would have none of it.

“You can’t be serious. Are you defending them?”

“What do you mean?” I asked. I knew what he meant.

“I mean, they are *awful* to you. I know that. I hear what goes on when I call. Sometimes they put the phone down and walk away, and I’m hanging there, helpless to do anything while they pick at you in the background. That’s GOT to get to you darling.”

I didn’t feel comfortable with the way this conversation was going. I would have much preferred to keep talking about my mom. “Well, I try and stay above it,” I explained. I had forgotten: that’s not the kind of person Harry is.

“Girlfriend, NO. Get INTO it! You’ve got a right to your feelings.” I leaned my head against the fogged-up window, focusing on the cold spot on my forehead, and struggled with this idea. No one had ever really said that to me before. Inside, my well-folded stacks of emotions were suddenly feeling like piles of dirty laundry.

“Ashley, give it a try. It doesn’t have to be a big deal. Take two minutes, by the clock. Just get it out, don’t keep it inside! Go ahead and BITCH your heart out.”

*Bitch is a Verb*

I laughed out loud. “Harry! I’m not that kind of girl!”  
Harry laughed, too.

“You know what I mean.”

“I just hate that word. It’s demeaning towards women. But everyone uses it these days. Girls use it to be funny. Even guys use it with each other. Even little kids. Even on TV. And no one seems to mind.” There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Ashley, darling, you’re thinking of it as a noun, see? I’m thinking of it as a verb. Bitch is a verb. To bitch is to complain. That’s all.”

“No one likes a complainer. I should know. I live with three of them.” I chuckled...then realized I’d let my first little bit of bitching out!

Harry, of course, was delighted. “There you go!” I laughed at myself.

“I know it’s hard for you,” he said.

“It is.”

“Your mother taught you not to speak ill of anyone.”

“She did.”

“Your mother, god rest her soul, was a bit of a doormat.”

I gasped. *How could he say that?*

“She *was!* She was the sweetest thing in the world, but your dad was the boss of her!” I had to stop and think about this. There was a rushing sound in my ears.

“Harry, I thought you were her friend.”

“I was the only one she could vent to, I knew her pain!”  
Now I understood. I wanted to ask him a thousand questions. But he said, “so try it, darling. Nothing bad will happen.”

Still thinking about mom, I doubted Harry on this one. I could imagine a lot of bad things happening. Should someone pick up the phone, I would never hear the end of it. Still, I knew I had a lot in common with mom. And if my mother trusted Harry...

“Two minutes,” he promised. “That’s all it takes.”

I took a deep breath and did my best. (I always try to do my best.)

“I always try to do my best,” I said. “It’s not like I don’t want to help. I do, I really do. But sometimes it seems like nothing’s good enough for them.” Instead of more words, a sob came out next. The “sibling rivalry” comment from Sylvia had really gotten to me.

“Okay, honey,” said Harry. “Deep breath. Let it all out.” I focused on his voice and followed his directions. I started with the Spanx incident. Immediately I felt a little better, then started speaking randomly, intellectually, articulately, feeling more like myself.

“So, I guess it’s like this: Sylvia’s expectations are pretty low—she doesn’t think I can do anything, even though I do a lot—but her standards are ridiculously high. Nothing less than perfect even comes close to being okay. She can always find some picayune detail that minimizes the hard work I’ve

done. And The Girls either argue with her, blow her off, or take up her issues. Once Donna even told on me when I was using the wrong mop on the kitchen floor—like she'd ever picked one up, herself.”

“Huh!” Harry was indignant.

“And once—you won't believe this—Debra even made me take care of her Nintendog, this adorable computer program that's supposed to teach you responsibility. Of course, having real responsibilities, I couldn't bother to pick up the stupid toy every half hour, and the puppy with the big eyes destroyed some furniture, or left a pool of virtual pee, or starved to death, whatever, who cares, it's not real. But Debra told Sylvia on me and of course Sylvia came down on me for having broken my commitment. What a hypocrite. She never does what she says she's going to do, at least not if it's something for me.”

Harry was a great listener. He just kept asking for more. I let it all out! I told him what slobes they were, how I was constantly picking up after them, how they were always losing things and asking me where they were. As I talked, the cold fear in my stomach turned to warmth, and the easier it was to say more. The words tumbled out with enthusiasm, surprising me with their ease. I enumerated my chores in great detail and with time frames: laundry, cleaning, cooking. I gave half a dozen more examples of how incapable the three of them were of change, even with simple things like toilet-paper, lightbulbs, and kitty litter,

and how cooperation was not in their vocabulary. I felt absolutely purified by the words rushing out of my mouth, and scrubbed my memories harder, emptying out every corner of frustration I could find. The half-eaten candy bars. The sticky floors. The gum wrappers “hidden” in couch cushions. The hair in every drain. The effing (effing, I have come to like that word; I think of it as a short version of “*effectively emphasizing*” ...) lost keys, lipstick lids, stockings, earring backs, and sometimes homework. Styrofoam cups with teeth marks. Effing everywhere. And on top of the work they made for me: the snide comments.

“Lord,” Harry said, truly sympathetic, when he could finally find a break in my stream of words. “How do you keep going, Ashley?”

I took a deep breath and thought about that question; the answer came to me readily, since I always worked to cultivate a very careful focus on the future, my present being what it was. I was just a year away from turning eighteen, and had sent in college and university applications to no avail, though I kind of had my heart set on Castleton, where my parents had met. “I have dreams,” I said, somewhat dramatically, “but I’m not just a dreamer; I’m determined.” And so I was. I stayed up late to finish every assignment and get extra credit, and if I’d been able to spend a little more time at school, I could probably have been Valedictorian. Harry asked if Sylvia noticed or cared, and I got a chance to snort again. “She bought a cake once when Debra managed



to get an ‘A ’” I said. “Donna was so jealous. And oh by the way, it was an ‘A-minus.’”

## *Vintage Silk Taffeta*

I finally confessed to Harry my darkest thoughts from my darkest hours, when I’d go to bed exhausted, fingering the frayed satin hem of the grass-green wool blanket that had gone with my family on every camping trip I could remember; it still had that old-tent smell, which made me think of dirt and gas stoves and the back of a car—and I’d escape to those places in my mind. I’d imagine the Hills when I was gone, eating cold, dry cereal out of dirty dishes for breakfast in their wrinkled, stained, cashmere track suits. I’d imagine Donna saying she missed me, then Sylvia would start blaming me for how dirty things had gotten.

“What! A! Bitch!” Harry said. I didn’t know if he was talking about Sylvia, or me for thinking that, or impressed with my incredibly cathartic rant. Either way, we both started laughing hysterically. I had to wipe my face. My eyes were leaking all over the laundry.

(But for the record, I am still a nice lady who doesn’t like to hear that word used about women who don’t deserve it.)

Sylvia must have figured out I was talking on the phone. I could hear alarm in her voice when she called down the stairway, “What are you doing down there? I need my girdle by five!”

“Speaking of bitches....” Harry kept laughing.

“Yes, Sylvia,” I called politely, resting my hand lightly over the receiver. Then I whispered to Harry. “Ironing a girdle! How pathetic is that?”

“Oh, right! You’re in the laundry room!”

“Yes, did I mention that?”

“Absolute perfection.” And then a long silence.

In the silence, I remember a fleeting sensation of gripping desperation. Was Sylvia coming? If I had to hang up the phone right now, I could lose this connection, which I now knew I *had* to keep. It was like having my mom or dad, silently, on the line. “Harry,” the scared child part of myself cried out, my voice louder than I intended.

“I’m still here, honey. Not going anywhere, no way. Just thinking. And I know you don’t have much time. So go slide open that closet where the water heater lives, and look way up on that shelf above it, and tell me what you see.”

I had worked in that room every afternoon for four years, now. I must have cleaned it, reorganized it, five or ten times. But I had never looked inside that big box on the top shelf. It was old, from the fancy, old-fashioned department store downtown, with big loopy letters on it, “Grimm’s;” tied with a faded red ribbon. I blew a little dust off the top. “An old Grimm’s box,” I said.

“Oh! Thank heavens it’s still there!”

“What is this?” I had to hunch up my shoulder to hold the phone on my ear while I eagerly untied the old bow. Inside, under some tissue paper, was vintage silk taffeta with

a beautiful pattern: dark purple and blue flowers outlined in black against a background of glossy green leaves. The inside of each flower was bedazzled by a few tiny glass rhinestones in three colors: green, yellow, and black. I lifted the gown by the wide, angled, velvet straps, and a voluminous skirt blossomed into life as it came free of the box. “Oh, my God,” I breathed. I suddenly realized what I was holding: my mother’s prom dress! “I’ve seen this in a photo, Harry!” I couldn’t believe Sylvia had somehow missed it.

“And now you’ve got a gown,” he said. I opened my mouth to say thank you and no, I don’t think so, but instead sputtered and stuttered instead like one of those antique cars starting up. He didn’t notice. I could hear him, on the other end, getting all gushy on me. “Prom night... here you come!”

“But Harry,” I protested, “I can’t go, honest.” He couldn’t possibly understand.

“Please don’t tell me you have too much work to do.”

“Well, obviously I do, but...”

“After that epic bitch session?”

“Doesn’t change the fact of finals,” I said, “and it doesn’t change the fact that...” How could I say this? I struggled for a moment, then finally got my real reason from my brain to my mouth. I said, flatly, “I can’t go. I don’t have shoes.”

“Oh, that can’t be too hard,” he said. But Harry had never seen my feet. How could I explain? I had to try.

“Yes, it could be that hard,” I insisted. “You missed my big growth spurt between fifteen and sixteen.”

“Oh?”

“It took place entirely below the ankles.”

Now, I know what you’re thinking: *No foot in the kingdom could fit in Cinderella’s tiny glass slipper*. I know in the legend the thing that truly sets Cinderella apart, in the end, from all the other women, was the fact that her feet were so dainty and unique. Like her, I am different because of my feet, but in the opposite way. The only thing dainty about my feet is the nail on my baby toe.

My feet started growing a few months before Dad and Sylvia got married. Sylvia had ordered satin shoes for Debra, Donna and I, dyed to match our bridesmaids dresses, but the morning of the wedding, they no longer fit. The Girls convinced me to wear them anyway. I toughed it out on the ride to the church and the walk up the aisle, but the pain of standing through the ceremony was so blinding I passed out. Which caused waaay too much attention to be focused on me, and embarrassed all of us but my dad, who was cool about it. I completed the ceremony barefoot, but couldn’t go into the restaurant for the reception. No shirt, no shoes, no service. Dad gave me some money to go to the drug store and buy some flip flops. Sylvia has never forgiven me.

Over the next few months, those really busy months of The Girls moving in and Sylvia redecorating, my feet kept

growing. I burned out on shoe shopping because it filled me with self-loathing. Years later, I would adopt the habit of wearing my pants too long, with really high heels, so my footprint would appear smaller, but at that time I gave up wearing shoes, period, and started wearing flip-flops exclusively. My feet were flat, calloused, and always exposed. Debra took pity on me once and gave me some of her old nail polish, so that helped a little. But by sixteen I was a size thirteen. Standing sideways, I looked like a capital 'L.' Kids at school called me Bigfoot, behind my back of course, but I heard them. Sylvia kindly called a plastic surgeon to see if I could have a foot reduction. (Not without having my toes removed.) Later on, in college, Nevada and Linda would lovingly say *no girl in town could fill my shoes*, but I would always tell them they were wrong; any girl in town could fill them. With hot water. And bathe in them.

A few months after my dad died, I noticed some of his clothes in the Goodwill box, which typically sat by the door until it overflowed or until I loaded it in Sylvia's SUV and borrowed the keys to make a run. Underneath the suits and pinstriped shirts, which still smelled like him and made me want to cry, and next to the plaid mohair sweater, which I kept of course, were two pairs of shoes: some scuffed black wingtips, and a pair of white tennis shoes, never worn. I was hauling the box out when I thought to check the size. Men's eleven. I tried the tennies on...and they fit.

So when I told Harry I had nothing but my dad's old sneakers to wear, he was speechless, for a minute. Partly, I'm sure, the way all people are when they see my face, and get to know me, and then one day happen to glance down at my structural support system. And partly, he told me later, because he was thinking about when he and my dad went out to get running shoes together, vowing to start being healthier. But then they never ran in them. "Those *Just Do It* ads," he explained, "always made me feel guilty I couldn't just do it."

Just at that moment, Sylvia started calling down the hallway again. I was sure she knew I was on the phone. I heard the creak of the stairs; she was coming. Just at that moment, I smelled scorched polyester; I turned my head to see the iron sitting where I'd left it when I had turned to the closet to find the dress. I righted the iron and shoved the dress in the closet and closed the door while whispering a quick good-bye to Harry. Before he hung up, Harry said three magic words that changed something inside me. It had been years since I had heard them.

He said, "I love you." *A Capital "L"*

I quickly folded the smooth parts of the girdle over the scorched parts, and opened the laundry room door just as Sylvia reached the bottom of the stairs. "Oh," I said, feigning surprise. "I was just going to bring you this." Sylvia was dressed up to go out, wearing a very low-cut Chanel blouse,