

ECHOES BETWEEN US

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SAWYER



Top five things I need to tell my mom, but I'd rather cut off my leg with a dull butter knife than say aloud:

1. She loves that I'm a swimmer more than I do. In fact, she loves most of my life more than I do. But she should, as she's orchestrated most of it.
2. I didn't break my arm by slipping on the deck of the pool at the YMCA like I told her, but instead by doing something stupid.
3. Even though I know what I do is the definition of insanity, I can't stop.
4. No, I'm not happy my cast comes off tomorrow as that cast is the only thing that's kept me from being stupid again.
5. My dad's current girlfriend is pregnant with their first child, and that's the reason I haven't talked to or visited

my father since the beginning of summer. He can hardly handle playing “dad” to us, so why have another?

Did I write any of that in my senior journal? Hell no. Our English teacher must live under a delusions-of-grandeur rock to think there’s a single one of us who would share our deepest and most intimate thoughts in our Daily Top Five Forced (my addition) summer assignment.

I’m forty entries behind, and I have until six this evening to finish before turning the journal of doom in to my teacher at orientation. I’m aware it’s not a good way to start the year.

In the driver’s-side mirror of the U-Haul, I watch as my little sister runs in circles around my mother. Lucy’s shrieking at the top of her lungs because she saw a bee. Her mess of black curls trails behind her like a billowing cape and her high-pitched scream mingles with my mother’s frustrated pleas. Not sure how holding her coffee with two hands above her head helps a six-year-old in full panic mode, but Mom has an obsession with her morning coffee that wins over Lucy’s fears.

Mom finally sets the cup on the porch then tries to contain my sister. For every half-hearted slip of my mother’s arm around Lucy’s waist, my sister zags. It’s like catching air. From the way Mom moves as if stuck in wet cement, I can tell she’s exhausted. Not sure if it’s a didn’t-sleep-well exhausted or I’m-a-single-mom-in-my-late-forties-with-a-demanding-full-time-job exhausted or just tired that it’s nine in the morning and being responsible sucks.

Six years ago, my parents filed for divorce the day after Lucy’s birth, and Mom and Dad gave me the choice of who I wanted to live with. My father had taken me out for dinner, put his hand on my shoulder and said, *Your mom needs you. She doesn’t like to be alone, plus she’s going to be overwhelmed with Lucy. Your mom will need an extra pair of hands and your little sister will need a permanent, loving big brother. I need you to be the man of the house now. I need you to take care of them.*

Decision made. Plus, considering Dad spent a total of ten min-

utes a night at home with me when they were married because he preferred work over us, choosing Mom didn't feel like much of a sacrifice.

A car honks and I try not to be annoyed by the sound. I'm blocking the end of the street lined by one-hundred-year-old towering oaks that bend as if the weather is too hot even for them. As far as I'm concerned, whoever it is can keep honking because I'm not moving until Lucy's safe. Besides, the house is the end of the road, the last of the neighborhood. Whoever it is can back it up since there is no more forward.

I roll down the window, and the August heat hits me like a jackhammer. I lean my head out and call, "Lucy."

My sister freezes in place and her big dark eyes blink as she slowly swivels her head in my direction.

"Hop in and I'll give you a ride."

Lucy squeals again, but this time in delight. In her favorite fluffy pink skirt and sequined unicorn shirt Mom bought her on their latest shopping spree, my sister races up the driveway toward me. I open the door, hop out and offer the car waiting on me an *I'm sorry* lift of my hand. The older man in the four-door Cadillac that's as big as a boat shakes his head as if pissed and decides to back into a driveway and head in the opposite direction.

With complete abandon, my little sister jumps into my waiting arms, and I place her into the truck. Lucy scrambles to the other side of the bench seat, and I close the door behind me. Even though we're only going a couple feet backward, I click her seat belt into place then put my hands on the wheel.

"Sawyer, you need your seat belt." Her innocent expression forces me to put it on.

Lucy can be Jiminy Cricket on crack, and most days, I need the additional conscience. I place the U-Haul into reverse, and the motor rumbles as I gently tap the gas. Seventeen isn't old enough to drive a U-Haul, but being a pharmaceutical representative, Mom has a way of talking until people listen.

My son is a doll. She dropped her million-dollar grin and fluttered her hand in the air when the guy at the U-Haul counter protested the idea of me driving. *Perfect to a T. He's going to win Olympic gold someday. You should see how good of a swimmer he is.*

Mom waves me back, in theory guiding me, but I don't watch her. I trust the mirrors instead. There's not a ton in the truck. Most of our possessions are in storage as we wait for our newest house to be built. It should have been done by now, but the contractor is late, the house we had been living in has been sold and now we're in short-lease-apartment purgatory.

Bright-eyed and grinning like I took her to the gates of Disney World, Lucy opens her door the moment I place the truck into park and jumps out. She senses adventure while I sense a train wreck. Mom has that grin that suggests she has something bad to tell me, but is intent to sell me the impending trauma as something good.

While you were at summer camp, I accidentally forgot to feed your hamster, but wouldn't you prefer a turtle?

I dropped the leftover spaghetti dishes on your eighth-grade graduation suit you had laid out near the table, but wouldn't you rather skip the ceremony and spend the evening with me?

Lucy has the stomach flu and I have a huge meeting with clients, and if you stay home with her you don't have to take that reading test.

I'm slow leaving the truck and slower still as I cross the high grass of the front yard to join Mom on the crumbling front walk.

"You know, most people consider it a privilege to live on Cedar Avenue," Mom says. "The houses have been in families for generations. Aren't they gorgeous?"

I glance around, not really understanding the draw. It's a house. Not a waterfall.

The other towering homes on this street have manicured lawns that suggest the laser-sharp precision of a gardener. But this particular home is overgrown with bushes and wild roses that look like they haven't seen a sharp pair of shears in years.

Mom grew up in this small town. Until I was eleven, I lived in

Louisville. It was weird being a transplant at first, but I've learned to fit in.

Removing an elastic band from her wrist, Mom draws her done-by-a-master-stylist blond hair on top of her head into a bun. What Mom does for a living relies heavily on appearances. Her acrylic nails are always perfection, her makeup on point, her body the result of a daily onslaught of forty-five minutes on the treadmill then another thirty minutes of P90X.

Her black yoga pants and tennis shoes are a testament that she meant what she's said and she's going to pitch in and work. Sweat beads on her forehead and she brushes it away with the back of her hand as she looks at the monstrosity of a house in front of us.

In typical Mom fashion to save time, she signed a lease without a walk-through. "The house seemed cheerier in the photos."

"So do psychopaths."

The yellow house is three stories, was probably built in the eighteenth hundreds and has a turret. The color alone should be inviting, but there's something dark about the house. Like the glass in the windows is a bit too thick, the air surrounding us too heavy, a pressure building that we aren't welcomed.

It doesn't help that the house sits at the bottom of a steep, looming knob and near the top of that huge hill is an aging, abandoned TB hospital that everyone in town knows is full of ghosts and demons, and it's where devil worshipers perform their ceremonies.

"Try being positive." Mom pushes my shoulder, but I don't budge.

"I'm positive psychopaths look cheerier in photos than they do in real life." A side-eye from Mom, and the hurt on her face causes a pinch of guilt. It's up to me to keep her going when things are hard.

I wink at her to take away the sting of my words. "You did good finding us a place."

Mom loves a compliment, and she accordingly glows. "I did *well*." She emphasizes the last word, a reminder she would like me to focus on my worst subject. There are subjects people get and subjects people don't. Math, I love. English is a constant struggle.

“We have the entire first floor and three bedrooms,” Mom continues. “One for you, one for Lucy and one for me. There’s a full kitchen and the appliances come with it. We can use the washer and dryer in the basement, we only pay half the utilities, and considering how much houses cost on this street, our rent is practically free. The best news is that we’re only here until December.”

When the contractor promised our house would be done.

“Did you tell your father about the move?” Mom’s light tone is now forced. After all these years, the mere mention of Dad still causes her to flinch.

“Yeah.” I’d begrudgingly sent him a text, but only to get Mom off my back about it.

“What did he say?” She puts on her designer sunglasses that are too big for her face.

There’s no answer that will make her feel better. “Nothing much.” And it’s the truth. Mom glances over at my sister who’s playing with a stick under the shade of the tree.

Where Lucy looks like Dad, with black hair and fair skin, I favor Mom. Our skin has a natural, year-round tan and our eyes are the same baby blue. My hair, though, is the original sandy-blond instead of her salon-bought platinum.

I’m tall, close to six feet and so is Mom. She was a volleyball player in high school and college. No volleyball for me, I’m a swimmer like Dad. A good one, too. If I can keep up my grades, my coach is convinced I’m on track for a state title.

“Are you sure you should be handling all these boxes with your arm?” Mom asks. It’s the hundredth time she’s asked this question in the past two weeks.

“The doctor went a week over to be safe, so I’m good.”

“You’re such a great kid. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Our landlord and his daughter live on the second and third floors, but they won’t disturb us. They have their own entrance. I think the daughter goes to school with you.”

My head snaps up as this is the first time I've heard this part. "Who?"

Mom waggles her eyebrows. "Why? Thinking of having some late-night trysts?"

No. I don't like the idea of anyone from school having a bird's-eye view of my life, but saying that to Mom will only make her fish for an explanation. Mom laughs as she takes my noncommittal silence as an affirmative. She's always on the search for me to be her version of normal.

"Hannah helped me find this place. She said that Sylvia said that the girl who lives here isn't someone you all associate with." Hannah's a Realtor and one of Mom's best friends, and Sylvia is Hannah's daughter. Besides Miguel, Sylvia's one of my closest friends.

"Hannah also said that the man who owns the house is super nice. He travels a lot for his job, but is fantastic to his tenants."

"If Hannah said it, then it must be true," I mumble. Because of her job, Hannah knows more about most people than should be allowed, and happily dumps all the personal info she learns about her clients by the first round of drinks.

Mom ignores my comment, which is probably better for both of us. "By the way, I told Sylvia you'd invite her over to see the place once we unpack the boxes. Maybe you should take her out to dinner when you bring her over. Maybe a movie, too. I'll pay."

"Like a date?" I overly raise my brows in the hopes Mom might think before she speaks.

"Sylvia is a nice girl, and she thinks the world of you. Maybe you two could be more than friends."

"She prefers girls."

With a sigh, Mom drops the subject. "Ready to head in?"

Not really. "Sure."

Mom calls Lucy, and she races up the steps of the porch that need to be sanded down and stained. A few pushes into the electronic key lock and we're past the first door and into the foyer. We walk

past the flowing staircase to another door with another electronic key lock. Mom has to check her texts to unlock this one and when she opens it, it's like the house exhales, and not in a good way.

The air is stale, the inside dark and when we walk in, I swear it's somehow darker. Lucy grabs on to my hand with both of hers and hides behind me. I turn on the ancient light switch with a loud *thwack* and a single overhead lightbulb flickers to life. The room has a dull haze now, like a slasher movie, and I'm betting Mom wishes she had done that walk-through.

"We need to open some windows," Mom says, but there aren't any windows in the living room as the bedrooms, kitchen and bathroom line the walls. "Lucy, come with me and we'll start in the kitchen. Sawyer, check out the bedrooms for us."

Translation—your sister and I are heading to the room with an exit while you check the bedrooms to see if there's a serial killer in the wings. I agree because I take care of my mom and sister, protect them, that's my job.

I inspect the right part of the house first. The area on the other side of the stairway is walled in. That area contains a bathroom and a big bedroom, which I assume will be Mom's. I re-enter the living room and check the small room running along the left side of the house. Maybe it was meant to be an in-home office. I then enter the bedroom with the turret and a circular window seat—something Lucy will love.

Even though the shades are drawn, rays of light peek through and highlight the copious dust particles in the air. I narrow my eyes at the rectangular-shaped object on the cushion of the window seat. I'm slow as I walk farther into the room, glancing multiple times over my shoulder as it feels as if there's someone else in here, someone staring at me.

I pick up the stack of stapled papers on the seat, flip through it, and it's nothing more than something that's been printed out, but it's wrinkled as if it's been well read.

DIARY of EVELYN BELLAK

1918

"To Evelyn from Maily. A Merry Xmas & a Scrumptious New Yr."

"What's that?" Mom says from the doorway.

"Something left behind." I roll the paper into a tube, place it in my back pocket and open the shades. Bright, cheerful light pours into the room. "Hey, Lucy. What do you think of this room?"

She runs in, straight for the window seat, and the heaviness in my chest lessens at the sight of her smile.

"There are a few stipulations for living here," Mom says. My stomach sinks as this is what I'm used to, the kick following the good. She walks backward into the living room, and from the look on her face whatever it is she has to tell me isn't news she wants Lucy to hear.

I join her in the black heart of the building and cross my arms. "What?"

"We can only use the washer and dryer when the landlord isn't, and we aren't allowed to pester them. Not even if something goes wrong with the apartment. We have to call—never knock. The only exception is when we pay rent. We're to hand it to them personally, and we can't be late. And we have to do the yard work, but all the equipment we need is in the garage around back."

Which means I'll be doing yard work, but if that's the worst, I can live with it. "That's doable. Anything else?"

"Just one thing, and it's not a big deal. Small, really."

"What?"

"The house is haunted," Mom rushes out, then smiles at me. "So let's unpack."