Great Expectations

I put my arm around my mother's shoulder as she read the divorce papers. There were documents full of information regarding the legal matters of how the property would be split, with a note from my father attached to the letter.

"This has been coming for a long time. I love you, but we can't live together when there is so much pain between us. This is the best decision for both of us."

"Pain between us" Mom said mockingly under her breath, as if their relationship had equated an equal amount of hurt distributed between them. It was just absurd. Her face was that of a defeated soldier, having fought all her life to cling on to this marriage, holding onto the slightest chance that my father would feel some regret, and actually start caring for our family instead of running away as soon as conflict broke out. I thought that I would feel some kind of relief since after all, I had watched my mom suffer in this marriage my whole life. But instead, I got this pressing feeling, as if my mom's life had fast forwarded too far ahead, reaching a point at which neither she nor I was ready for change. I had always imagined that after graduating from university I would be able to help mom out of her marriage, while also guiding her through the process of getting a job, since she hadn't had one in 20 years, and she would need one not only for earning money but also for boosting her self confidence. And I was certainly not at that point where I could balance both studies and help mom change her life, since I was just beginning mine.

"We have to sell the house. I can't stand living in the same city as him." my mom said as if she could just make her wish come true by an instant. But we both knew it wasn't a simple issue of moving. She had to have a purpose before moving.

She waited in silence for me to answer her with something reassuring, which I

couldn't. I felt as if nothing I'd say would give her comfort. I realised later in my life that she had undiagnosed depression for a long time, so when it came to her worse episodes, as the one she had at that moment, I did not know how to go about these conversations. If I told her something to sound hopeful she would accuse me of lying, and tell me that there was little hope, "If you find a job then maybe you can make some friends there. Surely people aren't that cruel that'd they would judge you for entering the job market again after all these years."

She would dismiss my ideas and hopes for a better future.

"Don't you get it? Nobody wants to be friends with a 54 year old who hasn't achieved anything in life for herself. With someone who is a total fuck-up."

But if I was quiet with her, she would complain about me not saying anything. But this time both of us sat in indefinite silence, not saying a word to each other, until mom broke it, "I'll make some coffee for us." We did not properly talk it through, but instead escaped, as we so often did. Not bearing to face our troubles but instead choosing to wait till the problem was big enough. For how could one bring forth change if one had not experienced it? We were the masters of our fate, although neither me or my mom seemed to realise it. We were both distracting ourselves from reality. That way we somehow controlled how we were feeling.

Mom would stay up late every night after the pressing news of the divorce. She suffered from insomnia before but it worsened after dads announcement. This led to her watching crime shows on tv till she could get the slightest of sleep. Her favourites being NCIS and Law and Order which both aired after twelve PM. She always woke up early night after night, which meant she got the bare minimum amount of sleep for someone her age. No sleep, no job and a husband that abandoned her were all factors that kept her worried and in thought till the late hours of the night. And even before my dad asked for a divorce she had

repeated this self-deprecating lifestyle, worsening over time, seeing her slowly rot.

But she still had her routine. Her days consisted of waking up earlier than she wanted, in order to wake me for school. We'd have breakfast together on the dark nordic mornings, fully engulfed in dreary blue outside us, with nothing visible except the light from our neighbors' kitchens. She made me the same sandwich every morning, with certain elements tweaked every other month. But there would always be two pieces of oat-bread, with one piece of ham and two slices of cheese on each. Together with a cup of newly brewed coffee and a glass of orange juice, with pulp might I add, never without. And since we lived on the outskirts of the city where my school was located, separated by long stretches of oat-fields, mom would offer to drive me there every morning instead of taking the bus, which I seldom refused. It served her purpose as she did not have a job to go to, and she would often take the opportunity to get groceries after she had dropped me off to prolong that sense of duty. She saw driving as the only freedom she had left. Going around town she'd often just drive past the neighborhood, or choose to shop at far off stores so that she could distract herself with the rules of the street, making sure she turned left in a perfect square formation and parking right between the lines. I knew that the other reason for her excursions to stores and places further away from town was to not be noticed by anyone she knew. She had been a hermit for so long that she was ashamed to be seen, thinking that people talked behind her back, or would see her as an outcast, and a freak because of the way she looked. All of this was a part of her own mind playing tricks on her. She looked about the same as any mother I knew the same age as her. But my dad indirectly made her feel unappreciated and ugly. He'd compliment her not out of love but as a way to get out of a fight with my mother. Mom once said "I feel ugly, I feel gross, and not even my own husband wants me!" in which my dad lazily replied with "You're the most beautiful woman in the world. There's nobody I'd rather want than you."

Mom heard the insincerity in his voice, not believing what he said in the slightest which made her feel all the more betrayed by the man she had married, and therefore stopped being seen with at different events.

She used to make regular appearances with my dad at school concerts and class meetings. She used to help me bake for my classmates, or talked with the teachers at the monthly parents gathering to either listen to my improvements in school or defend me against a classmate who had bullied me. My friends had met my mom and she used to talk to their parents and get along just fine. Although she admitted to never really liking any of them. She thought most of them were rednecks who pretended to be more posh than they actually were, usually bragging about a boat they just bought or going on a trip nobody but themselves would be interested in. She'd say, "Nobody is sincere here, it's either eat or get eaten. To live here is a battle of survival, and that is a battle I can't fight. Not with a dad like yours."

It was that kind of small town-syndrome where everyone knew each other, and as soon as some rumor got revealed the whole town would know about it soon after. And of all people, my mom hated that aspect the most, because she knew what it meant. That they would find out about her and dad's rocky relationship and it would have spread like wildfire in the rest of the town, leading to humiliation in my Mom's mind, fearing that I would be treated worse if my friend's parents would find out about my familial issues. She tried to cover it up as much as possible. But it would not be that hard to spot. Her secrecy led me to become more reserved, leading to me inviting fewer and fewer friends to our home. All that and the fact that my mom soon would stop to attend class-meetings and concerts I was a part of, only worsened my confidence, and made my mom more scared of showing her face outside the house, fearing that the community would judge or misunderstand her if she were to reveal herself to the world. She still wanted to uphold the illusion for the other parents that

she did have a job, and that her relationship with my dad was just fine.

In fifth grade I had a hard time holding onto the facade, and while on a bus ride with my neighbour Nils one day, I'd feel as though I was about to pop and release everything that had happened at home. I wanted to tell him so bad. But mom's words would pop into my mind: "You can't tell people about our situation, they wouldn't understand." So I kept my mouth shut, and locked away my feelings again.

Dad left home long before sending the divorce papers to Mom. It started off as him living somewhere else for a couple days, presumably at his mom's house, and later coming back to either bring groceries or pay some bill. I didn't mind him leaving as much as my mom did. For me it was some peace and quiet, since they otherwise fought all the time which would keep me up at night. But for my mom it meant something far worse. It signaled to her that he was ready to soon abandon us completely, and that scared her to death. Living in false hope, she had wished he would change for the better and maybe one day help her get back on her feet. She thought this way not by choice, but due to desperation. After such a long break from all types of social life, she had lost contact with friends and with the job market. She had become afraid of the ever changing world outside, and to her, the only way out she thought was through dad, because she did not want to be a lone adult in a family of three children. But her self doubt and shame stopped her from reaching out to other people her age.

Mom didn't have the desire to properly talk about her future after the divorce went through. Whenever I brought up the subject she would turn around to her newspaper and sigh, making up excuses like, "There's nothing out there for me anyways. I'm old and unwanted." and "my degree is too outdated, the rules have changed all too much, I couldn't keep up." She

always had something to concur, but never did she say she had abandoned all hope completely. She wanted to be a part of society again, but she just couldn't see a way to get back without having to degrade herself to a job that she never wanted.

Thankfully there were options.

"I have a friend whose mom went through a similar problem. She hadn't worked for 10 years but she had gotten a job as a nurse for elderly people. She earned well enough to get by and even managed to move into an apartment closer to the city center as well." I said. Mom however, wasn't as keen on the idea. "A nursing home for people in a position in which I will eventually be anyways? I can't do that, I am already in a miserable position, I do not want to dig myself deeper in it." I found myself baffled by this way of thinking, saying "Well there aren't that many options. You can't spend a lot of time getting a new degree and somebody your age that's been jobless for so long will have a hard time on the market. Better to take the chance while you have it than not trying at all, right? And who knows! It might not be as bad as you think." I could tell that mom did not feel reassured with the answer, but it was either that or wait till I got super-rich and would be able to afford her an apartment next to mine, but the latter option was too fictional at that moment. With Mom having little time, she agreed that it'd be the more practical option. "As long as I do not have to do it forever I guess I can try. I just don't want to work in this city, I'd like to move first and then find a job closer to you, where nobody will know me." And so she sent a late application for a nursing course, that'd start in autumn of that year.

Dad had been a very disassociated man the past 10 years. He would mostly be in his own world as the world around him passed by, lost in thought, nobody ever knowing what was actually going on inside his head. You would notice this by the way he started picking his

nose, thinking that no one noticed, even though he was surrounded by people. Quite gross, but it was better than him sitting with his face in his palms, dissociating from my mother being upset. Mom would compare him to the three wise monkeys, covering their ears, eyes and mouth with their hands. A culturally appropriate likeness, since my dad wasn't wise or trying to prevent evil from spewing out of him. But she would rather use the comparison to demonstrate how he would hide himself from responsibility, by pretending not to see the harm he caused, nor converse to make the relationship better, and neither listening to my mothers plea for help. He used all of these tactics to slowly get away from the battle, choosing to ignore any chance of redemption, hoping that mom would be the one to change. He thought that mom should have changed, and that he was the victim in the story, even though he had cheated on her and lied about it for several years. Her trust for him had been swaying ever since.

When I was a kid, I always felt bad for him, not understanding at the time what he had done wrong. I wanted a dad more than anything, so I tried to show kindness to him when I could. On one of his birthdays mom did not get him a present due to him being more unresponsive than usual. He was sad that he did not get a birthday-celebration during the whole day from mom. Being 10 at the time I was quite impressionable, and seeing my mom act in a way that I thought of as cruel, disturbed me. "I would get really sad if nobody celebrated my birthday," I thought. And thinking that mom would disapprove of me for giving dad a present in front of her, I went into my room after dinner. There I tried to put together a gift with limited options on what to give. So I grabbed some things I thought would be useful for someone working in an office like my dad did. I grabbed a pencil and an eraser from my desk, and wrapped them around in paper. It was a very shabby looking gift but it

was the only thing my kid-self could make. I waited for dad to enter the basement so that mom wouldn't see us, and walked up to him with my gift tightly wrapped in paper and tape.

"I know it's your birthday dad, so I got you a gift."

"Thank you son, I'm sure I'll use it." He said as he gave a flat smile, and then patted me on the head. The memory of that interaction fills me with melancholy, as I gave him the gift out of pity, and not out of a son's love for his father. I felt as I was granting a bullied child a chance when no one else would. Our relationship was nonexistent, and instead of this being a sweet moment between parent and child, it turned into a child showing kindness to another child. One that was stuck in a circle asking himself "why me?" instead of trying to realise what he himself was doing. He could only see out of his eyes and not my moms, nor mine.

Summer began to creep up, and the wood anemone had started to bloom. Midsummer celebration was around the corner and it was time to collect flowers in preparation. Our red-bricked house was surrounded on every side by neighbouring houses except for the front. There was a dense forest, with only one three meter wide gravel-road going through it, leading to the upper neighbourhoods. Along that road, we would go and collect flowers. Mom would dress in a pink dress, covered in a pattern of small cherry-blossoms, fitted with a string-belt around her waist. She was so beautiful. The sun shone right though her blond shoulder length hair, making her look as the incarnation of mother nature, while holding her flower bouquet, in the midst of the tall oak-forest.

"These flowers aren't ready to bloom yet." She said as she observed the bluebell-field in front of her.

"Won't they continue to grow if we put them in a vase with water?"

"I don't think so. These flowers need to be in their own environment in order to grow.

If we remove them now they won't make it overnight."

Mom used to say that the root for all evil in the world stems from money. That good people turn bad as soon as more is earned than needed. In her case I never saw her being corrupted by that greed she so often warned about. But she had grown up in that environment. She was raised in a rich household together with an older sister and a younger brother. Her dad owned a furniture factory and her mom was a high school teacher. "It was an easier time," she said, "back then I had a carefree life in which everything went well. We were the richest family in town which made the townsfolk respect our name. But after your grandpa's company went bankrupt and I moved out of my hometown to study far away, our family grew further apart. Grandpa became depressed, and he was not able to be that safety net I once had. It wasn't until I met your father that I started to feel safe again, like I did not have to be alone in this ruthless world. But I was wrong about him. Gosh was I wrong."

That rich lifestyle she once had she credited my grandpa for. The patriarch had become too important of a figure in her life for her to determine her own individuality. It had a downspiraling effect on her, one which gave her the idea that a man by her side was the solution to all her problems. By law, dad was supposed to share some of his salary with mom as she was later unemployed. But as he slowly started giving less as he earned more, she was right under the boot of the same system that once served her.

After a few months of studying, mom had entered the practical weeks of her education. She was away for five days a week working 9-5 at a nursing home in the middle of the city. At that time my sister had come back home to stay with us for a while and so it was the two of us at home while mom worked. It was a nice change of pace, although strange. We had never had a mother who worked before, at least not outside of the house. It was a whole

new world for us to be in the house by ourselves while mom had a “job” so to say. We were trying to get used to the idea, but even more so did mom. To suddenly start working again after a 20-year hiatus took a toll on her. Especially in such an environment filled with mental challenges, having to deal with sick and/or dying patients. She’d come home every day exhausted, with me and my sister usually preparing dinner, usually some pasta dish or frozen food thrown into the oven. She would share stories about her work days, although almost always in a negative light.

“I had an awful colleague today at work. Such a despicable woman.” She’d start

“What did she do mom?” There was a terribly long pause before she would sigh, and then explain, “Her whole character was just terrible. Every time I tried talking to her she would assert herself as superior, bragging about how little she cared for the patients, ridiculing and treating them like children.”

“That woman does not seem right in the head, Mom. Is there at least one sane person?” I told her in a monotone voice, hoping she’d realise that I was sick of hearing only the bad, and nothing of the good.

“None.” She'd answer coldly. “None of them. Swear to me that you never put me in place like that. If I get ill, you kids take me to Switzerland. I’ve heard that lethal injection is legal there.”

An uncomfortable silence would fill the room after she said that. I never knew what to answer when she would talk about her death. I did not want to say the wrong thing, but I also did not know what was the right thing to say. So I would look towards my sister, see if she had any answer. And she did. “Why do you say something like that? Don’t you understand that we get hurt when you talk of such horrible things? We do not want to think about you dying, we need to focus on you finishing your studies, and on you moving down south, to

where we are.” Mom would feel guilty upon hearing my sister say this, but instead of properly discussing the problem and then moving on from it, she’d say: “I am sorry, I am a bad mother, I shouldn't say stuff like that.” Which made us only feel worse. She played around with the idea of her potential death to us, as if she was blind to the fact that we got hurt by it. In her own pain she was unable to see the pain she caused others. We were only trying to help, we did not want our mother to die. So me and my sister refrained from mentioning her practice, intending on avoiding the depressing conversations that mom would eventually bring upon us if we ever reminded her of it. My sister would most often cry by herself, feeling as though she did nothing right, although she helped our mom a ton. I, on the other hand, would get frustrated. I would contain the anger that I had against mom for always seeing, and clinging on to the worst part of humanity, of her life. I thought of her as selfish for blindly thinking about herself when saying such hurtful things around me and my sister. She never knew the extent of the pain that her words had over us. Mothers can say the most hurtful things imaginable while still carrying so much love inside of them. And for an unemployed, depressed mother, that statement carried a much heavier weight.

There would be a pause in the fighting. Long stretches where my father would live at grandma's house which led to me and mom having the house for ourselves. We had peaceful moments together. Times where we could focus more on each other, instead of mom focusing on dad. After dad started disappearing, me and mom followed a tradition every Saturday. It was called “The Melody Crossword” and would air at 9 am on the radio. A narrator-voice would ask music related questions which you would write down the answer in the crossword section of the day's newspaper. Mom would make a special breakfast for those days, serving buttered toast with ham, a boiled egg and a fresh cup of coffee. And we would sit there for an

hour, figuring out the riddles and names of songs, all the while chewing away on some crisp toast. Although only once a week, it would be the highlight of the weekend. Mom would wake me up all excited telling me that “Wake up! Today is melody quiz day!” while opening the curtains, letting the morning light enter my room. It was as though some childish fire rekindled in her those mornings, as though her old self, her more self-confident and happy self reentered the world. Her eyes glistened and her voice would be optimistic. That happy mood would carry on for the rest of the day, in both of us.

I would often build up my frustration and keep it inside when mom expressed her negative views on her future and the world. One day she went around in her pajamas in the afternoon, with no motivation for moving away and starting a new life, saying “You kids would be better off without me.” to which I couldn’t hold in my dismay anymore. I had held in so much frustration and anger so as to not put fuel to the fire, not daring to stand up properly to Mom’s toxic way of thought. But my bubble burst, and I disclaimed “How dare you talk like that around us? How do you think we feel when you talk about your death? What if we did that to you?” She hadn’t been affected by what I said, she only shrugged and said nonchalantly “At least You have a life ahead of you, while I do not.”

Her negative attitude never ceased, it just looped back as change got closer. There were brighter days, but far in between. We lived in an ignorant reality, me and my sister chose to take those hits and move forward without retaliating. One step forward and two steps back.