

## Live to Fight Another Day

It was just a few minutes before midnight when the last ferry of the day arrived from Seattle. Rachel Asbill had dreaded every minute of the hour ride across Puget Sound. It was a long-dreaded trip back to her hometown. She knew that she had to leave Seattle behind - had to leave all the fake people who claimed to be her friend, all the people who wanted to take her down dead-end roads. She had to put it behind her and make a new start. And most of all, had to leave him behind. She needed time. She needed space. She needed money of which she only had enough for the ferry back to Bremerton. But maybe, she thought, it would be different this time.

The arrival whistle had long since blown. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and counted to ten. She opened her eyes and watched the cars exiting downward across the boat docks. There was no longer any delaying the inevitable, so she walked down three flights of stairs, across the deck of the ferry and set foot again on the shores of her hometown. It had been three long years since she'd left.

Bremerton, Washington - only an hour west of Seattle nestled quietly on top of Kitsap Peninsula overlooking Puget Sound. Bremerton might as well be the middle of nowhere. Bremerton, home to the largest naval yard on the west coast - at any given time, thousands of naval personnel walking its streets on shore looking for a drink, night out or a good time. Bremerton, the place Rachel left in a fit of rage two years ago and vowed never to come back again. Yet here she was anyway. The ferry landing was several blocks

behind her now as she walked down Palmer Street towards downtown

She stopped at a traffic light, slowly took her duffel bag from her shoulder and lay it gently on the pavement. She rummaged through the contents and withdrew an old faded green skateboard. She put the board squarely down on the road, affixed the bag back over her shoulder and slowly but surely propelled her way down the middle of the road really not sure of a destination, as if lost in some far-away warm fuzzy childhood memory.

The seconds ticked by as she prowled through the roads and memories of her childhood. The seconds turned into minutes and the minutes turned into hours. At some point, she found herself standing at the locked gates of the park her mother used to take her as a child-Bremerton East Community Park. The gates were still locked. The sign on the gate said, "Open Daily Dusk to Dawn". Rachel looked at her watch-only 4:00 am, still three hours or so until sunrise. She walked around to the backside of the field following the white wooden fence with her left hand-feeling for a familiar catch in the dark. Suddenly, she found the loose fence section that her memory was so familiar with. Carefully, she heaved the plank from the fence line and slipped on though into the park

She walked past the swings, slides and merry-go-rounds then found refuge under a set of bleachers overlooking an overgrown baseball field. Again, she looked through her duffel bag, found a blanket and neatly laid it out under the bleachers. She placed the bag at the edge of the blanket, laid down on her back and closed her eyes. Again, trying to calm herself by breathing deeply, she let out a heavy sigh and rolled over on her right side. Rachel Asbill fell into a

sleep and slept deeply and peacefully for the first time in weeks.

The sun rose and Rachel slept. The sounds of morning filled the air-the birds, trains and cars humming on the nearby road and still Rachel slept. Families piled into the park late in the morning and early afternoon having picnics, throwing frisbees and playing radios and still Rachel slept. Somewhere late in the afternoon, small footsteps approached her. A young toddler girl in yellow overall jumpers wearing sandals with pigtails in her blonde hair stood over Rachel casting a small shadow on the sleeping figure before her. The little girl was sipping on a juice from a tiny handheld box. The young girl swallowed, very briefly touched Rachel on the shoulder and flinched back. She opened her mouth and screamed, "Mommy, Mommy, Mommy !!!"

A young woman in her mid-twenties came running to the call of her daughter, "What is it Emma?"

"Mommy," said the daughter, "I think this lady is dead."

The mother looked down on Rachel. She could tell that she wasn't dead and was still breathing. "No, Emma. She's just sleeping. Let's leave her alone."

At that instant, Rachel turned over flat on her back, opened her eyes and moaned "Uhhhhhh...what time is it?"

The mother looked at her watch. "Two in the afternoon," she answered.

Rachel paused and thought. The sun stung her eyes. She groaned, "What day?" she said.

"Saturday".

Rachel sat up and felt her body creaking, the young mother in front of her said "Are you OK? Are you hurt?"

Rachel let out her first deep breath of her waking day and said "No, thank you. I'm good. No worries. Just a long day followed by a long night. Thanks for asking."

The mother and daughter walked away. Rachel slowly got up to her feet and began packing her blanket and skateboard away. She moved out from under that park bleachers, the bag hanging at her side. Slowly her mind and body began to wake to the day and situation. She walked through a wooded area towards the public bathrooms. She opened the door and went in.

She removed a small flannel pouch from her bag. She turned the water on, took a bar of soap to thoroughly washed her hands and face. She brushed her teeth. Then and only then, Rachel looked at herself in the mirror. It had been weeks, maybe months since she had seen her own reflection. It took a minute for her mind to focus on the young woman staring back at her from the mirror. It certainly wasn't the reflection of the little girl who used to hide in this same bathroom fifteen years ago playing hide and seek with her brothers-knowing they would never find her in the girl's bathroom.

No, the woman looking back at her from the mirror had dark, deep green eyes-far greener than those baby hazel eyes she had as a child. Freckles, still all over her face though. The same complexion that had cause so many kids to make fun of her as "diseased" when she was in elementary. And that hair, just as red, thick and stringy as it had always been. That thick muss of hair, even out of control than ever these days. She sighed at the sight of long, knotty

strands. She had seen the road and lived without a roof over her head for too long now .

So, she took a brush, comb and small pair of scissors from the pouch. Slowly, but surely, she gently held her hair on one side of her head and carefully stroked it with the brush. Several minutes on one side, then switching to the other side. She brushed for fifteen minutes. Then she picked up the scissors and lopped off several inches of stringy dead ends. With a few strokes of a comb, she pulled it all back into a ponytail and nodded. Maybe one day she'd have enough money to have something professional done with the nest on top but not today. This would have to do.

She took a small leather wallet out of front pocket and took inventory. Nine dollars. It was all she had left in the whole world. She walked out of the bathroom, looked up at the afternoon sun and said out loud to herself, "You can do this, Rae, you can do this."

And then she walked out the same front gate that had been locked early that morning, turned left on Chambers Street, walked a few more blocks, turned right on Fifth Avenue and then stopped solidly on the road facing the third house on the right-508 Fifth Avenue. She looked at it stoically as if she were Clint Eastwood staring down the bad guys in a Spaghetti Western. There was no reason she couldn't just walk down the sidewalk, climb up the six steps to the front porch and go right through the door.

And if the door was locked there was no reason that she couldn't take a few steps to the left, pick up the flowerpot, pull the loose brick up retrieve the hidden latch key, unlock the door and go in. After all, it was her house too. The only house she had ever lived in. The house her father

had built all by himself for the three of them to live in together when they have moved to Washington. But that was long ago. Her father had died when she was three and she barely remembered him now and what few memories she had, she held onto dearly. It wasn't long after his death that her mother fell apart. Fell in with the wrong people, the wrong lifestyle, fell into the bottom of a bottle and never came back up for air. It hadn't been uncommon for Rachel to spend days, sometimes weeks alone during her elementary and middle school years fending for herself while her mother went rambling off some faraway place in search of money, adventure or her next high.

Before she knew it and when nobody was looking Rachel herself fell into the same vicious lifestyle. She barely graduated from high school. She herself began living from one high to the next high and doing whatever necessary in between to get the next hit.

And then one day, her mother came back from an extended road trip and a long list of accusations began to fly between the two. For every wrong her mother flung at her, Rachel threw two injustices back at her mother. They argued over money, they argued over who the house belonged to, they accused each other of the death of Rachel's father. Their dirty laundry list had no end.

That night culminated with her mother pulling a loaded snub nose thirty-eight caliber from her purse and shooting the window out. Rachel turned on her heels, screaming in a fit of rage, left and never looked back.

She had never looked back until now. She continued standing on the road and the stare down contest with the house. She tried to take inventory in her mind at what

brought her back brought back . The loneliness brought her back , the down and out brought her back , the boredom brought her back , the memories of what once had brought her back to this point .

So, she took that long walk down the sidewalk and up the creaky steps to the porch . It seemed to take an eternity to make it to the top of the stairs . When she finally made it , she knocked three meek raps on the wooden door . After a while , a tall skinny woman with sunken cheekbones in graying brunette hair answered the door wearing a faded Seattle Seahawks sweatshirt answered . Neither woman said a word to each other for an entire minute or so . They just looked at each other and examine each other very slowly and concisely .

"Well what the fuck do you want?" asked her mother .

Rachel wasn't surprised , she let out her breath and said , "Can I come in?"

Her mother was stoic and silent . She raised her eyebrows and stood aside to let her daughter in . Rachel walked in . The place was just as she remembered it - a total mess . There were dirty dishes , empty wine bottles sitting everywhere , and piles of dirty clothes . In the far corner , the old stand up piano was still there , even more camouflaged with clutter and overdue bills then she remembered it . She remembered the day her dad's parents had driven it on a flatbed trailer all the way from Mobile , Alabama to give to them . She remembered climbing up on her father's knees as he played it that night .

Her grandparents had given it to her parents as a housewarming gift for their new home and life in

Washington. That was when she was three years and it was perhaps her earliest clear memory. Then she recalled remembered the endless nights she spent alone wondering where her mother was. She would climb out of her bed, come downstairs and bang on the old piano to keep her company and drive the night terrors away.

She swallowed her pride looked at her mother and said "Mom I need a place to stay. Just a few weeks until i get my feet back on the ground. Nothing permanent."

Her mother sarcastically nodded her head and said, "Well, well, well, look what the cat drug in. Isn't this great, Rae? Almost four years and not one peep out of you and now you show up. What do you have to say for yourself?"

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. "Just for a while Mom. Not long."

Her mother twisted her nose and asked in rapid succession, "Well, are you clean? Are you still using? Rachel please tell me the truth are you clean yet?"

Rachel sunk her head into her shoulders and said, "I'm trying mom. I'm trying."

"You're trying?! Is that all you got to say for yourself Rachel?"

Rachel looked at her mom and sneered. "Well what about you...Mother. It certainly doesn't look like you are the poster child for sobriety, are you?" She pointed at all the empty vodka sitting on the coffee table and shot an icy glare back at her mother.



Rage came over her mother's face and she screamed "Doesn't fucking matter what I do, Rae! This is my goddamn house and not yours!"

Tears welled up in Rachel's eyes and she said, "Dad built this house for both of us. I remember him telling me that. I don't remember much about dad, but I remember him telling me right out there on the porch steps. He built this house for both of us." She pointed to the porch steps on the front door

"Don't you bring your father into this Rae. Don't you dare!" screamed her mother.

"And why not?" sneered Rachel, "I'll bring him into this if I want to, he was my father."

"Same old Rae," her mother said nodding her head and repeating, "Same old Rae. You're never going to get your shit, together are you?"

Rachel looked around the house. She saw a window her mother had shot out years earlier. It was boarded up and still needed a new glass pane. It was apparent that this conversation was going nowhere so she decided to put the final nail in the coffin of it and bring an end this reunion. She spat words back at her mother, "You know, Connie..." she said referring to her mother by her first name, "You're the one who needs to get your shit together. Look at this place. It's filthy There must be a month's worth of empty bottles and dirty dishes laying around here. Hell, woman, you haven't even replaced the window you shot out the last time you kick me out of here!"

Connie stamped her feet. "Oh, that does it. Leave. Leave now. Get the fuck out. I Don't need your bullshit sarcasm around here."

Rachel turned to the rear, walked out and slammed the door behind her. She zigzagged down the road crying, not knowing for sure where she was going. Her childhood home getting smaller and smaller in the wake until it finally disappeared altogether.

It started raining. It was the type of rain the northwest is so famous for. It was a heavy constant drizzle. Rachel stopped to fish her rain gear from her duffel bag. She put on the breaker, cinched the hood over her head, hunkered as far as she could into it and kept walking.

She approached the edge of the neighborhood, turned left on Main Street and walked among the fluorescent signs of consumerism like McDonald's, Denny's and Walgreens. She continued through countless intersections until finally she found herself in the parking lot of the Safeway grocery store. She took refuge in the covered breezeway area where the shopping trollies were kept. Slowly she leaned up against the brick wall and collapsed onto the concrete below, closed her eyes and pretended to sleep as the masses of people entered and left the supermarket.

She emptied her pockets and counted the spare change. There was a payphone down the corridor. She took a well-worn and tattered letter from her back pocket. She had been carrying this letter around for months. She unfolded it and scanned the words. There was a phone number written at the bottom of the letter. This was her final lifeline, the last ace she had up her sleeve. She heaved herself up the side of the wall and moved down towards the phone. She picked up

the receiver and put a quarter in the slot. Several electronic beeps sounded over the phone at some far away switching station. A static preprogrammed voice spoke to her.

"Please deposit an additional \$1.75 to complete your call for 10 minutes."

She sorted out the pennies from her pockets and began putting nickels, dimes and quarters into the slot until the distant mechanical voice said thank you and that the call would now be connected.

She could hear the phone ringing on the other end. And just as the third ring began to chime, the caller picked up. "Hello, said a deep raspy baritone voice in a southern drawl."

"Hey Pops. "she said, "It's Rachel."

There was a short pause on the other end. "Oh, my goodness, Rae. Oh Lord, child, it's so good to hear your voice how you are doing, darling?"

"Pops I'm going to be honest with you, "replied Rachel, "Pops I'm not good."

"Well Rae, what can we do for you? We're here for you, honey."

Rachel choked back the tears and tried to form the words. "Pops.. Mom won't let me in. I don't know where to go. I'm broke. I've been living in a tent for the past several months .." She couldn't hold back the tears anymore. She took in a deep breath. "Pops can I come down to Mobile and stay with you and grandma for a while? I promise I won't be

any trouble. I just need some peace and quiet. I need some time to get my head together.

There was a quiver in the old man's voice as he spoke, "Absolutely, Rae. We'd love to have you here. Just get yourself down to Mobile as quickly as you can. You can stay for as long as you like"

Rachel looked up at the fluorescent light above, closed her eyes and spoke, "Pops, I'll be honest. I've been hanging around people shouldn't and taking things I shouldn't. But I want you to know I'm trying to be clean. I just need to get away from this place - as far away from it as I can"

"Don't worry, Rae. You come stay with us. Grandma and I will take care of you. It's going to be all OK. Do you think you can find a Western Union terminal nearby?"

Rachel looked out across the parking lot at the Safeway sign. Beneath was the immediately recognizable black Western Union logo on yellow background. She smiled then chuckled "Yeah Pop, I think I can find one"

"Good," replied her Grandfather. "I'm going down the road right now to the Western Union at the post office. I'll wire you enough money for a hotel room for a few nights and I'll get you a plane ticket to Mobile tomorrow. Call me back when you get to the hotel. I'll give you all the details. Can you do that for me honey?"

"Yeah Pops, I can do that," she said.

"There will be enough money for you to get some new clothes some luggage and anything else you might need all right?"

"Thank you, Pops. I love you. I love you so much."

"Love you too, Rae. We'll see you in a few days. Everything's going to be fine. You just get yourself to that Western Union and the money will be there in less than an hour."

"Thanks Pops. See you soon."

"Looking forward to it. We'll take care of you. Bye dear".

"See you soon," said Rachel. She hung up the phone and began wiping away her tears, even cracking a smile for the first time in months. The coldness that had that she had been feeling for so long deep within her was now starting to go away and melt.

She walked into the Safeway and wandered around looking at stocked foodstuffs. She could only have dreamt about buying these types of things months ago she laid low and tried not to arouse any suspicion. Eventually she walked up to the customer service booth. She pulled a tattered state of Washington driver's license from her wallet and slipped it through the slot. "I believe there may be a Western Union money transfer waiting for me," she said.

The lady behind the counter looked at her license, then at the computer screen and tapped on the keyboard for a few moments. The money drawer popped open and she looked at Rachel and said, "How would you like it?"

"Pardon me?" asked Rachel.

"Tens, Twenties, Fifties.."

"Oh," replied Rachel, "twenties will be fine."

The clerk handed \$600 to Rachel.

"Thank you," said Rachel. She took the money, put some in her wallet and then hid the rest of it deep within a duffel bag.

She picked up her belongings, walked out of the door and across the parking lot. She saw a Super 8 hotel a few blocks down the road. That would do fine-nothing fancy but nice, nonetheless.

Twenty minutes later she was in a hotel room laying on a bed for the first time in a year, munching on Hershey's bars watching an old rerun of "The Jeffersons". She closed her eyes and smiled. It had been so over ten years since she been to her grandparent's place down in Mobile. She thought about it deeply. She remembered running through their yard and swinging from the tire swing hanging from a live oak in their back yard. The warm memories filled her heart and mind. It melted the sadness that had built up inside of her. She remembered sitting at their table eating cornbread peas homemade pie. She remembered going fishing and riding the tractor with her grandfather.

It had been a long day. It had been a long week. I had been a long month. It had been a long year. It was only eight o'clock in the evening, but she could feel along sleep overcoming her. She smiled with her eyes closed. Yes, indeed, everything was going to be good. Everything would workout. In just a few days when she'd be down in Alabama. Warm weather, southern cooking and clean air. The worst was behind her now.

Rachel Asbill fell into a deep warm beautiful sleep and dreamt she was riding on a cloud fast and far away from dingy Bremerton, Washington.

