

Family Portrait



“I cannot wait until you’re gone,” my mother said to me as I left for the gym an hour earlier than planned in order to get away from her. I was toasting a piece of bread when she came downstairs:

“Is that my bread?” she asked.

“I suppose so...but I figured I could have a piece, right?” I tiptoed around her, reaching for the peanut butter.

“That’s MY bread! Did you put a twist tie on it?”

“No...there wasn’t one on it when I took a piece.”

“You’re ruining my food! Are you planning on buying me more bread?”

“Mom, you’re being ridiculous, I’m going to the gym!”

“I cannot wait until you’re gone...” (door slams).

I cycled for an hour, then drove home. I walked upstairs and into her room. The phone rang.

“Get it,” she said.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Elizabeth! Where are you?!”

My grandma’s voice was shaky.

“I’m at home, why?”

“Turn on the news!” she sounded relieved.

I turned the television on and saw the headline: “Shooting at LA Fitness, Pittsburgh, 3 Women Shot Dead, 9 Hurt”.

“WHAT IS THIS?!” I screamed, “Mom! Do you see this? Grandma, what happened?! This isn’t my gym, is it? It’s a different LA Fitness.”

“No, it’s the one you go to by the movie theater,” my grandma said. I didn’t believe her, but as I continued to watch the report, I saw the close-ups of the gym, the gym I was work-

Elizabeth Bennett

ing out in one hour previously.

A man who was angry with the world, who thought women were evil and wanted to teach them a lesson, had walked into my gym with his gym bag containing three guns and opened fire before shooting himself in the head. This happened only moments after I left. Had I gone to the gym when I was “supposed” to, an hour after I actually did leave, I would have been there when it happened. I would have been dead or wounded or traumatized. But this didn’t happen to me. I got into a fight with my mother and left early.

Apparently, the man came in while I was still at the gym, but was reluctant and left, only to come back 40 minutes later. I was lucky. What would my present life be like now had I been there? What kind of person would I be? Would I have helped people or ran? Would I have been brave?

Thank goodness I will never know; thank goodness I was not there. But along with being relieved and thankful, I was angry with my mother:

“Mom, do you realize that the last thing you said to me before I went to the gym was, ‘I cannot wait until you’re gone?’ What if I had been there, Mom?” I thought maybe she’d change; she’d apologize or say she couldn’t believe it or that she was glad I survived.

Her response: “Well...I guess then my wish would’ve come true.”

I should have been there when he shot all those women. Had my mother not wished me gone, I would’ve been killed. I’m sorry for eating your bread—but I’m not sorry that I missed the massacre. When those flags go up to remember the girls who perished, put one up for me as well. Because that was the day your daughter died, Mom. That was the day



I realized that my mother was not a human, but an alien.

That was the day I realized I had a lot to figure out.

Growing up with an abusive mother and an absent father, my brother and I took our hurt and frustration out on each other. Our grandparents called this “sibling rivalry” but I call it “how my brother and I kept ourselves from killing our mother.” I used to “tattle” on him because if her attention was on him, then that meant it was not on me. When my mother ignored me and made me feel useless, I, in turn, did that to my brother. He would come into the kitchen,

“Liz!! Today in sch-sch-school we did a... we did a...”

“SPIT IT OUT, GREG! Godddddd! Sch-Sch-Sch-what?”

“We did a... we did a project. And I... and I”

“I’m sorry, I just don’t care” I left the kitchen and ran upstairs.

(When I was little, I loved my baby brother. I used to take him into the turtle sandbox in our backyard, before our family fell apart, and put fistfuls of sand in his hair without him noticing. Then, I would sit and pick the sand out of his hair. I loved taking care of him. I couldn’t do much for him because I was only seven myself. But, I could get the sand out of his hair, even if I was responsible for putting it there in the first place.)

It took over three years of college—studying human behavior, intentions, writing and reasoning—to realize why I had been so horrible to him: I felt powerless next to my mother.

She would be so horrible to me, and I would get upset, but then her “Nice Switch” would go off and I would feel guilty and go running back to her. This created a Generalized Anxiety and Panic Disorder within

me. I never knew what kind of mood she would be in or if she would be nice to me or if she would “accidentally” burn me in the forehead with a curling iron before Shabbat services.

Instead of talking to my brother about this heartache we shared, I took my anger out on him, and he took his out on me. Maybe that’s what siblings are for....

Maybe “sibling rivalries” exist so that kids don’t lash out on their parents.

This Thanksgiving break, I thought my mother would be nice to me. I came home for an entire week, and I was staying at her house. I babysat for two days straight, then returned home. She was laying in her bed, depressed, at 3 p.m.

“Hey mom, how are you?”

“Fine,” she replied unenthusiastically, “How are you?”

“I’m spent,” I said.

“Oh yeah, I’m sure you have tons of problems. Did your husband leave you?”

“What?” I was confused...did I complain or something?

“I don’t need details about your life, Elizabeth, it was a simple question,” she replied cruelly.

“...Mom! You asked me how I was!”

“I know...and I said fine.”

“Yes...then you asked me how I was and I said spent!”

“Yes. And I don’t care. I don’t need details!”

“So what, Mom, we’re just supposed to not talk all break?!”

“I guess not.”

I was boiling. “That’s fucking it Mom. I am done. I am going to stay with Dad!” I had just gotten off the phone with my psychologist who said, “Liz, what would happen if you did leave your Mom and stay with your Dad? I think it may be good for you!”

I ran into my room and bolted the door shut. I heard faintly, “What...you’re going to leave me like the rest of them? I thought you were—”

I didn’t let her finish. I wasn’t letting her “Nice Switch” guilt me into staying in a place of uncaring. I blasted music. Ironically, the song, “Cry For You” was playing:

“You’ll never see me again. So now who’s gonna cry for you? You’ll never see me again. No matter what you do.”

I was lying on the floor with my hands in front of me, crouched down so my eyes were level with the floor. I squinted so I could see if she was still standing there, and sure enough, her feet were planted parallel to each other and perpendicular to my door. I was trapped.

I kept undoing and redoing my ponytail: It was pissing me off! It didn’t feel right. I wanted this hair off of my head.

I grabbed a pair of scissors and cut off my ponytail.

I looked at myself in the mirror. I faintly heard my mother screaming and kicking outside of the door. I needed a change. I wasn’t going to end up like her. I watched the pair of scissors as I texted my brother:

“Greg. I need to leave now. Please, please come pick me up. I just gave myself bangs.”

His reply: “Put the scissors down, I’m coming.”

I wouldn’t have been able to leave that house without him. He came into my room and grabbed my suitcase: this eighteen-year-old man who sprung up without my noticing. We bolted past the woman who created then nearly ruined us both. Past screams of, “Don’t you two dare come for Thanksgiving” and “if you leave now, I swear I’ll...”

I watched him as he started the car he paid for with his own money. He revved the gas he bought and filled himself. He drove me to our father’s house...I didn’t even know the directions.

When did he get so handsome? When did he grow a beard?

I stared at the brother I had missed my entire life.

My family photo sits ironically in place, showing the smiles on each of our faces.

My family—a phase.

In that photo, my dad smiles even though at the time of the photo (the photo in which his one arm is around my mother and his other arm is around the real love of his life, Ramona the canine), he was slowly plotting his escape from my mother, his wife.

In this photo, I smile. But I don’t really smile like that, at least, I’ve never seen myself smile like that. Why can’t people see through that?

In this photo, I’m smiling. But that isn’t a real smile. Just like that isn’t a real family.

Not everything is the way it seems. Never stop questioning. Never be satisfied until you get the answers you need. I’ve been disappointed, but that doesn’t mean I’m always going to be disappointed. I’ve been hurt, but now I know how not to live my life. I am thankful for this.

I am thankful for the childhood I had because it taught me how to treat people—the opposite of how my parents treated each other. It taught me how to love people—the opposite of how my parents loved each other. And it taught me to believe in myself. Even if I’m the only one who does. Because if I don’t,

if I don’t hope
if I don’t dream,
if I don’t write,
and if I don’t thrive,
I’ll end up just like them.

And I simply refuse to do that.