

“BREAKOUT”

• A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Morehead State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

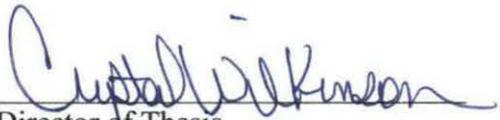
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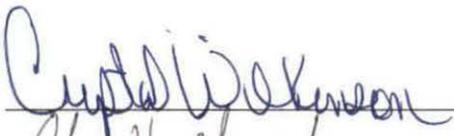
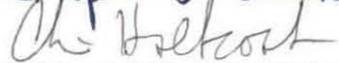
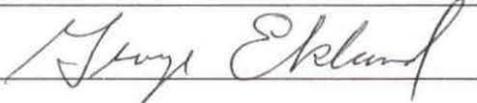
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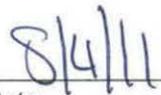
Heather N. Miller

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Accepted by the faculty of the Caudill College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, Morehead State University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree.


Director of Thesis

Master's Committee: , Chair




Date

“BREAK OUT”

Heather Miller, M. A.
Morehead State University, 2011

Director of Thesis: _____

In my creative writing thesis, I explore issues of gender roles and feminist theory from a Modernist/contemporary perspective through a novella focused on a young woman, Allison, who is in her mid twenties. In the wake of the feminist movement, women are generally perceived as equals; however, there are struggles we still face, as it seems to be a given that there are certain traditions and roles to which we are expected to conform, especially, it seems, in small towns. I see this almost everyday in the attitudes expressed both by my high school students and in the remarks I have personally received for being 27 and never married.

This story first came about during the fiction writing class I took last summer. One of our exercises was to take a wedding picture and then write about what was going on. Wanting to explore what was behind the perfect smile, I wrote an interior monologue from the bride's point of view and discovered a woman trapped in the lonely hell she had created by being a people pleaser her entire life. This then turned into two pieces, one a shorter interior monologue with an ambiguous ending, and the other a longer story exploring what happens when the reforming people pleaser breaks away and starts over—thus, the basis for the novella.

Accepted by:

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**Office of Graduate and Undergraduate Programs
Committee Approval to Review Graduate Thesis or Applied Project**

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This is to verify that the committee has approved the student's thesis or applied project.

It is now ready for Graduate Office review of policy adherence.

Committee Chair Date

Please bring this approved form when submitting the thesis or applied project for review by the Graduate Office in 701 Ginger Hall.

Break Out

She stared blankly ahead, her once bright, twinkling brown eyes now dulled and glistening with tears. She hated the pink and green striped wallpaper across from her (always had), but it was either this or go out there and face them. As she would much rather gaze intently upon the blazing sun until she went blind or look into the fires of hell than face what was waiting her in the next room, she settled for the ugly yet harmless wallpaper.

She laid her hot face down on the cool, tan tiles, wondering how long she could get away with hiding, knowing eventually she would eventually have to pull herself back together again without the aid of king's horses or men. "Smile on and chin up" as her mother would say. *Not anymore. She'll probably disown me after this.* As a matter of fact, she had received a very stern warning from her mother right before the ceremony stating something to the effect that she would be very "put out" if anything were done to bring embarrassment on the family. Though she thought no one was around when she was talking to Melanie (her best friend and maid of honor) about not going through with it, her mom had apparently either overheard her or was psychic. Or psycho. It could really go either way. She just needed to lay there for a few minutes, alone, to recoup before dealing with the mess she had created.

It was really quite humorous if one was writing an absurd comedy. She had managed to make it through the entire ceremony with a smile on and her chin up until the preacher pronounced them husband and wife. As soon as he said that, all she remembered was a sudden panic gripping her heart. Images of fingernail polish on

pantyhose and golden rings seared onto flesh flashed across her blinded vision with these words, as though they had sealed her fate and this was it. She thought she was still keeping up her façade and was only screaming “no” in her head, but it appeared as though she had been mistaken. Once she realized everyone was staring at her with shocked expressions she crumbled and knew nothing until she awoke in her mom’s bedroom. That’s when she managed to sneak off into the bathroom where she was now. It seems that everyone has a breaking point and she had reached hers with a huge crash.

She chuckled at the ridiculousness of it all. Had she just stood up to her mother, none of this would ever have happened. Or maybe it would’ve. Alternate fates cannot be known, but she couldn’t help but think about it. At any rate, she had created a mess. Was she still technically married? A wave of exaltation surged through her body at the possibility that she was not trapped. This was, of course, immediately followed by a sinking feeling of depression as she realized that she had already said, “I do.”

A soft rap on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Honey? Are you okay?” He sounded concerned. Of course he would be concerned; she was his wife. She shuddered at this, sat up, and turned towards the door so he could hear her.

“Yeah--” but her voice was arrested as she caught a glimpse of herself in the full-length mirror that hung on the inside of the door. She looked terrible. In addition to her attire (she was, of course, still in her wedding dress that was now crumpled and stained), her normally beautiful brown wavy mane of hair was tousled and tangled;

her mascara and eyeliner were everywhere but her eyes; her eyes themselves looked almost crimson; and her normally porcelain, perfect complexion was red and blotchy.

“Are you sure?” She could almost feel his hazel eyes looking at her with pity and concern. The thought occurred to her that she probably needed to be shot.

“Yes, I’m sure,” she said a little more convincingly. She just wanted him to go away. “I’ll be out in a few minutes.”

“Okay, if you say so...” He trailed off and she could still feel his presence lingering just outside the door, his perfectly tailored suit and jet black, gelled hair in place, as if he was waiting for some reason to knock the door down and come to her rescue. Unfortunately, it wasn’t that easy; he couldn’t rescue her from a life with himself.

Finally she could hear his footsteps moving away from the door. *Thank God*, she thought as she lay back down, this time on her back for a change of scenery. She hated the ceiling, cream with those little ridges in it, but it was better than the wallpaper with which she had been priorly plagued. She missed the basic blue and white wallpaper and plain white ceiling and tiles of the good old days before her dad had passed on, but, more than that, she missed her dad. He could always cheer her up and he had ways of rescuing her from her mom. Even though he worked long hours and overtime at the steel mill to provide for them, he always made time for her, doing things she actually wanted to do. As long as her dad was there she could tolerate her mother’s crazy antics and vicarious living. She always thought it odd that her parents were together; they were like night and day. Well, she thought it odd until she was old

enough to do the math.

She could remember the day of tragedy clearly: Ninth grade, a whirl of confusion and change as she entered high school, desperately needing the continuance of popularity she had achieved (with the help of her mother, of course) in middle school, hoping that here she would find something to combat the loneliness of having only superficial friends. In fall (October 14th, to be specific), she was sitting in her 6th period Algebra I class when she was called to the office. Of course, panic immediately set in; no amount of smooth talking her father was capable of would deter comments from her mother if she were in trouble. It seemed like a mile's trek to the office, though the classroom was down the first hallway; every time she stepped the click of her high heels echoed loudly in her ears, increasing her anxiety, her palms becoming sweaty. Tentatively stepping into her principal's office, she was shocked to find her mother sitting in front of Mr. Sterling's desk, poised as always, though noticeably shaken.

"Allison, dear, would you have a seat?" Mr. Sterling asked gently. She gave no reply, but looked questioningly from her principal to her mother as she sat.

"Oh, my darling! A terrible accident has happened!" Her mother lacked any tact, and stressful situations only heightened her inability. She lifted herself out of the chair and flung her weight onto Allison's shoulders, taking on the air of familiarity that one sees between family members in tragic melodramas. Allison, of course, froze up out of one-fourth worry and three-fourths shock at this unwarranted and extremely unusual display of emotion from the "Plastic One" as Allison often referred to her in

her head (never out loud).

The next words her mother spoke floored her, literally; she was so horrified that she fainted. "Your father was in an accident, honey, and he's not with us anymore." These words, a constant reminder of the fact that things could've been different, still come to her at times, haunting her at her loneliest moments...

Like now. She sighed and turned her head to press her now hot cheek on the cold tiles, wiping away the tears that were beginning to form. She gave a slight chuckle at the irony of it all: her wedding day, which was supposed to be one of the happiest days of her life, was being spent crying in her mother's bathroom, as though she was still that fourteen-year-old girl crying in secret over her father's death.

She still couldn't understand it, either. Fourteen-year-old girls should be allowed to cry when their fathers die. After the funeral, though, she was not allowed. Her mother's words rang through her head, the toll of an unceasing bell: "What doesn't kill us only makes us stronger. Now keep your chin up and remember to smile; it's your best feature!"

No wonder I'm so screwed up. I guess I should probably get all this over with. Maybe Melanie would let me stay with her for a couple of days until I can get myself back together. Instead of getting up, though, she scanned the room, her eyes making their way over to the bathtub (once white, now a sickly pink), where they landed upon a razor. Allison slowly crawled her way over and picked it up, fingering the shiny metal blades. Darker ways of relieving the situation entered her mind; she could almost see the shock of horror and anger on her mom's face after she was

found. It might even make life easier for everyone else. This could be her good deed for humanity. But why do that? She didn't really want to end her life; she just wanted to be free. Was that really too much to ask?

No, she thought resolutely. Putting the razor back in its place, she steadily got to her feet and cautiously opened the door, her hand shaking just a little.

As soon as she cracked open the bathroom doorway just enough to quietly step into the wood-paneled hallway, she was greeted with none other than the one person who could strip her of all confidence, though she was determined to let her anger lead her today.

"Allison, what is all this ridiculousness?" Of course she didn't care if Allison was okay; she just wanted an explanation for all of her embarrassment. She was still immaculately dressed in a pink and black designer dress (perfectly coordinated to the wedding colors—which Allison hated), clicking the stiletto heels of her black Jimmy Choo wanna-bees on the faux hardwood floor in aggravation, close enough to where there was no easy way around. The sickly sweet flower aroma of her perfume mingled with the minty fresh breath of a control freak was slightly nauseating. Allison wished that she had mastered the art of projectile vomiting.

"Thanks for your concern. I'm feeling quite better now." She hit a nerve with this one. Her mother's eyes narrowed to twin darts ready to pierce.

"You do not speak to me that way, young lady! I don't know what on earth has gotten into you, but it best stop right now!" As her mother's voice rose, Allison

noticed that her face became red. She must've forgotten to take her blood pressure medicine.

"Shut up." Allison had no idea where those words came from; she had spent the entirety of her 25 year existence using more polite phrases like, "yes, ma'am" and "no ma'am" when addressing her mother. Allison went with it, though, and stepped around her, leaving her flabbergasted and fuming in the hallway. Feeling like she was having an out-of-body experience, Allison made her way into the living room where her husband was waiting.

"Jason," she said as she stepped up from behind him. He was sitting in one of her mother's beautiful cream armchairs facing the window. She hated the pretentiousness of it all and the feeling that she could be in one of the closing scenes of some tear-jerking chick-flick. She could almost hear the climactic music as she prepared for the confrontation of a lifetime where she was to be the hero, the noble one who set the good guy free from a life trapped with a woman who could never love him...

Get a grip, she told herself. As he turned, these romanticized notions fled and Allison felt another wave of nausea. She abhorred confrontation, but knew it had to be done.

"Hey, there. How are you?" Yep; that look of concern mixed with pity that she had imagined previously was there now, staring her in the face. It was something one would see more on a parent than a husband.

"I'm okay. I'll be okay, at any rate. But I think we need to talk." *So far, so*

good.

“Whatever you need to do, honey. You know I love you.” Allison hated the fact that he seemed to be patronizing her. Just because she had a complete mental breakdown in front of everyone during their wedding ceremony did not mean he had to tiptoe on eggshells. But she guessed he was being nice, so he may actually be trying.... If he were just a jerk things would be so much easier. Lost in this thought, she failed to hear the serpent slithering up to her ear.

“Yeah, did you hear that, Allison? He loves you. You’d best get yourself together and apologize to him. Think of the life you can have if you just get your head out of your ass,” her mother’s harsh whisper engulfed her quavering resolve, making it stronger and turning it into something more resembling anger. Dropping all leftover concealments, Allison furiously turned to her.

“Look here. I’m sorry that I was the reason that you never became Miss America. I’m sorry that you got knocked up by someone you didn’t love and who didn’t really love you. I’m sorry that you then married another man who loves his job more than--”

“Allison, I’m warning you...” But Allison was not to be deterred; everything that she had been holding back all these years was finally frothing over.

“No. Listen to me. I’m sorry that you never got the life you wanted, but that doesn’t mean you can have full control over mine. You and I are not the same person, so mind your own business.” She turned back to Jason. “Jason, let’s go somewhere and talk; it’ll be impossible here.”

Allison stormed out of the house without looking back to see if he was following. She knew he would; he was as reliable as she used to be. Sure enough, she didn't have to wait very long to be proven right; within two minutes he was standing beside her.

They got in his black BMW sedan (luckily the groomsmen had yet to decorate it; they were waiting until the reception and it had not gone that far) and drove down to the lone park in town. Not a word was spoken during the entirety of the ride. Allison stared out the window at the glorious summer day. It was her favorite time of day, too, right as evening sets in and the sweltering heat finally begins abating. She watched as an elderly couple sat rocking on a porch together; the next house offered a glimpse of a family cooking out in the side yard. Nice, quiet lives, the type of life she could have. The thought occurred to her that it wouldn't be all bad...but there was so much that she wanted to experience first; this was all she had ever known.

They finally arrived at the park and pulled onto the gravel parking lot, the crunching sound of wheels on gravel one loosening Allison from her reverie. Still silent, still trying to keep her thoughts at bay in order to maintain composure, Allison got out of the car and began walking. Not paying attention to where she was going, her feet automatically took her to a certain bench in a secluded area of the park, which just so happened to be where she and Jason had their first date and where he proposed. Cringing at the uprising of memories, she nonetheless sat down. Jason followed, and they sat in continued silence. Allison could hear him breathing softly, could feel the body heat radiating from him, knew that he was nervous. Finally she

worked up the courage to ask him if they were married, the answer to which would shape the rest of the conversation.

Jason shook his head, the newly setting sun creating shadows under his eyes making him look old. “The preacher refused to sign the marriage certificate; he said that you were in no mental state to be making eternal decisions. So I guess the answer to your question is no.” Allison felt relief tinged with guilt at this new information. It gave her the strength she needed to go on to the most challenging task: explaining her feelings to him. Not knowing how to begin the conversation, Allison pretended to be intrigued by a squirrel making racket in a nearby tree. It really was a lovely evening, the direct opposite of how she felt on the inside. Such are the ironies of life, she supposed. After several moments, Allison caught a couple of deep breaths, turned to Jason, and forced herself headfirst into cleaning up the mess.

“Look, Jason, it’s not that I don’t love you. It’s that I...don’t *love* you. Does that make any sort of sense?”

“Not really,” he awkwardly chuckled through the confusion made evident in his eyes.

“Of course not...it only makes sense to me and my brain is a little twisted right now.” Allison paused in an attempt to center herself and her thoughts. “Look. You’re a good man and I admire you for that. But I’m not in love with you.”

“Telling me this before today would’ve been helpful, Allison.” He was clearly frustrated, and Allison knew it was for good reason. Were the roles reversed, she was certain that she would not be reacting so calmly. He was a better person than she. But

life was just much too short to spend it always wondering what could have been.

Despite this, she still felt like a terrible and selfish person.

“I know, I know and I’m sorry. I feel horrible for the mess I’ve created. I wish I could make it all go away.” She put her face down in her hands and began crying. She didn’t like to hurt people. “I just felt trapped and I panicked. I didn’t mean to say any of that out loud. I thought I was just screaming in my head, but I guess I lost control. I’m so sorry that I put you through this. I just couldn’t put up the image anymore.”

“You don’t have to pretend with me. Had you just told me we could’ve postponed the wedding, took some time to work things out. Allison, if you stay with me you know I’ll do everything in my power to make you the happiest woman on earth. I love you.” Jason looked her in the eyes and took her hands carefully in his with these final words. Allison took her hands gently out of his grasp and turned to face the tree with the squirrel. She noticed that the squirrel was alone, but seemed to be perfectly content, going about its own business of gathering nuts and storing them in the tree.

She knew that they would both be miserable if she consented to his wishes, but that didn’t make this any more difficult. What little girl doesn’t dream of having a handsome and charming man confess his love to her? But this is the reality that they don’t teach you in fairytales: that sometimes marrying the prince doesn’t bring happiness, that sometimes it’s hard to break the wicked queen’s spell, that sometimes the princess wants to live her own life and not just be an accessory to her prince.

Allison steadied herself by taking a deep breath. Her entire world was spinning and she was attempting to keep it from teetering totally out of control. “I know and that’s what makes this so hard. I don’t want to hurt you, but if we stay together it’s just not fair for either of us. You deserve someone who actually loves you, and I need some freedom.”

“Is that what this is all about? ‘Freedom?’ Just because your mom has controlled your entire life doesn’t mean I will! That’s stupid, Allison. You know I’m not a controlling person and—”

“She’s the reason why I even agreed to marry you. Because she told me to and I’ve been doing everything she tells me for 25 years now. I just can’t do it anymore.” She didn’t want to look at him, but his silence was scaring her. When she finally did, she could see he understood. The fight and hope on his face were gone. “I’m sure a lot of people in similar situations end up living happy lives and maybe I’m just being selfish, but...I mean, did you even know that I really don’t want to have children?”

“I just assumed...I never...but we talked about it, what we would name our kids and all that. I don’t understand...why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“I thought I would just get used to the idea. You know, the maternal instinct would finally kick in at some point. I probably would’ve done it but I wouldn’t have been happy.”

“Allison, this is madness. We have our entire life planned out. I’ll give you as much time as you need. We’re still young,” Jason reasoned. Why was he so calm? Any guy in love with a girl trying to leave him should’ve been more shaken than this,

or at least highly pissed off. *Maybe if he would be a little more passionate my feelings would be a little different...*

“No, Jason. You’ll thank me later.” Allison was matching his calm composure, at least on the outside.

“I doubt that...you know I won’t be like her. I won’t try and control you...” Why couldn’t he just understand that she was not going to change her mind? Or at least argue with her. He had to always be so cool and rational. *Better just cut the chase and end this quickly.*

“It’s over, Jason. Goodbye.” Allison got up from the bench and began walking away.

“Where are you going?” She turned at the question and saw that he had risen, but was not attempting to follow.

“I’m not real sure. Anywhere but here.” And with that she turned and walked away without looking back. She could feel his eyes upon her, but she kept going, her step getting lighter and lighter the further she went. Allison actually found herself enjoying her walk, though the pain she had just inflicted weighed heavily on her mind. She was thankful for the sun being to her back so that she didn’t have to squint and could try and get lost in the natural surroundings at least for a time. Birds were singing, and the sounds of frogs and whippoorwills that characterize Kentucky summers wafted to her on the breeze.

As Allison began meandering into more populated areas of the park, she noticed that people were staring at her. She knew she probably looked like death, so

she started wondering what she would do next. It was too far to walk to her mom's house, nor did she really want to go there because her mother would be furious with her by this point. Besides, once she got there she would be stuck. She had probably already called Jason's cell phone and Allison was quite sure he would've gone ahead and told her everything that had happened. *Poor guy*, she thought, *having to get sympathy from a she-devil like her*. Even if she hadn't heard from Jason, she would still be angry enough to not let Allison have her car. Yes, Allison could afford her own car, but what was the point when her mom and step dad offered to give her one as a present when she graduated college? She had a feeling that her mother would take that present back. Actually, Allison decided that it would probably be better for her to just give it back. Turn in her keys like she had just borrowed it for three years. That would throw her mom for a loop for sure.

Luckily her purse had been left in Jason's car so she had her essentials with her. She dug through all the junk she kept in her black Coach handbag and retrieved her iPhone from its depths, promising God to do away with all this name-brand crap if He would just let her plan work and give her a chance to do life over. Allison didn't have to wait very long for a response; Melanie answered after half a ring.

"Where are you? I've been driving around this town that I know nothing about for a half hour trying to find you! I got to your mom's house apparently right after you left with Jason and I tried to follow him but I guess you were too far ahead of me. Anyway, are you okay?" Allison couldn't help but smile at this overly exuberant greeting from her friend. She also knew that everything would be all right.

“I’m fine, Mel, calm down. I’m down at the park. Come get me please; it’s been a long day and gonna be an even longer night. I’ll wait for you by the fountain.”

“Alright, I’ll be there in a jiff; glad you picked one of the few places I actually know!” Some time with Melanie was exactly what Allison needed; no one else was as good as she was at empathizing and cheering up at the same time.

After a few minutes of standing around and receiving more strange looks and honks from passersby, Allison could finally see the bright blue Cavalier approaching, and all the tension and worry she had been feeling finally left her, if only momentarily. As Allison opened the door and stepped into the car, she finally realized that the people staring at her were not staring at her because of her disheveled hair or raccoon eyes; no, they were looking at her because she still had on her wedding dress. *Why did they let me leave the house in this? I guess I didn’t give anyone much of a chance to tell me anything, though...*

Once seated, Allison did not want to look at Melanie and see the amused smirk sure to be planted squarely on her face. While averting her eyes, she noticed the familiar sounds of a fitting Elvis Costello tune blasting from the stereo. *Just what I need; some signature Mel music to drown it all out.*

Melanie would not let it go so easily, though, and she turned the music down a bit so they could talk. “I know your appearance is probably the least of your worries right now, but you look awful. The hair and mascara-face I expected, but you still wearing the dress...that’s classic.” And with that Melanie burst into a round of laughter.

“Thanks, Mel.” But this was one of Mel’s ways of cheering her up, and she laughed.

“So what’s the plan? Are we committing any felonies? Robbing some banks? Killing some people?” She was just crazy enough to probably actually do those things, too, had Allison requested.

“No, no, nothing like that. Although we are going to have to deal with my mother...”

“Ah, so don’t count out murder, right?” They both laughed at this and Allison knew she had made the right decision.

Under the moonlight and the influence of the day’s events, the house looked almost sinister to Allison.

“Okay, so are you sure you’re ready?” Melanie asked as they sat in Allison’s driveway.

“As ready as I’m gonna ever be.” Allison was nervously fidgeting with her house keys while trying to keep her breathing under control. They had been driving around town for the past couple of hours to kill some time in hopes that Allison’s mother would be asleep when they got back. Allison also wanted to see all of her favorite spots one last time, since after tonight she planned on not setting foot back in her hometown for quite some time. Feeling slightly nostalgic, she had made Melanie

drive her all over town just to get a final picture in her head, including stops at Giovanni's for a hot ham and cheese sandwich and at Jolly Pirate's for her favorite strawberry and cream filled donut. She would miss a lot of things, like the familiarity of it all and the slower pace of life, but she knew it was time to leave.

"Remember, all you have to do is go straight to your room, pack your stuff, and you won't have to deal with her anymore. You're gonna come stay with me, find yourself a job, and it'll be okay. It doesn't matter what she says to you anymore," Melanie encouraged.

"Alright. Let's do this," Allison resolved, opening the car door. They really did have a beautiful house, surrounded by trees, yet only five minutes outside of town. It was a nice location, and Allison would miss that. *Too bad its inhabitant is psycho*, she thought, reminding herself as to why she was doing this.

They walked quickly but quietly up the paved driveway and climbed the wooden steps that led to the porch. Here Allison hesitated, fumbling her keys nervously until she found the right one. Silently she slid the key into the hole and slowly turned it. There was a slightly audible click and she prayed in her head that her mother would not be waiting there, a cougar ready to pounce. She felt almost like she was breaking into a stranger's house instead of letting herself into her own.

Technically I won't be living here after tonight, though, Allison reminded herself.

"Here we go..." Allison whispered to herself as she simultaneously turned the knob and pushed the door open. Peeking in, she could see her mother nowhere in sight. That, of course, meant nothing; knowing her mom, there could even be some

sort of trap set up, like when Wile E. Coyote set up anvils to fall on the Roadrunner's head. This thought made her giggle slightly, and Melanie asked if she was okay.

"Yeah. I was just envisioning my mother waiting with something to drop on my head like one of those Acme anvils from the Roadrunner cartoon." Saying it aloud made it even funnier, so this time Allison really had to work at not letting out a guffaw.

"You really need help, you know that?" Melanie said, shaking her head and trying to not laugh herself.

"Yeah, I know. Now come on." Allison pushed the door open wide enough for the two of them to enter. There were no lights on, but that could just mean her mother was trying to lull her into a false sense of security.

In the entranceway the coast was still clear, though, so they pushed forward, heading to the stairs that led to Allison's room. Actually, room wasn't the word for it. It was more like a suite. Being the only child of a woman who, as previously mentioned, was living through her daughter, Allison had everything a girl could've asked for. At the top of the stairs, there was a huge bedroom on the left, complete with pink frilly bedspread and a lounge area for when her friends came over. Straight in front was her own bathroom, and then to the right (across the stair landing from the bedroom) was a closet the size of her college dorm room. It was slightly embarrassing.

They crept up the stairs, trying to be as noiseless as possible, the lights of their cell phones leading the way. When they got to the top Allison led the way to the

closet, shutting the door once they were in it so that she could turn the light on and see what she was grabbing. As she began looking over her things, planning out what would be best to take and what would be easiest for her to change into for the trip, it hit her.

“Oh, no...”

“What’s wrong now? We made it up here without your mother hearing. It’s all gone according to plan. All you gotta do is grab your stuff and...oh...” The realization that had hit Allison finally dawned on Melanie as she looked at Allison’s normally full closet. “Everything was already packed for the honeymoon, wasn’t it?”

“Not everything; just most of my summer stuff. It’s all in Jason’s car.” She knew that it had all gone too smoothly. “Crap. I guess I could send him a text to see where it is...” As soon as the words were uttered, Allison realized that this was one of her worst ideas. “No...I’d probably better not do that.”

“Do you think he would’ve dropped it off?” This was the one thought Allison was trying her best to keep from entering her consciousness; and now that Melanie had spoken it she realized just how plausible it was. It made her want to scream profanities rather loudly.

“His way of punishing me by making me have to deal with my mom. She’s probably sleeping with it ‘cause she knows I’m not going to leave without my stuff!” It felt like an anvil had hit her over the head and she collapsed onto the floor of her closet, dizzy and nauseated with her back to the wall, tears streaming down her face. It was times like these that the scared little girl came bubbling to the surface and she

just wanted to be held by her daddy. "I just want to leave and never come back here," she mumbled into her knees. Melanie crouched down beside her and put her arm around Allison.

Once Melanie got Allison calmed down into thinking rationally, they decided that the most logical place to look would be across the hall in Allison's room. Allison knew, though, that her mother was not very logical, nor did she like to make life particularly easy on Allison, but she was hoping her mom was feeling a slight bit of generosity that day. A quick survey of the room led to the discovery that, of course, she hadn't been feeling generous, but there were a few other mementos that Allison wanted to grab from her room, things she had planned on retrieving once she got back from the honeymoon, mostly reminders of her dad. After filling a spare tote with these things, they made their way downstairs, once more traveling via cell phone light. They decided that the next most logical place for her luggage would be the living room; Allison knew her mother to be nowhere close to normal or logical, though, and was somewhat anticipating a full-fledged scavenger hunt before the night was over.

It was pretty dark in the living room and the glow from their cell phones didn't give off enough light for them to see the entire room, so they went two separate ways to look more quickly. As Allison made her way around the room with no suitcases in sight, she was beginning to get discouraged. She had really hoped it would be here; entering her mother's room while she was sleeping was definitely something Allison did not want to do.

I guess I could just go on without it and really start over. But I'm not going to have enough money to buy a new everything, at least not 'til I get a job... As her mind wandered, she didn't see that the normally clear space between the couch and coffee table had a minor obstruction. Her right big toe was the first part of her to notice.

Her toe smashed into her suitcase so hard that she couldn't help but scream out. She lowered her cell phone to see that she had, in fact, hit it upon her luggage. She even forgot about the pain that would have normally been almost blinding.

"What's wrong??" Melanie exclaimed, rushing over to Allison.

"It's nothing...just stubbed my toe. But guess what I hit it on? My suitcase!"

They each grabbed a piece of luggage, not noticing the light clicking on down the hallway, and forgetting in their excitement that they were supposed to be being quiet. They made it to the front door...

"Allison Denise Wellington!!" Allison froze in her steps as though she was still a teenager who had just got caught sneaking out. *Here it comes...*

"WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING, YOUNG LADY?!" Allison looked up at Mel before they both turned to face her. No words were needed between the two; the look said it all: "We're screwed."

"I'm leaving, mom. I'm through here," Allison said quietly. She had always hated being yelled at, so she wanted all of this to end swiftly, and though there was a slight quaver in her voice, she was still confident enough to make her intentions plain and clear.

“No you’re not! You are going to stand right there until I’m finished talking to you. You may not care that you’ve totally messed up your life, but I do! You get that phone of yours out and call Jason right now. If you beg him nicely enough, he may just be kind enough to take you back. I wouldn’t, but he’s a better person than—“

Feeling herself break not for the first time in the last 24 hours, fury rose to the surface and Allison did something she had never done in her 25-year existence: interrupt her mother. “You’re right; he *is* a better person than you. But that’s not saying much, since a monkey is a better person than you. But I’m not going to call him. It’s over between us. And I didn’t mess up my life; you’ve been messing up my life since I was born and I’m leaving now.” Feeling better, Allison turned and she and Melanie walked out the door, followed by Allison’s enraged mother shouting at them the whole way, disturbing the otherwise tranquil summer night.

“No, ma’am! You are not leaving because I’m officially kicking you out of my house!”

“Seriously? You know how ridiculous and childish you sound right now?” Allison kept walking, as she had said her piece and didn’t really care if her mother heard her anymore or not.

“Me, childish? You ungrateful little brat! You’d be nothing and have nothing without me! I was good to you! I gave you everything!”

Allison turned to face her mother one last time before getting inside Melanie’s car. She sighed, taking in more than just air. Above, the dark blue of the sky was alive with twinkling stars and the moon was huge in its welcoming glow. It was a lovely

sight and Allison felt humbled and calm. She could almost pity her mother, standing there in her mauve silk robe and matching house shoes, the wind blowing her curler filled hair, loose strands sticking in her cold cream mask, having yet to realize what was actually important in life.

“No you didn’t. All I ever wanted was love.” Allison shut her door and Melanie drove off, leaving her mother staring after them, dumbfounded.

The twenty-minute drive seemed to last at least an hour, but Allison finally arrived at the high school. Melanie had been kind enough to not only allow Allison to borrow her car, but to also let her sleep on her couch for the past two weeks. Ever since they had arrived at Melanie’s apartment the night they left Ashland, Allison had attempted to find a teaching job, but it was all in vain until this opportunity presented itself. Since Allison’s prior teaching position had been all but placed in her lap, she had never attended a real interview, so her nerves were about to get the best of her. As she sat in the parking lot, she could feel the cold clamminess of her hands and was concerned she was sweating through the back of her shirt as well. Knowing that this was probably her last chance to get a job before the new school year began, she took two deep breaths and got out of the car. She walked into the office where she was greeted by a tall, thin man wearing plaid shorts, a polo t-shirt, and sandals. She took this to be a good sign, as all of her former bosses dressed in a similar fashion. She

introduced herself with her chin held high and a smile plastered on her face; some habits die hard. He introduced himself as Tom Shannon, and led her back to his office where the interview was to be conducted. Allison noticed that this seemed to be a fairly small, independent school, and looked similar to the one she taught at back home. *This would be perfect...*

As they walked through the door and into his office Allison concentrated solely on breathing and walking. She learned this technique as a young child when she would get nervous before walking out on stage in the beauty pageants her mom made her enter. They entered Mr. Shannon's office and four other people greeted Allison; she was so nervous that she didn't even catch their names, though she did notice one lady with short, wavy red hair in particular. She looked to be in her mid-60s, slightly on the plump side, and had an incredibly dour expression. Her still sharp gaze made Allison slightly shrink back, as though she was back in middle school and had just got caught talking in class. She decided that looking at this lady was probably not the best thing for her nerves, so she turned her eyes back to Mr. Shannon as she took her seat.

Despite her initial nervousness, the first part of the interview went fairly well; she told them about herself, her professional background, extracurricular activities she had been involved with, etc. Then came the stinger:

"So what brings you here?" She had a feeling this question would come up, though she was hoping it would not. She knew her real reasoning would probably not look too good, so she opted for giving them a more general response, that she just

wanted the more opportunities that a larger city had to offer. The principal, however, would not let the issue go.

“Nothing else we should know about? We called your last school and they said you were a good teacher, but they really didn’t know what was going on with you. It just seems kind of strange for a single young woman to leave her family and a good job when she’s not even tenured and move before she’s even sure she has a job in the city she’s moving to. We’re not looking for someone who’s just going to up and quit on us one day when the winds change.” She felt the principal’s piercing blue eyes on her and felt exposed and flustered at his sudden change of attitude. Feeling the panic begin to rise and mix with the guilt and confusion already boiling within, information that she would normally never give in an interview came overflowing through her mouth like word vomit.

“I left on good terms with the school I was at; I’m sure they told you that much. It was just time for me to leave. My mom was still trying to control every move I made and then I all but left my fiancé at the alter...” Allison knew it was too much information and that she had probably just shot herself in the foot, but it was too late now. Not wanting to see the expressions on the interviewers faces, she focused instead on her hands folded gingerly in her lap.

“Mr. Shannon, might I say something?” Barely waiting for a nod of acquiescence from him, Mrs. Dour Face jumped in with her southern lady drawl. “Now when I read your application, I thought I recognized your last name, so I called my daughter to make sure I had it right. My youngest daughter used to be in pageants

with your mother when they were younger.” So that explained the hateful gaze. Mrs. Dour Face was just waiting on Allison to say something stupid so she could interject with a scathing comment. She could almost hear the flush of a toilet as her last hope of a job got flushed down the drain.

“From what I could gather from talking to your poor, dear mother, you just had a complete breakdown. Mr. Shannon, you would not believe the way this young lady talked to her mother! And after she sacrificed so much for you, too...Now, dear,” she leaned in towards Allison and she caught a whiff of the same sickly sweet scent that her mother wore, “I suggest you just take yourself on home and apologize to your heartbroken mother. She might be gracious enough to help you get better.”

This, of course, infuriated Allison, but she didn't want to cause a scene in front of these other people. Her mother obviously had this woman brain washed and was using all of her manipulative powers to trap Allison back home. She wondered if the concern was genuine or not. Maybe her mother did care...but it didn't matter; Allison knew that she had to make her own way now. “Now, I'm not going to talk family issues with you, ma'am.” Allison wondered how she was going to talk her way out of this one. Mrs. Dour still did not look pleased, and Allison knew that didn't bode well for her. “Look, I just had to go. I am a hard worker and I love teaching more than anything else. I know the circumstances I'm coming here under seem a little odd, but you won't be sorry if you give me a chance.” *I hope that worked...*

“Alright, I think that will do it,” Mr. Shannon said as he stood up. “Thank you, Allison. We'll be in touch.” He walked over to the door and opened it for

Allison to exit.

“Thank you all for your time.” Allison may have lost her mind and bombed the interview, but she still had her dignity. She walked out of the office, still with chin up and smile on, though she could feel herself crumbling on the inside.

By the time she got back to Melanie’s apartment, not only had her smile vanished and her chin dropped, but her cheeks were also wet with tears once more. Allison came straight inside and threw herself on Melanie’s couch in exasperation. After giving the rundown of the entire terrible interview, Allison broke down into tears once more.

“I hate to say it, Ally, but you may have to settle for something else for the time being. I would try and get you on at the art library with me but we don’t have anything open either. You could try retail or waiting tables...”

“But I have a degree! And I’ve never had to work any of those sorts of jobs before...I wouldn’t know how.” Fighting the hyperventilation that often accompanies panic made talking difficult. She had had friends that did those sorts of jobs in college and didn’t look down on them for it, but for herself...that had always been entirely out of the question.

“Well, short of moving back home and groveling at your mom’s feet like Sourpuss suggested, you may not have any other choice. You’ll learn it in time; it’s

not that hard.”

“Maybe that’s exactly what I should do. Maybe this isn’t the right decision.” Allison had thus far managed to keep herself busy and keep any real thoughts of the wedding from permeating her psyche. She remembered the hurt look on Jason’s face and the awful things she said to her mother, and how she had been basically mooching off Melanie for two weeks now. She thought that she would feel better once she got away from all of that, but it didn’t appear to be working out that way.

“Don’t start this. I thought you were past the mourning period; it’s been two weeks already and you’ve been fine since after the first night…” But Melanie’s words barely registered as Allison was in deep thought about her actions.

“What am I doing?” Allison said in disgust at herself as she replayed all of it in her mind. It was like watching a bad drama, one of those where you hate the protagonist and feel bad for everyone that has to put up with her. Only this was much, much worse, as Allison was watching herself, and self-loathing is never a good thing. Now that she actually thought about it, Allison felt absolutely terrible. She knew she had some bratty tendencies, but had no idea how deep rooted they were. The thing was, two weeks ago she had felt totally justified in her behavior, and maybe it could be justified to some extent. But this wasn’t Allison. Allison was always nice and never hurt anyone.

Well, I did say that I was tired of fitting into the mold I’ve been in my entire life, Allison thought. But maybe she didn’t want to fully shed her old shell. She finally broke, letting the guilt fully consume her and the tidal wave of tears came

crashing freely from her eyes. Melanie sat down beside Allison on the couch, handing her a wad of tissues.

“Did I make the right decision? I really didn’t need to hurt Jason, did I? I could’ve made myself be happy with him...”

“No you couldn’t have. Just think about it. Do you even actually miss Jason, or do you just feel bad because you made him upset?”

Allison thought about this for a minute as she tore at one of the wet tissues in her hand. “I guess you have a point. I just don’t know what’s gotten into me. You know this isn’t like me.”

“What is like you?”

“I don’t even know anymore. I thought I was doing everything the right way my entire life, but I have no clue who I am.”

“Well, there ya go. You’re not going to find happiness with someone else ‘til you find it in yourself. No one ever said that life was perfect or easy.” Allison had never realized how wise Melanie was until then.

“You should write a self-help book or something,” Allison said, chuckling slightly. “Seriously though, thanks. I know I’ve been a brat, but you really are the best friend I could ever ask for.” Allison reached over and hugged Melanie.

“Alright, Ally. This is getting a little too sentimental for me,” Melanie said as she patted Allison on the back. “And you’re welcome. Now put your face back on so we can go eat. You look horrible.”

those days in the park with her father, and she knew that, no matter who doubted her or looked down upon her, he would've been proud. She was finally making her own way instead of taking the easy course in a passive existence. Besides, the imperfections and gaps and cracks are what make life beautiful, what keep us striving for more.

She often thought of celebrities and how they have all kinds of money and resources and fame at their fingertips, yet attempt suicide or turn to drug and alcohol abuse to dull the pain and emptiness that money can't buy. It made her think about how, if she had everything, what would she have to live for? There were a lot of things she could regret or change, but they all brought her here, so she refused.

Most of the kids that were outside playing scattered back inside when the rain began. There were two little girls that looked like sisters refusing to be deterred from their fun, though. Ally could see them running, jumping, spinning, laughing like two animals free in the wild. Taking a cue from them, she straightened her arms all the way up as though she was trying to touch the clouds, and Ally began spinning and laughing, her long dark hair twirling out from her body like the swing ride at an amusement park. The thought occurred to her that had her guests looked out at that particular moment, they would've thought her crazy.

But the beautiful thing is, she thought, they would probably come out and join her instead of deeming her weird. It was nice to feel like she belonged for once instead of living a lie. With a sigh of contentment Ally stopped spinning and looked back down at the girls in the courtyard. They had stopped running and were looking

at her with joyful expressions, the way kids do when they see adults acting as crazy as they do. Ally smiled and waved at the girls. They looked at each other, waved back, then exploded into giggles and went back to their play. Ally watched them for a minute more, thinking how they reminded her of herself at that age during her excursions to the park with her father. She knew nothing about these girls' lives or where they would go, but she hoped they realized the importance of living at a young age, and held onto each other. Ally had learned the importance of a friend's love and support much later in life, but at least she had it now.

Turning away from the girls she looked back through the sliding glass door of her apartment. Melanie gave her a questioning look, but a smile from Ally reassured her that she was fine. It had stopped raining, so Ally took one more glance at the wonderful view surrounding her before walking back through the door, back into the life she was making for herself, better than any fairy tale that could've been made up for her.

She slid open the glass door and walked out onto the small wooden deck overlooking the community courtyard in the back of her apartment on an exceptionally warm fall day, overcast just enough to not be miserably hot. Once Ally had broadened her horizons, she had found it quite easy to find a job; after a month of waiting tables in the evenings and working at a small boutique during the day she had saved up enough money to move off of Melanie's couch and into her own apartment. The day she signed her lease papers was the day she truly felt the joy that accompanies real freedom. Though it was just a small studio apartment that cost way too much for the miniscule space it occupied and the only furniture she had was a mattress, a stained coffee table found at a discount furniture store, and some fold out chairs, and the only decorations were her own paintings and collages, it was hers.

Sounds of laughter and conversation wafted out to her from within and this made her smile. Inside, her new friends (plus Melanie) were enjoying what was to be the first of a plethora of these sorts of evenings, and Ally wouldn't have it any other way. It was all so surreal, so not like what she had ever imagined her life to be, that she had to step out back to get some air and collect her thoughts.

As a little girl, Allison had imagined herself to be married to Prince Charming (who resembled her father) and living in a mansion by the time she was her present age, and this was definitely a far cry from all of that. Though that was the path lined out for her, it was not her path. Melanie's words often resonated through Ally's

thoughts: "No one ever said life was easy." Life was meant to be lived, and truly living was tough work. Allison once thought herself too good, too educated to be waiting tables and working retail, but now she could see the beauty in it. She had finally stopped taking things for granted and had never felt so accomplished or satisfied. Once she fully got on her feet she also planned on volunteering at one of the homeless shelters; she had been lucky enough to have a friend that cared for her when she started her life over, but she knew that others were not so lucky and she wanted to help them. She had no intentions of wasting her God-given chance at doing something unselfish with her life.

Ally felt a solitary drop of water hit her head and knew that this should be her cue to go back inside, but instead she simply looked up and lifted her hands as more drops fell in quick succession. A month and a half ago she would've ran back inside as soon as she felt the first one. Now she welcomed the rain and no longer cared if it messed up her hair; as rain has been symbolized for years, it felt very cathartic and cleansing for Ally.

No, her life was not perfect, but whose is? There were still parts that needed to be worked on, holes that still needed filling, cracks in a stained glass window. She had yet to make amends with her mother, though a voice inside of her told her to try, and try she probably will in vain. She still had not offered a sincere apology to Jason, and she didn't know if she ever would. She still missed the idea of someone being there, still got lonely at night, still cried herself to sleep after a bad day at work. But there was an underlying peace and serenity that she had known only as a child on