

~ ONE ~

My story of healing begins with me dragging a bag full of dirty laundry down the Sharpless Street sidewalk in West Chester. It was so full and overflowing, if you saw me you'd probably confuse me with Santa. But I'm not Santa. I'm Stacey. Stacey Marie Keba.

And I was going home for Spring Break 2k17. A whole week full of nothing but being a hermit. And watching *The Office*. And not leaving my bed except for when my dad comes home from running errands, and I do that thing (that you've probably done too) where you pretend and lie through your teeth that you had the most productive day ever, but don't look under my pillow because there's an empty bag of Flamin Hot Cheetos that you do not want to find.

And holy shit why did my dad have to park so far away?

I've got on this giant black backpack that when I fill it with all my theatre textbooks and laptop, movement shoes, and just one stick deodorant it's enough to topple me over. And now it's full of all that plus everything I need for this next week. And did I mention I also have this giant bag of laundry?

I brace myself. *God, give me strength. If this is how I go down, than dammit this is how I go down. And I'm going to be proud. A proud turtle squirming on its shell.*

But shit, I thought my movement professor got me in better shape than this.

Then, finally I get close enough and see my dad's car. He's sitting in there, and he sees me. He sees me. And that's it. He just sits there. And I'm about to cry. But I can't because I'm not gonna tell him. Nope. I'm not gonna tell him. I am an actress. I can do this. Just breathe. I grit my teeth. One foot in front of the other and I make it. My fists are clamped so tight, I can feel crescent moons forming on palms. I open the door.

And he just speaks into his phone doing that weird voice to text text message thing that is wildly inaccurate 50 percent of the time, that sends me gibberish half the time, then he has to send a never ending stream of follow up correction texts. *What I meant to say was GIBBERISH.*

What I meant to say was GIBBERISH. What I mean to say was GIBBERISH. Just use your thumbs and text like a regular person already. Please! And he's doing that instead of helping his daughter with all her things? Like I get it, I am a strong capable woman, but god dammit just help me with my laundry.

I toss the backpack down and it gets his attention. And not in a good way.

But before he can ask, *What the fuck's the matter with you?* I clench my jaw, and calmly open the back passenger door, and shove my shit in the back seat, punching it into place. I will not cry. I will not cry, because then he will ask what's wrong. And I can't tell him about the boy and that night three weeks ago. And the other time that night. The next morning. I can't do it. I won't do it. It's a secret. I get in the passenger seat, and politely click my seatbelt into place. A minute goes by. I look over and my dad's still in park looking at me like I've got two heads.

Let's just go home, I want to scream. But instead, I cry.

And he knows.

And everything is shit.

Plain and simple.

~TWO~

The next week, I was on a mission. I gave myself two rules and 2 rules only: To get in and to get out as fast as possible without being seen.

My dad slowed Jenny, I jumped out, and I tried to be as sneaky as possible when I entered EO BULL, the theatre building. My former home away from home. The second my feet touched pavement, my countdown clock started. I had 30 minutes until my dad would send a search party out for me. 30 minutes.

Noted.

I did not want to see him angry.

Again.

I smiled. For the first time in 3 years, I was real grateful for the construction traffic on 202. I never thought in my entire life I would say that. Never. We were late. And that was so perfect. For once, the universe did something good. Everyone just started class, and I could get in and I could out without being stopped in the cove by people asking, *Oh my god! How was your spring break?*

I could avoid having to take off my sunglasses and pretend like my bloodshot eyes were a byproduct from something cool and hip and 4/20 friendly, when in reality, I haven't slept since my dad dragged me to the police station, paced around for 45 minutes, misheard half the story, and blamed me on the way home the week before. I could avoid the never endless stream of burning glares from my ex-boyfriend--it's been six months, dude. And I could avoid not have to hold my shoulders back and smile like I always used to smile.

Five minutes later, I'm in my advisor Charlie's office sunglasses off, stuttering and twitching, unable to look up from the tiles, and I'm there trying to explain how a bag full of dirty laundry lead to me dropping out of college. Or to be less dramatic (theatre majors, am I right?), a

6 month hiatus until the school's investigation was over and the fall semester started. I'd probably feel safe on campus then.

Sure, laundry didn't hurt me. Laundry didn't cause this. But I guess you could say the laundry was the metaphorical straw that broke my back.

So I'm sitting there, shifting my weight from one butt cheek to the next, trying to explain all this to Charlie but more word-vomity and less metaphorically than that, but also literally, laundry made my dad pull me out of college.

Fuck, how would my life be different had I just asked my roommate for quarters? Good question. Good question.

Now to paint you a picture, Charlie DelMarcelle's a tall, lanky man with a bit of a slouch. Since he's always busy corralling college kids and weaving between pedestrian traffic, when he walks, he walks fast and leads with his nose. He's got places to be, people!

You can always spot him wearing the same slender looking sneakers. Same green and blue backpack. Same variation on an unbuttoned button down over tee shirt, or sweater over a tee shirt, and khakis or cargos and carrying a McCafe from down the street.

A middle aged, tenure-track professor who runs a theatre camp for kids, he has this look in his eyes that tell me he's closer in character to a wise old man rather than an absurdly talented Philadelphia theatre artist with too many Barrymore awards to count. And just to clarify, he's middle aged. Not old. He's like Dumbledore. But the Jude Law Dumbledore not the Richard Harris or Michael Gambon version.

And he scares me.

There aren't many who scare me the way my former professor, director, and mentor scares me.

There aren't many things that scare me the way vulnerability scares me.

It's hard letting people in, *right?* Tell me I'm not alone in this. It's really frickin hard. Especially letting people see the ugliest, nastiest side of you. The side of you that you didn't even know existed until BAM!

Hello trauma and PTSD, it's not nice to meet you at all. GTFO.

It's uncomfortable. It's awkward.

It's a BIG OLE LEAP OF TRUST.

But you have to do it. And here's why--sometimes people surprise you. Most of the times, probably not. But sometimes.

And Charlie surprised me that day.

But before I tell you the magical words he probably pulled out of his ass, you need to realize that while inspiring words might be wonderful, they must be coupled with actions to become powerful. Life didn't just magically get better after hearing Charlie's advice. In fact, life was about to get a lot worse. I had to fight tirelessly against resistance, so I could make better fighting choices for myself. I had to clear a new path for myself.

~THREE~

6 months later, me and my dad are sitting in a booth at Perkins. It's 4pm. And if you average me and my dad's ages together, we are by far the youngest people in here. Breakfast for dinner. That's not the right theme song but whatever. Pancakes. Coffee. I'm still a vegetarian at that point in my life, so no bacon. And I'm sitting there. And he's sitting there. We're staring at each other. And it's like the goddamn fried chicken dinner scene in *Little Miss Sunshine* when Steve Carell's character is first brought home from the hospital.

It's uncomfortable. It's awkward.

I should mention that we're both pretending that an hour and a half ago, I didn't lose my chance at a college degree. We're pretending like my dad didn't just pick me up after a very worrying phone call from Health Services. I was so touched. Really I was. West Chester cared about me and my well being. If only they cared a month ago when they dropped my case after I was enrolled and tuition paid. Darn.

So anyway, we're sitting there in Perkins. It's uncomfortable.

It's awkward.

But I'm mature. I try for conversation. And he does this thing that I really don't like—not the voice-to-text texting thing but the *yes-ma'am-ing* me just to get me to shut up and drop it, and he actually has no intention of letting me do it.

Yes, you can take those stage combat classes you really want to do. Yes, I'll let you go to that audition. Yes, sure, go ahead and sign up for those acting classes.

If I knew what he was doing at that time, my eye would have been twitching. But I didn't. And I went to bed so excited, so hopeful, that even though I no longer had the opportunity to get my college degree, at least this was something. Something the last shred of me and my sanity could hold onto. I could work with this. This could give me purpose. I needed purpose. But then, the next day when I said I wanted to go to the bank to deposit the wad of cash I'd

stashed away so I could then enroll in classes, he didn't have any recollection of saying *yes*. Didn't think I was actually serious. He put his foot down.

And I begged.

I begged.

And he came at me with choice words. Choice words being *fucking basketcase*.
Basketcase. Basketcase. Basketcase.

I opened my mouth, words tumbling out, watching then as my bedroom door starts ricocheting off the wall, and watching as his feet barrel towards me, then flinching as his palm races against the top of my head.

Then he borrowed my money and said he was proud.

I'm still not sure what he was proud of. I sat on my mattress. Too stunned to make a move. Too terrified to move. *Don't move. Don't make him mad. It's safer if you stay still. Don't move. Don't make him mad. It's safer if you stay still.*

The same thoughts from that night months ago, played on repeat, hypnotizing me into some part of my brain I couldn't escape from. Like watching Missy Armitage stir her tea with a spoon. Maybe he was right about what he said. Maybe I was actually a basket case. I was a basketcase. And I realized as I sat on my mattress that saying, *Please don't call me that* wasn't worth it.

It would never be worth it.

It was broken moments like this. Broken moments when reality was so ridiculous, it was much easier to plot my life and trauma on a Freytag's pyramid, and spend hours surmising, lost in my head, wondering how close I was towards what's supposed to be a happy ending, full of all the good shit that's supposed to come out of life?

You guys remember those from High School English class, right?

The inciting event, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, or as some fancy schmancy people like to call the denouement.

If I was in a play, what choices would I make based on my character's history? What's her backstory? Did she ever go through trauma before? Is this true to her? Would it make her proud? Or is she acting like a wild dog that's got her foot caught in a snare?

I don't know. I never played a basket case before.

But fuck it. I was a basket case who was still going to read plays and hide them. I was a basket case who was going to make choices. I was a basketcase who was going to take her power back.

~ FOUR ~

The next week, I am standing in the kitchen—a kitchen full of mustard yellow appliances that were all the rage in the 70s. Also, our oven has never been cleaned. Not once. It's 3:51 in the afternoon. I've dressed for the occasion. Bra on, clean shirt, my nice pair of sweatpants, hair brushed, pulled back in a half pony—the whole nine yards.

I pull out the kitchen chair. His work boots sit right in front. Lunch packed. And I just spent the past 10 minutes hunting down his cell phone, charger, wallet, and keys. Just like every other day. It's a hard balance being on my best behavior and not raising suspicion. Because most days I roll my eyes at the frenzy of getting my dad out the door and to work on time. I don't put much effort into helping. I don't normally listen to what he blabbers. But I want him to be in a good mood today.

He talks.

I still don't really listen, but I nod my head and throw in some *I-support-yous* and some *I-think-that's-a-great-idea*. Then, the dreaded moment comes where I'm forced to improv.

Kiddo, tell me something you did today. Tell me something new.

It happens every day, and it's a real struggle.

I'm not allowed to leave the house, I want to remind him. But I don't. He sounds too hopeful. Hopeful for me. Hopeful for us. Trauma was effecting us both.

I think I say something about our dogs.

I never made the improv team in college.

Finally, he leaves. I hear the screen door slam shut, and I let my posture slouch. I was sneaking out to do something my dad did not approve of—group therapy here at Network of Victims Assistance.

Now this was a real daring feat, more daring than the Battle of Blackwater, because Jenny, my 260k mile plus GMC, always has me crossing my fingers that grannies don't flip me

the bird when I have to accelerate an merge onto a road above 60 miles per hour, and to this day, I still do this thing where every time my foot comes down on the pedal, my right shoulder comes forward as I try to will her up to the speed limit. She's had her engine replaced twice, her fan belt squeals any time there's moisture in the air and it squeals so loudly when I pull up to my friend's house I don't have to ring the doorbell, because they could hear me from down the street, and shit, I missed Denise's birthday. Denise from the AAA Premier Member Services' hotline? Ugh.

I miss everyone's birthday, tbh. Any milestone. It's always like 3 days since the last person made a comment on their status and too awkward to reach out on FB. So I'm that asshat that just never reaches out. Oh well.

Anyway, I offer up a prayer to the Lord of Light—Red Priestess, I will give you my blood. I will let you put leeches on me, but please let Jenny be ok tonight. Please don't let any deer jump out in front of me. Please don't let me run out of gas. Please don't let my dad find out. Come on Jenny. Come on Jenny.

Come on. You can do this. And she did it. I did it. And every week for the next year, I took my power back.

~ FIVE ~

And as I attended NOVA, I never forgot the way Charlie surprised me that day in his office.

As some of you in this room know, the words he pulled from thin air became the only barrier between lightness and darkness, progress and self-destruction. Big time self-destruction. Even after my case was dropped, and I was left abandoned, and all my progress reverted and then some, these words still echoed through my soul, begging me to try one more day.

“Take from this what you will,” he said:

“But this shit that’s happened are Given Circumstances. These are your Life’s Given Circumstances. Act—live, choose. But be true and honest as you live among your Life’s Given Circumstances.”

Now I know not everyone in this room speaks theatre, so let me translate this for you.

Whatever happened to you morphed, created, and shaped the environment and daily life that you experience every day. This is a piece of your life’s story. Your life’s history. You can’t change it. These are facts that are set in stone. It would be like reading Romeo and Juliet and expecting a different outcome--unless you’re directing that play and wanna make it weird. But you as an individual still get to choose what you do with it. You still get to live life by your terms. They may be vastly different now, but you cannot go back.

You can only go forward.

And as you choose and live your life, there’s only one simple rule you must follow—be true and honest to yourself.

To your character.

Your life changed. You didn’t ask for it. And it got shitty. Plain and simple. When that happens, it’s impossible for life not to change you. But deep down, there are some things that

trauma cannot touch. Not if you don't let it. These are your core values and your outlook. Your soul. Your conscience. Your intuition. So, dig deep and listen.

Make honest decisions that are true to you and not your trauma. Trauma's only power was being a catalyst for you to make bold, brave choices.

It's been a little over years since I first sat in Charlie's office with a stutter and a twitch, terrified of the way my story was shifting, terrified of how little scenes I'd have left to appear in, terrified I was staring in a Shakespearean tragedy, but now life is good. It's so good.

I'm 23, and I have the most amazing amazing support system, a loving boyfriend I could have only dreamed of. A puppy named Lincoln. I made the "no-college degree" thing work by getting my Realtor license, and now I also have a job with benefits. Like I can pay my bills AND go to the doctor. I don't have to choose! No more bill and credit score roulette. But the best part is, I've brought what I love is back in my life—acting. God I missed it. That and Trusting. Being open to new people, helping them, letting them in in ways I never could before even before the trauma, using my voice for change, and for fucks sake being happy. Can I say that? It feels good to be happy.

All of these are choices that I made. Healthy choices that I wasn't always ready for. Healthy choices that at one point seemed so simple—yet so far away and so confusing. But I kept trying. I kept listening to Charlie's words. And I chose to have faith in myself.

I challenge you to keep trying. Please keep trying. Fail. Fail big. Be stupid. Be so stupid. Smack yourself in the face. Cringe at your blunders—preferably in the shower or right as your about to fall asleep, because that's when it tends to always happens. Then laugh them off and get back up. You judge yourself too harshly. You're human. Forgive yourself, and keep going. There is no right or wrong timeline for healing. Just take your time and live truthfully. That's what I did.

And let me tell you, there is no greater gift than knowing that because I was stubborn and scrappy and skinned my knees for the past 2 years in choosing to overcome my trauma, that I now get to go to bed happy, knowing that I am doing what I love. On my own terms. With those whom I love. Who I have chosen. And who have chosen me back.

For that reason alone, I would never trade the day that I was too shy to ask my roommate for quarters to do my laundry. And I hope one day you wouldn't either. You are brave. I support you. And I congratulate you for being on this journey towards healing.

Break a leg.