

OMNIVISUM

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who we are

We're Okay

Written by Lexie Pellegrin

I'd grown accustomed to the sound of muffled yelling at a very young age; through three layers of My Little Pony coloring pages and a thick blanket strategically tacked to the hallway entrance leading to my bedroom, I could just barely make out some of the lethargic words that launched from Rod's mouth.

Something about a whole bench, a pause, and, then, my name. I smacked the pink and purple heart shaped clock on the floor near my mattress, squinted at the bright numbers on the display, then pushed it face-first into the melted carpet. It was 2:34 a.m. I hummed the number song to myself. The front door slammed with an unmistakable smack. I doubted anyone was sleeping before, but they definitely weren't now.

I didn't hear my mom walk into the room, but I could smell the sharpness of her cucumber melon perfume and Marlboro Red 100s. She poked me in the nose gently, kind of like the sisters on Practical Magic. We watched that movie a lot. People look at me funny when I tell them that Sandra Bullock was my first TV crush.

My mom pushed a pair of shoes at me.

"Can you put these on for me, my girl? Momma needs you to stay at Maw's tonight." She only called me that right after she woke up, when she was scared, or when she was high. I pretended not to notice. "You're okay." It wasn't a question.

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“Get a skirt for school tomorrow,” she whispered. She dug around in the panty drawer for socks, but I couldn’t tell her that I didn’t have any clean socks, or that I didn’t have school the next day because it was Sunday.

Like a little package of contraband, I was escorted through the slightly silent house in my nightie and Tims, my stuffed animal tucked roughly under my arm. There was a buzz in the air; the motor in the large box fan that sat elegantly in the window whirred loudly despite the thick layer of cat fur and cigarette smoke coating the blades, preventing them from moving. The lights in the kitchen and living room were off, the fish tank bulb had burnt weeks prior, and the porch light wouldn’t turn on when I flicked the switch. Behind a purple scrapbook near the front door stood a heavy duty flashlight and a smaller light decorated with Stegosauruses. I didn’t need to see, but it ensured that I avoided the frogs. I hated the frogs. Mom gave me the lanyard from her purse with a purple key attached to it.

She watched me stumble through too-tall grass, the damp blades wetting the bottom of my nightie. Paw Paw Moon- I didn’t understand the concept of Heaven at that time, so I believed my grandfather had quite literally become the moon when he passed away- wasn’t very bright. I relied on the flashlight. No frogs. The walk seemed so long then. I turned to look back at my mom, but in her place was a dot of orange light that bounced around like a lightning bug until it eventually burned out. When I unlocked my Grandmother’s front door, she was waiting for me in the kitchen. She greeted me with a smile, took off my wet shoes, and carried me to bed.

In the same way a four-chord song progression carves memories the size of calluses on your fingertips, so did that late-night routine carve itself into my brain: the box fan’s song, the mud under my shoes, the dew on my knees, the damn frogs.

It was usually at night, after George Lopez would finish but before the boats in the bayou would glide past our house and into the Gulf. Very rarely would my mom ask me to go when the sun was up; she didn’t like asking me then, but sometimes Rod - her boyfriend who’d bravely taken on the role of a father figure for me - got angry during the day, which complicated things.

I stayed home from school some time in November because I had a fever the night before. It wasn’t really cold outside, even though it was November, but I’d learned that it doesn’t get really cold in Louisiana because we live in the South.



I took a colder-than-usual bath; the fever and humidity made things sticky and uncomfortable. When I was done, I wrapped myself in a towel and wobbled out of the bathroom toward my bedroom. The blanket that was typically tacked up in the hallway was torn down and sat crumpled on the floor, like a pile of wrinkles without a voice. The front door was wide open, too, and just as I stepped into view, the house phone collided with the wall near my head. It never stood a chance. Bits of white, shattered plastic flew in every direction; a piece hit my ankle, cutting me. My mom picked up the aluminum bat she kept close to the porch in case of coyotes and launched herself between me and Rod, who was already in the process of stumbling into the living room. She screamed at me to go. I went. The sun was up, so there weren't any frogs.

I blame Terrebonne General Hospital for the deficient relationship my mom and I have, though the fact that neither of us were particularly ready for my arrival did not help our situation. Normally, the fetus will turn upside-down so that the mother can easily push the child into the world. The doctors called me "transverse;" my mother called me "difficult." She wouldn't dilate more than four centimeters, either. Less than thirty hours after I was pulled from my mom's body via cesarean, she "contracted an infection" that ate her skin from the inside out due to a "foreign object abandoned in the abdominal area." A seventeen year old girl hopped up on morphine shouldn't be expected to understand the Wheel of Fortune puzzle on her shared hospital TV set, let alone the legal jargon of the hospital's medical lawyer.

For a little over two weeks my grandmother cared for her near-dying teenage daughter and newborn granddaughter, neither of which could sit up on their own or coherently voice their problems and pain. They signed an AMA (against medical advice) which released my mother from the hospital that nearly killed her. They supplied tons of free packaging gauze and antibiotics for the awfully long, arduous healing process, as well as an infant-sized nebulizer mask for the broken baby that'd been born too soon.

The fourteen inch incision that began from my mother's right hip and ended at her left one had to be packed and unpacked daily, and despite the copious amounts of opioids being shoveled into her body, the feeling of necrotized flesh being reopened everyday was excruciating. My mom wanted to die, so my grandma had to watch her at every waking moment to ensure she didn't try to take her own life. Even



after she was healed, my mom remained dependent on pain medicine to make her feel like a functioning human. When the prescriptions stopped, she turned to other means of attaining those medications. She couldn't take care of a baby, at least, not alone.

Our house was never empty. Rod had plenty of connections around town, and because she was more or less a child herself, my mother relied heavily on the "village" to take care of me. The same person would never tuck me in and lock my door for me two nights in a row. It was like having ten parents between the ages of seventeen and twenty-nine, and they all smelled different and slurred their words. They abused drugs on a regular basis and couldn't define the word sober if their life depended on it. Every one of them were my aunts and uncles, and their children were my cousins, but only my mother and I shared blood.

My cousin Kelli and I shared a bedroom for a while, which wasn't awful all the time. We almost had things in common. I read a lot of books and she liked to eat paper. We both really loved animals, but her version of playing with our childhood kitty straddled the line between cuddling and pro-wrestling. I liked to sing and she liked to yell.

One year my grandma who wasn't really my grandma - Rod's mom - bought us a Barbie Karaoke machine for Christmas. We took turns performing for everyone while dancing on an incredibly dilapidated coffee table that had been used as a tattoo bench more than once.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked when we took a brief intermission from our concert. My mom wasn't home, and neither was Rod, but we still had Christmas with the aunts and uncles that were around. "A shark," Kelli said. She knew she would get a response from that answer, and she was right. Everyone laughed, especially my not-grandma, who laughed almost too hard to hear my answer. "Raven Symone," I replied, "from The Cheetah Girls.

"She's black," she said. It wasn't just an observation. Her real grandchildren were black, too, so the venom in her voice didn't add up.

"She's pretty, and momma says I sound like her when I sing." I took the karaoke machine back to my room to save myself from a butt whipping, which Rod called a whip'n when he used his hand and a lesson when he used his belt. I didn't know what my not-grandma called them, or what she used to give them, and I didn't want to find out.



My mother came home later that night; she smelled of fried foods, chemicals, and sweat. I hugged her tightly when she was close enough. She told me that I shouldn't have spoken the way I did, and she said it loud enough for the people in the living room to hear her. Before she locked my door, though, she gave me a high five. With greying skin and drooping eyes, she looked too tired to be twenty-two.

As I got older and began understanding and communicating in a more mature way, the nighttime walks to my grandmother's house became daily occurrences. My mom insisted that I start my journey earlier in the night before my bedtime, and sometimes before dinner. She was afraid I'd see too much, as if I hadn't seen it all already. No longer was I tucked into bed by a nameless bald aunt with manic depression or kissed on the forehead by a drunk uncle who had beer for breakfast and crack for dinner. I saw my mom's family less, and with that, my mom, too.

One afternoon I didn't walk to my mom's house after school; instead, I stayed home with my grandma. Home: that's what we called it after a certain point, even my mom, though she seemed bitter about it. I was bitter, too. I couldn't understand why she was so angry at me. I did what I was told, I was very smart in school, and I didn't bite anyone even though they usually deserved to be bitten. My extended family would melt and spoil me because I was so clever and well-behaved, but they didn't know that I had to be well-behaved. Bad kids get attention, sure, but good kids get love. "You can tell your grandma raised you," they would say, but they didn't understand, and for a while, neither did I.

I stopped seeing Rod because my mom stopped seeing Rod. I believed he'd fallen down the stairs and hurt himself, which was partially true. My mom got a restraining order and moved to a different town. She met another guy, an ugly shell of a man, who made her happy for a little while. He made her look twenty-five and feel sixteen again.

Even from a different town, she came to my important events. Whenever I had an award ceremony, she sat in the front row. I brought her to school for the book fair every nine weeks, and each time she let me buy a book. I began playing clarinet and my mom requested off of work for every concert so that she could listen to me perform. She was my biggest fan.

I got off of the school bus one Friday, and I was distraught



over this jerk who'd broken my favorite hair band. My mom's green Crown Vic was in the driveway; a few boxes in the back seat took up most of the available seating space. She sat on the steps outside of my grandma's house with her new boyfriend, Andrew, and my grandma. She was smiling, and she hugged me tightly when I got close enough. She smelled like shampoo and cleaning supplies.

"Hey, my girl," she said, practically singing. I hadn't heard her sing in a long time. My teacher that year taught us the process of elimination and other test-taking strategies to prepare us for the upcoming testing mandated by the state. Mom's eyes weren't sleepy, so she hadn't just woken up, and she didn't smell stinky like weed. She was scared again. I pretended not to notice.

We talked about how school was going, and I told her about a new girl who I became friends with. After enough time had passed my anxiety got the better of me.

"You're okay," I said, but I phrased it like a question so she didn't seem suspicious.

The way she breathed, as if it were a difficult chore she was forced to do, scared me.


"Andrew built a second bedroom in the house for you and maw to stay in. It's blue, and you love blue.

"I like yellow now."

"We can paint it yellow," she offered, paused, then began again, "I'm going to need your help with the baby."

More often than not, I disliked when adults sugar-coated things because they thought that a young child couldn't handle straight-forward facts, so my mother literally dropping my future little sibling's existence in my lap was much appreciated.

I obliged, and we grew closer for about eight months, but then the baby was born. Mom went back to work and my grandma focused all of her attention on the baby. I didn't resent the kid, but I did resent my mom. She took me out of my home and dangled the opportunity to have a mother figure just outside of my grasp. I was an animal starving for attention, and the less I was given, the quicker my resentment became hatred. I got attention from Andrew, but it wasn't the kind of wholesome attention a stepdaughter should receive from a stepfather. My mom didn't believe me when I told her, and I hated her for that, too.



The baby grew older and my mom didn't need help anymore, so my grandma decided to go back home. I went home, too, not because I was dependent on my grandmother, but because I knew it would hurt my mom if I did.

Our relationship was never conventional, and it transformed into something incredibly toxic. My hatred for her manifested into hatred for everyone in my life, myself included. At thirteen I was diagnosed with manic depression, exactly like my mom. I was even prescribed the same antidepressant as her. Once word had gotten around to the rest of the family, the image I'd worked so hard to create for myself was skewed. They no longer pined over me; instead, they called me "Cindy's daughter." Their vision of me became something ugly, something I didn't want to be: an awful image of what I thought my mother was. I was forced to conform, and slowly I metamorphosed into a younger version of her: angry, crazy, the black sheep.

I dedicated what I believed to be the rest of my life to becoming the opposite of that image I'd assigned to us. Each achievement I obtained wasn't to better myself, or to pave the way to a successful future, but to prove to a nonexistent, judgmental jury that I was more than just "Cindy's daughter."

Every year I made another personal achievement. I didn't drop out of school. I didn't get pregnant. I didn't rely on an abusive drunk to make me feel like at least half a woman. I wasn't a washed-up teen mom who'd never amount to anything. That was the image I strove to avoid; an ugly, convoluted image that I'd created. It was a nightmare. I was wrong about her, but I was too angry and stubborn to accept it.

Throughout high school she was still my biggest fan. She went to all of my choir concerts, she helped me dress for homecoming and prom, and she was overall an incredibly supportive person even though I didn't want her to be. I progressively fought to keep my mother out of my life simply out of spite, and I'm pretty sure she picked up on it, but pretended not to notice.

I graduated from high school in 2017. I had planned to kill myself around that time, so I wasn't prepared to deal with life. Then I didn't kill myself. Being an adult was unavoidable, and it was not a gradual event. I was handed my diploma and immediately thrown into rational, logical thinking. They just kind of expect you to know how to swim - and where you want to swim for the next two to six years of your life- after years of algebra and pep rallies.



College occupied the majority of my time and energy. I wasn't happy by any means, but I was too tired to keep up with maintaining my hatred for people. It was like a switch was flipped.

I visited my mom more often, and I grew closer to her by bonding over the woes of adulthood. When I called her to cry about taxes, she laughed with slight pity and told me that she still didn't know how those worked. She still came to my concerts and award ceremonies, too.

I was inducted into the Phi Kappa Phi Honor Society, which is one of the most highly acclaimed Honor Societies in the nation. My mom and my grandmother sat in the front row, like always, and when I walked across the stage to be recognized, my mother screamed in praise like the crazy cajun lady she is. I was embarrassed, but I didn't get angry; instead, I laughed while receiving my pin and documentation and shook the hands of the pompous people looking disapprovingly into the crowd. I finally stopped pushing her away, and once I'd done that, I started to smile again.

When the ceremony was over and we were on our way to the after party dinner, she pulled me to the side away from my grandmother, a look of concern on her face.

"Maw Maw told me what happened with the blood donation truck." I donated blood at every opportunity, and my mother knew that donating was important to me, even if she didn't understand. It had become a routine, a spiritual experience, like going to confession, but it was taken away from me. The first guy I willingly had sex with cheated on me with a man, and because of medical caution, I was told I couldn't donate without proof that I was clear of any sexually transmitted diseases like HIV.

"You can call me, you know. You can talk to me."

"I know, I just didn't think you'd..."

"Care?"

"Understand," I corrected. I shook my head and pulled her towards the dining hall.

"I don't care that he cheated on me. Look, can we talk about this later?" I asked. I expected her to protest. She was good at turning good moments into bad ones, even if she didn't mean to.

"Yeah, baby. We can talk about it later. But promise me that we're actually going to talk?"



"I promise. Come on, they have egg rolls."

Later, we talked about it. We talked about it, and we talked about sex, and I asked her questions I could never ask my grandmother, and it was fulfilling. She told me that she didn't understand why I was so upset about not being able to donate, and I told her it wasn't something that was easy to explain. We didn't get to grow up together, but we did get to experience adulthood around the same time, and I appreciated her honesty and openness.

My mother eventually moved into her old home closer to my grandmother, partly to help my grandma in her old age, but also partly because of money issues. She met a man who she deserved, and who deserved her in return. It was a quick love, but the timing was perfect.

We wore sleeveless dresses in December, my sister and I in red and the rest of her party in charcoal, but I remembered that it doesn't get too cold in Louisiana because we live in the South, so the sleeveless dresses weren't an issue. They flowed past our ankles and just barely tickled the tops of our All-Star Converse shoes. Thirteen women in a single hotel room resulted in four separate noise complaints, a tongue print on the glass patio door, several burns from curling irons, and a lot of interesting photos for the wedding album.

About two hours into getting ready, my mom received a phone call from the photographer. He proceeded to inform us that the owner of the home in which the groomsmen's photos were supposed to be taken was being difficult. My mom started to panic, as if the room around her was shrinking and daggers were fastened securely to the walls.

I pried the phone from her makeup-covered ear and handed it off to Marie, one of the more assertive women in the bridal party, so that she might fix the photography fiasco while I calmed down the bride.

"You're okay," I said. My hands held her own tightly. Of all the similarities between the two of us, our smiles, our hairline, our antidepressants, the veins on our feet and the sound of our coughs, our hands were the only feature that were completely different. Mine are pink, small, and chubby with short nail beds and bitten cuticles while her hands are larger, long, and worked into a yellow and blue mosaic of discoloration from years of work and smoking. Her nails curved down, around the tips of her fingers, and mine would have curled up like the tips of elf shoes had then not been cut to the nerve.



"I knew it was too soon. This is just the universe reinforcing it. We can put it off, my girl. It's okay. We're just not ready, is all. Another day."

"Shut up."

"Another day."

"You're okay. Marie?"

"Barker's complying. Phone's turned off."

"See?" I offered, paused, then began again,

"You're okay."

My mom laughed, held her breath, then nodded. The daggers fell off of the walls and the room returned to its original size. "We're okay," she said.

Eight hours later I was a witness to my mom's unity with my third and final stepfather. Poinsettias littered the floor of the hall, loudass cajun women danced a two-step to modern alternative rock music, and my new dad and I danced together for the first time surrounded by pine trees and wine. I began my maid of honor speech by admitting to the overstuffed dance hall that my mother had awful taste in men, but somehow managed to fall in love with the perfect one. Everyone laughed.

My mom is tired, and she looks older than thirty-eight, but she's the happiest I've ever seen her. The version of her that I'd crafted in my angsty teen brain so many years ago wasn't her, but instead it was a nightmare, a creature, a horrible projection of my biggest fears. I don't sing anymore, and being a shark seems too intense for me. When I grow up, I want to be like my mom: dedicated, persistent, and strong.