

Preface

(We all know who's really to blame: My Mom and Dad, of course.)

I'm not nuts. At least I have never had a doctor or medical professional say I was crazy despite a few (former) friends, foes, and even a family member or two who most certainly thought I was (am). "Why on Earth would a smart girl like you marry someone in prison, much less a murderer?" I heard more than a few times, to which I would smile and give varying answers depending on my mood or who asked the question.

Even though my upbringing could have been better (as I'm sure anyone could say), I still think all kids should grow up, at least for the most part, like I did. I had a real mom and a real dad. I had real sisters and a real brother. I lived on a real farm in the Midwest. I played outside all day. I got dirty, I got hurt, I learned how to think and make quick decisions. Of course I made some bad decisions. I got the belt—a LOT. I got my hair pulled—a LOT. But it was *real*—which is more than I can say for a lot of people I see today. I learned the value (and sometimes the repercussions) of helping your neighbor whether you liked them or not. I learned to be independent. (When you live in the sticks, you figure out how to be self-sufficient and creative just as naturally as you figure out how to—well, you know.) I learned to be tough—to either sleep in the bed you made or set it on fire with a vengeance and move on with your head held high ready to pay the piper, no matter the price.

I also learned to fall in love. No thanks to Mom and Dad (who I remember seeing kiss once, a peck, the entire time I grew up). Although I never saw them be affectionate, I figured out soon enough that they must have been passionate at least four times. They fought with passion; as in the kind you think of when you hear 'crime of passion'. It was totally normal to see my Dad staring out the window like a daydreaming zombie and then transition into verbal lashings seemingly out of nowhere in the matter of a split second. These outbursts were often followed by him biting his tongue while making a noise that sounded like he was revving up for some madman rocket blast off, which always included wildly swinging clenched fists, and more often than not something getting broke. "We didn't *need* that [insert *something* we *really* needed] anyway," my Mom would usually say with a sarcastic tone after my Dad walked out of the house to cool off.

Of course my parents loved me; they just showed it in other ways. After all, they kept food on the table, clothes on my back, and a roof over my head. But I've since discovered that parents can do all of these things without really feeling the teeniest tiniest bit of love or affection for the people they do it for. It's like "duty" takes over—and from that point on, some parents run on auto-pilot, pulling the levers and the cranks, pushing the buttons and keeping the family machine going—duty-bound, honor-bound, whatever-bound—but love-bound? Not-so-sure. I really had occasion to wonder!

Let me start with Mom, after all you'd think that's the first place you would find love, right? She once made me a snowmobile suit. Growing up in Minnesota, a snowmobile suit is as important of a piece of attire as sunglasses are in the Arizona sun. I was *thrilled* my Mother made me a snowmobile suit because that meant I could stay outside and play longer in the cold winter. Even though I was only eight or nine at the time, however, I was smart enough to see her intentions were not all from the 'goodness of her heart'. She made it completely out of brown material – smack in the middle of deer hunting season. Every time I went outside to play I felt like I was being watched closely through high powered scopes. Hum, now that I think about it, maybe she just wanted to make sure *someone* watched me, yeah that's it!

One other time I suspected my mother didn't love me was when I broke my leg trying to jump down an entire flight of steps. Showing off, of course! I slipped on the last step. My teacher and my Mother only ever knew of the last part of that statement. After hopping back up the three flights of stairs *alone* (all my friends wanted to play instead, I guess—and who can blame them?—it was recess time), I waited for the teacher to come back into the classroom. She was probably trying to take a break from us unruly kids. She called the principal, who also happened to be the father of a boy I had a slight crush on and he helped me down the steps when Mom arrived to get me. I was taking too long so he finally picked me up and carried me. My Mother just waited by the car. She had had to leave work—a thing she *never* did—and her eyes let me know she was not happy about it.

She drove me to the doctor which was just two blocks from the school in our small town. In her notable silence during the short drive she was probably thinking I could have hopped there instead of her taking time off work. At the doctor's office, she waited in the lobby while the nurse helped me hop to the examination room. It was the first time that I could recall ever being in one. It was cold and entirely too bright. I was *alone* when the doctor told me I had broken my leg, I was *alone* while he built the plaster cast around my foot and calf, and I was *alone* for what seemed like forever while I waited for it to dry.

On the way home, I told my Mom that the doctor said it would take 24 hours to dry before I could walk on the rubber thing on the bottom, so I asked if I could get crutches. She snapped a cold, hard response "They cost too much." I asked if it was possible to rent them instead then, to which she then barked "NO!" She *helped* me hop from the car to the house by holding my arm with a death grip for balance and got me to the couch. She then left me there and drove the nine miles back to work to finish her shift. I couldn't walk and I was *alone*. I crawled down the long hall to the bathroom because I was afraid of falling while I was *alone*. I then crawled to the refrigerator in the kitchen and brought a bunch of snacks back to the couch.

It was during this time that I started to get a little pudgy. I always thought it was due to lack of activity, but I would later learn the term 'comfort food'. A therapist once told me that my mom was only upset because she was worried about providing for the family – showing love in the only way she knew how, or something like that. I don't know. A little TLC may not seem like a big deal to adults—but it is to little kids—and it's not even something they need very much of. Just a look, a smile, a pat on the knee—anything to show that you give a damn—that's usually enough. And when a kid needs it, a kid needs it—more than air, or food, or anything else—even when it's the kid's own damn fault for getting hurt in the first place. Okay, okay, so we all blame our parents!—but we know it's not *all* their fault. Only partly.

So, yeah, I admit, my therapist had a point—but I still thought it was pretty fucked up at the time while I was growing up.

*Disclaimer: My mom actually did crochet some sort of cup looking thing to cover my toes when I had the cast on. I remember it had a thick elastic band to strap it around the back of my heel to stay on; and it was brown.

I knew my Dad loved me though. He would always tell me so as he was handing me a \$5 bill—and he wouldn't let it go until I said "I love you too" back. I suppose he was trying to teach me the value of politeness but it may have created one of my personality flaws as a side effect. I imagine this where I learned that giving people things is how you show love. To this day, I can't break that habit. I am always buying things for

people; even when I hate them (part of the 'kill them with kindness' theory). It's almost like an addiction. I'm pretty sure there are no re-hab programs for compulsive givers, but I would definitely qualify for treatment if there were.

"Even assholes need love." A very old and dear friend once told me this after I shared the pain I went through during my divorce. I hadn't seen her in a very long time, as we both had moved away from each other. She had found God sometime back so when she said that during our parting embrace, it meant more to me than it probably would have from anyone else. I'm pretty sure Jesus would have said it a little differently—but, what the hell, the message would've been the same, right?

One thing I have learned about love and relationships now that I'm older, is that people are not jerks *all* the time, nor did they most likely act like that in the beginning. I probably knew that when I was young, too—but somewhere along the way we forget this basic stuff and dwell on our injuries and insults. My first divorce—believe it or not—was a breeze; almost too easy. The second divorce felt like he raked broken glass over my open and bleeding heart. Yet, I still have trouble accepting when people do nothing but bash their exes. It puzzles me that they don't see how it reflects on them; they picked their mate, were with them, married them, and sometimes had children with them after all. Either there must have been some redeeming quality at some point or they should admit that they are just really stupid for hooking up with a jerk. Let me just state for the record right here: I can't say that some of the decisions I made in *my* past haven't been anything short of stupid either.

However, I *can* honestly say my first husband was a WONDERFUL man. He was smart—like genius smart. He was funny; he left me the sweetest sticky notes with hilarious drawings on them. He was caring and helped any friend in need at the drop of a hat. My second husband was also very smart, funny, and kind. He was a talented artist and he also had a way with words (good and bad). He also had the most beautiful eyes that made me melt. I don't regret falling in love or marrying either of them. I learned and grew a lot from both experiences, as well as from other non-marital relationships I've had.

I've learned there are many kinds of love. I think the most important thing I've learned is that even though you think your world has come to an end, you simply must continue on.