

In The Salt

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Second Edition

For my husband, Jan-Marten
and my sons, Hugo & Max

"April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out
of dead land, mixing memory with desire,
stirring dull roots with a spring rain."
T.S. Eliot

ONE

Maggie sat staring at her nails. She ground her teeth together to help her focus. It was coming again, the wave of nausea and fear. Fighting the panic attack, she looked up at CNN playing on the T.V. monitor in the airport lounge. The words *focus, focus, focus* kept running through her mind. And then it came, *my mother is dead*. The one resounding thought that had been echoing in her head for the past twenty-four hours. Maggie could see those letters in typewriter font flashing across the front of her mind. My mother, my mother is dead. Each time emphasis on a different word, MY mother is dead. My MOTHER is dead. IS DEAD.

"Now boarding flight eighty-two nonstop from New Orleans to Boston. First-class passengers and people needing special assistance may proceed through gate 4," the anonymous voice from the loudspeaker roared. Maggie just sat there forgetting she was a first-class passenger. She was more the special assistance type, she thought sardonically. Maggie gathered her one leather carryon and dropped her sunglasses from the top of her head down over her eyes. She did not have patience for Miss Mary Sunshine Stewardess greeting everyone at gate four with the neatly pressed white polyester blouse, red scarf and platinum hairdo. She hated it when they purposely paused to read her name. Why? Who cares what our names are?

"Thank you, Miss Atwood," the perky stewardess said.

Maggie managed a smirk and bolted through the gate door. The only real thought compelling her was the Bloody Mary she was about to have with her second Valium.

Maggie had booked the first-class ticket after her fourth glass of scotch. If she had to go home to Haven, she was going to go in style. She had gotten a case of the "fuck its" as she called it when your actions were above and beyond your financial or emotional means. It was the "fuck its" that lead her to New Orleans in the first place. And it was that "fuck its" that had stopped her from speaking to her mother. Maybe they weren't working out for her after all.

The call had come at exactly 12:07 p.m. yesterday from Millie, her mother's next-door neighbor and closest family friend. Maggie remembered the time because she could not stop staring at the cable clock over the T.V., as if she averted her eyes her entire world would melt away. When she saw Millie's caller ID, she had instinctively known it was bad news coming to bite her on the ass. In preparation, she sat on the couch and hit the talk button. She had been expecting this call for years, but Maggie could not believe it had finally picked a date and time.

"Maggie, it's Millie, hon."

Maggie could already hear it in her voice. She visualized poor Millie telling neighbors later it was the worst phone call she'd ever had to make. Maggie wanted to say, 'It's okay Millie, I know, I have been waiting for years,' but instead she sat there silent.

"Maggie, your mom... Vivian.... She fell down the stairs last night and well... hon, she had been drinking. I guess we all knew it had to catch up with her sometime."

Millie's voice was breaking up and immediately Maggie began to panic, wishing to God her mother was not in a coma. Her mind flashed to sitting bedside in a hospital, her mother a vegetable enduring the endless idea of death.

"Her brain hemorrhaged from the hit, hon. She was gone in an instant. No pain, hon. None whatsoever."

Millie's voice faded and Maggie, just for a second, felt relief. Her mother's death was black and white, quick as a flash. No monitors beeping, no prolonged pain, no pulling the proverbial plug. But within a split second the relief was gone, and Maggie realized what Millie was really saying and her heart turned to stone. The sad truth was that she always knew it would be this way. Her mother, Vivian Atwood, had been the most active and vibrant alcoholic anyone could have ever known and to have had it end any other way wasn't in the stars.

In the hours that followed, Maggie managed to call her boyfriend Marten at work, pour herself heaping tumblers of scotch, and book a first-class ticket direct from New Orleans to Boston. The brown, smoky feeling that burned her chest competed with the ache that was beginning. A deep pain that she knew would take months, years to subside. By the time Marten had gotten home, she was sitting on the floor of the bathroom, crying into a towel, and clutching an empty glass.

Maggie stopped talking to her mother two years prior, prompting her move from New York City to New Orleans. Not once had she called home to tell her mother where she was or that she was in love or living with the man of her dreams. It would have been the one wish Vivian would have loved fulfilled. Hearing every detail of their relationship would have given Maggie's mother something to look forward to, perhaps a wedding and then grandchildren. Cruelly, Maggie did not spare one crumb of her happiness for her mother. She had kept all her affection and attention for Marten as punishment for her mother's many failures.

Accepting her mother's death was like choking on air itself. The vortex of her life was closing, and her brain felt fuzzy and black. Marten gently wrapped her in a blanket and refilled her drink. "Maggie, breath darling. Listen to me, you will get through this. It will hurt, but you will get through this," Marten whispered over and over. "I love you. That will never change, no matter what happens next."

Maggie looked at him and felt the surge of realization hit her chest like an iceberg. Here was this gorgeous man, dedicated and devoted to her, and she had cheated on him. Maggie never talked about her family, never acknowledged more than their names. Now, she was realizing her obstinacy and silence had been an adultery all of her doing. She had withheld her past, skirted over the details of her family and made it precarious to ask. She made it seem consequential to their happiness, that her secrets remain hers. Her family was a topic not allowed in their relationship, making it capricious and ephemeral. Yet, he was still there before her, accepting of the circumstances. Why did he love her unconditionally? No one in her family did; they all had conditions, rules, the delicate balance of all their lives contingent upon the dutifulness of one another. Was she going to have that kind of relationship with Marten, exactly like her others?

Maggie had met Marten on a hot New Orleans April afternoon. For two months she had been living in the French Quarter and trying to find work. She had just left an unsuccessful job interview with a magazine and easily succumbed to the music and drinks calling to her from a local bar. She had liked the piano player, the breeze through the windows, and the fact that the bar was empty. She was deep into a paperback and halfway through a gin and tonic when Marten Klein strolled in and ordered a beer. Maggie tried not to stare but he was so attractive. At 6'3", blonde hair, blue eyes, he was the epitome of his German heritage. At 31, Maggie had given up on attractive men being

unmarried, straight, and normal and just assumed this was another cosmic joke. Karma was dangling the hope of love before her like a mirage in the desert.

Still, Maggie could not help but steal glances of him for the better part of an hour before he finally broke the ice. "Why do you suppose someone would put a cake out in the rain?" he had asked making direct eye contact with her. The pianist was singing Donna Summer's *MacArthur Park*.

"Wouldn't the better question be, why make a song out it?" Maggie retorted, shrugging her shoulders just a little and smiling.

"Ah, yes Americans do have a funny way of illuminating the wonders of the world." He said wryly.

"Or maybe we just have better drugs that make us see baked goods in strange places." Maggie deadpanned. Immediately, Marten burst out with a hearty laugh and moved one stool closer to Maggie.

They talked all afternoon about music, movies, books-discovering they both liked comedies, Italian food, and expensive wine, yet each disliked politics, California, and dull people. Marten was six years her elder and at 37, he seemed mature but with a boyish guile. She spent the entire night searching for what was wrong with him but, in the end, she had learned maybe there was love at first sight. And in... of all places, an empty bar.

Living in New Orleans, post Hurricane Katrina, Maggie was getting used to bleak and melancholy stories. Marten's was no different. He was from Hamburg, Germany and only moved to the States a few years back. He had already lost his parents to health problems too soon and divorced one wife back in Germany. Marten had presupposed that growing up one should have a big fancy job and a wife in order to be happy. The job, buying and selling international goods, was financially profitable but an emotional abyss. His wife was pretty and dull and valued his bank account more than his heart. So, Marten left Germany and came to New Orleans to be a carpenter, rebuilding houses for the needy after Katrina. He liked the feel of a hammer, being outdoors, building something that would last, and having a drink in the middle of the day if he wanted. He had Euros in the bank from Germany and no one to answer to; he was a free man. He was happy for the most part, which not a lot of people could say. Marten told her it was not really what he wanted to be doing with his

life but said that every day he was reminded he's not the only asshole out there who has a shitty go of it.

They had been dating for six months when she moved into his apartment on the edge of the French Quarter. And now, two years later, they both knew marriage was the next step. Yet there was a wall between them, a roadblock that Maggie had carefully built and would not let their relationship pass. Marten had been open and up front about his past, but Maggie had been reserved and secretive about hers. She found it difficult to explain the complexity and abnormality of her childhood. The difference between their families was that tragedy had struck Marten and his family; they were the casualties of fate and circumstance. Maggie's family had created their own misery through booze and drugs, lies and deceit. Her family was riddled with alcoholism, addiction, and depression. Their pain was self-inflicted with each drink they took and each fabrication of reality they made. She found it unfathomable to even feel sorry for them or herself when the course of their lives had been by choice, designed by the drama. Maggie was sick and embarrassed by it all.

Marten, like the people of New Orleans, had felt true loss. They were the ruined amongst the ruins. Her family had not lost anything. They were criminals who robbed themselves and anyone around them of happiness. That was why she had moved to New Orleans, to distance herself from them. Now that she had met Marten, she stayed far away, scared that they would inflict the same damage on her relationship as they had on her. If she could keep her past and her present separate, she and Marten might have a chance. In the two years that Maggie had been with Marten, the man she loved more than anyone else, she had not spoken to her family.

That night, Marten sat in bed with her until her shaking and sobbing subsided. They rode out the night together; Maggie curled up staring at the night lights of the French Quarter. Although she did not say a word, he reminded her over and over that he loved her. He would get her through this. If she could have said anything without fear of breaking, she would have told him she loved him too.

And deep in the recesses of Maggie's heart, if she could have, she would have told Marten that her family had broken her in all the wrong places and that she didn't know how to mend. They had made her voiceless and shallow, and she feared her love for him was as impermanent and deceptive as their love for her. She would have confessed that she was like her family, each one of them in the worst

possible ways, and despised herself for it. But worst, she could not change who she was, not even for him. And the only way to explain it was for him to meet her mother. She was the most important person in her life for all the wrong and right reasons. And now it was dawning on Maggie that the chance was gone.

Sitting on the plane, Maggie thought about her life or what she thought was the lack of one. Going home, the irony got to her, how far away from her past she had run but how she had not gotten very far. She had Marten, but what else? No marriage, no children, no real career. Maggie was either a failed writer or an aspiring one. She could not decipher the difference. Her obsession with writing started when she was a young girl when Maggie loved to dream up stories about fantasy lands and faraway princes. She wrote poems and amusing pieces for her boarding school English classes and then majored in creative writing at college. But did that make her a writer? Had she taken the notion too far? Stayed too long at a party she wasn't really invited to?

From an early age, Maggie worked hard and got into her father's alma mater, Tufts University in Boston. For four years, she focused and filled herself with twentieth century literature and creative writing classes. After graduation she travelled, seeking experiences outside of what she had known from her childhood in Haven, Massachusetts. Her twenties were a blur of tramping around Europe, staying and working where she could and scribbling in self-indulgent notebooks. Eventually, tired, and broke, she ended up in New York City.

She had a quick wit about her and, during her time in New York, she'd write cultural pieces for the latest hip rag around town. Maggie was known for her venomous take on society and biting remarks about 'American' culture. Once she wrote an article about how Andy Warhol was the Milli Vanilli of the seventies, a great little dance number that had everyone fooled. Her humor was what New York readers loved, but it was not exactly what Maggie had dreamed of writing all those years. Always in the back of her mind was her family and her childhood in Haven, the story she really wanted to tell. Now she was in the Big Easy, and it was not so easy. She had not made the connections, or the friends like she had in New York. Instead, she dropped off old articles here and there waiting for someone to be inspired. But how could they be inspired when she, herself, was not? Words were failing her. Writing had become a chore. When Maggie was a child, she learned early to write the world in which she wished

to live. When her mother would drink, Maggie would retreat to her bedroom and create fairy tales about being saved by a prince. Maggie was older now, she realized that no one was going to save her. Writing was not saving her either. The unfortunate truth in life is that you are responsible for yourself, end of story, kaput. Even people who win the lottery are not saved from themselves, even with 100 million dollars they still end up drunk or in prison.

"Miss Atwood, would you like lunch?" the flight attendant asked. Maggie, a little foggy from the Valium and Bloody Mary did the most obnoxious thing she could, she waved her little plastic cup implying she wanted another one. Normally her motto was not to treat people like servants but right now her moral compass was a bit askew. Maggie's grandmother Virginia used to say, "manners are for free", meaning anyone can use them and usually Maggie respected that credo. But now the Valium was mixing so nicely with the vodka that she finally could let go. Marten was always saying how wound up she was, holding her own self to impossible standards.

But wasn't that the game she was playing with herself? She knew she could commit herself to Marten, could write a novel, could hold a writing job, yet she hadn't. She let the days slip by, things unsaid, the computer untouched. Maggie couldn't figure if it was focus or purpose she lacked. It manifested in a disappointment in herself she was always trying to mask. No one would have ever described her as soft, but she tried hard to not let people see the bitterness either. Self-medicating helped a little too much.

Just like her mother, Maggie thought ironically as she watched the clouds drift past the airplane window. Her mother could never really run away from who she was and now it caught up with her at the bottom of a flight of stairs. Was it time for Maggie's demons to catch up with her, for her to free fall right into her failures? Would her life be as miserable as her mother's? Maggie brushed away the free-flowing tears and stared at the racing landscape below her. She sighed and took the last swig of her drink. "Fuck it."