

It was cold; the kind of bone chilling cold that cut right through you and seemed to freeze even your soul. The sky was overcast, foreshadowing the coming snow. I was sitting in the passenger seat of my car. My hands were neatly folded on the lap of my gray tweed skirt. I stared out the window. My husband, Steven, was going on about a pending embezzlement trial that had hit his hedge fund firm. He went on and on, bashing the same man that he had been golfing with the week before in Palm Springs. He would ask the occasional question that I would answer with a simple nod of the head. Our seven-month-old daughter Sophia slept soundly in her car seat behind us, wrapped in a pink blanket.

“Avery, are you even listening to me?” Steve asked. I could hear the irritation in his voice.

“Yes, Steven,” I said quietly, staring straight ahead at the coming intersection.

Steven pulled up to the crosswalk as the light turned red, all the while telling me how I never listened to him or paid attention, when a homeless man ran through the crosswalk right into the car.

“You stupid bum! What do you think you’re doing?” Steven yelled out his window, pressing firmly on the car horn. I had become accustomed to Steven’s fiery temper; it was usually directed towards me.

The man stopped and stared right at me. He had bright, familiar blue eyes. I knew those eyes. His loopy, black, chin-length hair looked greasy and matted. He wore a dirty blue hoodie and a black coat. His hands were black with dirt and grime. The man’s shoes were so worn that the sole had begun detaching from the rest of the shoe. I knew this man; he was the man that I grew up with. The person I loved dearly.

“Mattie,” I whispered with a heavy heart. Almost as if he had heard the haunting call of his name, he took off running through the maze of taxicabs. I flung open the car door and ran out after him. I could hear Steven yelling my name, but I ignored him and kept running. Matt ran down an alley and disappeared. I looked from left to right, trying to see which way he went. I put my hands on my head and took a labored sigh. Had that really just happened? Was that really Matt? What was he doing? Where did he go? I walked out to the street clutching my handbag. I walked slowly over to my car, teetering on my 4-inch pumps with every step.

I walked into our apartment and switched on the light. It was dark. It was already six o’clock on a cold winter night. I could see the snow from the windows in the living room. The

snow looked as if it were dancing, a slow haunting dance. I thought to myself, I wonder where Matt is. Is he okay? Is he cold? I couldn't sit and think about it. I had to do something else.

"Here," Steven said handing Sophia over to me. He sauntered over to the beige sectional and sat with his arms stretched across the back. He kicked off his shoes and put his feet on the sectional. He was watching CNN at an obnoxious volume. I looked down as Sophia lay in my arms fast asleep. She was still in her brown Mary Janes and pink down coat. Her cheeks and ears were the rosiest shade of pink. Her eyelids slightly fluttered, but then she was absolutely still. I carefully carried Sophia into her room, trying not to wake her. The walls of Sophia's room were purple and pink stripes. There was a rocking chair in the corner, opposite of her crib, and an old vanity that had belonged to my sister and me when we were kids. I gently took Sophia's coat and shoes off and placed her in her crib. I put her blanket on her and gave her Mr. Bananas, her favorite toy, to sleep with. Her little hands held firmly onto him. I quietly walked out of the room but bumped into the vanity. There were so many memories in that vanity, but one came flooding back to me.

I was sitting on the bench, as Gemma was French braiding my hair. It was the summer before I was going into second grade, and Gemma was entering fifth. I was straining my neck to peer out the window at the large yellow and white moving van pulling in front of the house across the street.

"Stay still! I'm going to have to keep starting over!" Gemma said.

"Sorry, Gem." I faced the vanity again and couldn't help but think about the brand new neighbors moving in across the street.

As soon as Gemma finished my braid, I jumped up from the chair and ran towards the front door. As soon as I opened the door, my mother said from the kitchen, "Avery Grace, where do you think you're going?"

"Um, to meet the new neighbors," I said hoping with all my might that she would let me go.

"Okay, but be back before dinner."

"Yes!" I said quietly to myself.

I ran straight up to the yellow moving van and looked inside. There were two boys. The older one looked like he was Gemma's age and the younger one looked to be my age. The two

boys look virtually identical. They both had jet black, short curly hair. They were both pretty tan and had piercing blue eyes. The only difference was one was shorter than the other.

“Hi, I’m Avery, I live across the street,” I said pointing in the direction of my house.

The two boys looked at me as if to say, “Who are you and why are you talking to us?”

“Um, would you like some help with these boxes?” I said

“No, we’ve got it,” the older boy said.

“Well, do you want to play?” I asked

“No,” the older boy said.

“Do you talk?” I said pointing to the younger boy.

He nodded and said, “I mean, yes, I do.” His face turned red as if he was embarrassed.

“Well, do you wanna play or not?” I said, thinking these new neighbors were dull.

“Sure,” he said hopping out of the moving van.

“Matt, where are you going? We have stuff to do,” the older boy called after him.

Matt turned around and shrugged his shoulders, and followed me.

We walked to the nearby park and were sitting on the seesaw. We had not spoken very much and I was beginning to think that Matt wasn’t one for talking.

“So, where did you move from?”

“Chicago. My dad got a new job at the Crennbroke Community College.”

“What does he do there?” I asked trying to get him to speak more.

“He’s a professor.”

“What does he teach?” I asked.

“Literature.”

“What’s that?”

“You know, books. He talks about those big time writers like um, Hemingway and Dickens.”

“Oh, Hemingwack. I love that lad,” I said trying to impress him with the false knowledge that I pretended to have of these people.

Matt started laughing. First, a chuckle, then the uncontrollable spewing of laughter. Laughing so hard you could see a slight tear run down his cheek.

“What’s so funny?” I asked genuinely perplexed.

“Ernest Hemingway,” he said taking a brief respite from laughing.

“Yeah, what about him? Was he one of your friends back home?”

He started laughing again, “I meant Ernest Hemingway, he’s a writer.”

“Yes, and?”

“You said ‘Hemingwack’ and that you loved that lady.”

“Oh,” I could feel my face turning red with embarrassment. I finally had a friend to play with, and he was probably never going to talk to me again because I thought that some great writer guy was a girl, and that I got my “wacks” mixed up with my “ways”.

While I was wallowing in my bruised ego, Matt reached out and tagged me saying, “Tag, you’re it.”

I chased after him as fast as I could. I had a hard time keeping up with him, but I had fun. I had finally found a friend, and I was happy. Matt and I spent the rest of the day playing tag until we had to go home.

I was in the kitchen, the clock on the oven flashed 7:30 p.m., and I was beginning dinner. Steven was in the same spot he was when we walked in. I decided on something simple for dinner, maybe something like baked chicken and mashed potatoes. I started prep and went into cooking mode. By the time I looked up at the clock again, it was 8:15 and dinner was finished. “Steven,” I said, “dinner’s ready.”

“Um, I’m going to go meet some of the guys from office down at O’Riley’s,” he said barely looking up from the TV.

“Now?”

“No, next week, of course now.”

“You saw me cooking. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Avery, why do you make everything such a big deal? It’s just some chicken and potatoes,” he said gruffly.

I watched as Steven went to the closet to get his coat, grabbed the keys out of the key dish and left, slamming the door behind him.

I went and turned off the TV. I stood there for a minute reveling in the silence. I went to the kitchen and made my plate. I slowly placed some food onto my plate and went to the table to

eat. I ate staring at the falling snow out the window when another memory came flooding in once again.

I was about thirteen years old and I had gone ice skating on the pond with a few of my friends from school. It was snowing, the soft gentle kind of snow that you try to catch with the tip of your nose. My mom had specifically told not to go ice skating, but, she was obviously ancient and the word “fun” wasn’t even in her vocabulary. Besides, I needed to show off the new ice skates that I had gotten a week before for Christmas. I sat down on the ground and began lacing up my skates. It was pretty dark and hard to see, but in my mind it made this adventure all the more exciting.

“I don’t think this is a good idea guys. Remember last year when that guy fell in?” my friend Julie Lawrence said. Even through the dark I could see the concern in her eyes.

“It will be fine. Don’t worry, Jules,” Kelly replied to calm her down. I nodded in agreement.

I was the first one on the ice, then Kelly, and Julie followed reluctantly after. We were some of the first to skate on the ice because there weren’t many blade marks on it yet. We were skating and laughing and having fun. Kelly and I were far out and we could see Julie was still by the edge of the ice. Some boys from school had joined her. I went off to skate by myself. I looked at my skates as they smoothly glided across the ice. I had always loved ice skating. As I skated, I moved farther and farther away to the point where it was nearly silent except for the sound of my skates slicing the ice. I began making a figure eight when I heard the crackling sound, my heart dropped. I looked down at my feet to see that the ice had cracked. The next thing I knew, I was in the freezing cold water.

“Help! Somebody help me!” I began to scream. I could hear five pairs of skates coming towards me.

“Oh, my gosh, she fell in! Avery fell in!” I heard Julie say in a panicked voice.

“Don’t just stand there, help me pull her out.” I recognized the voice. It was Matt’s.

“Help! Help! Help! Help!” I screamed, by now I was slowly sinking.

The five of them created a human chain to pull me out of the freezing water.

“Take my hand!” Matt said.

But the moment I lifted up my hand, my body began to sink even more. When I finally grabbed hold of his hand, I was so drenched that I slid right back into the water. Panic began to set in. I was starting to believe that I would die a watery death at the young, tender age of thirteen. I began to sink lower and lower. I heard a large crashing noise as if someone had jumped into the water. The next thing I knew I was being carried up to the surface and something warm was being thrown over the shoulders of my shivering body. Matt had been the one to jump in and pull me out of the water. He had saved my life and I owed everything to him.

I gave up on waiting for Steven and went to bed.

I was dancing, it was the last time I had seen Matt. It was my wedding reception; and he was good, more than good great! His hair was neatly cut, and he looked healthy. It was the best I had seen him in ten years.

“So how does it feel to be a married woman?” Matt asked with his classic smirk.

I shrugged my shoulders, “ Ehhh, the same I guess.”

“You don’t seem too excited about that.”

“I mean, I am, but I don’t know. It doesn’t feel the way I thought it would.”

“He doesn’t seem like a pleasant guy.”

“He has his moments,” I said glancing in Steven’s direction.

“ Avery I always saw you with someone different, someone nicer, someone with a sense of humor, someone”

“Someone like you?” I said interrupting him.

“I didn’t say that,” he said smiling.

“Alright, alright, enough about me. How have you been? I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“I’m finally clean, Avery. I’m thinking about going back to school. Maybe becoming a doctor to help others with addictions.”

“Matt, that’s great! I’m glad to finally have the old you back,” but as I said it, Matt’s face changed. He looked jumpy and a lot more like the man I had seen on the street. His hair had grown longer and matted. His clothes morphed from the khaki’s and blue blazer he was wearing, to a blue sweatshirt and over coat. I could feel myself being pulled farther and farther away, but I didn’t want to leave yet I wanted to stay. And like that he was gone.

I woke up to the sound of someone talking extremely loud on the phone. The sky was still dark and everything in my bedroom was some shade of gray. I looked over to the clock, and it read 4:52 AM.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” I said quietly to myself.

I lay there staring up at the ceiling for a while before I finally realized that I wasn’t going back to sleep. I climbed out of bed and placed my feet on the ground. I grabbed a sweatshirt off the chair. I walked out of my room into the hallway and could hear Steven on the phone. The TV was on mute, so he was probably talking to someone important. “Good Morning,” I said

He waved me off and continued talking.

I made my way to the kitchen where I made myself a bowl of cereal and sat down on one of the stools at the island. I sat and stared out the window still thinking about Matt. It was still snowing. I slowly stirred my cereal around the bowl with a spoon. I just couldn’t stop thinking about him. I remembered when everything all started to change with Matt.

Matt was the new rising star on the track team, the fastest freshman by far and a top contender in the state. He was slated to win state and the entire school went out to cheer for him. I went with my friends and sat front row ready to cheer Matt on. I could see Matt stretching on the side. I just knew he was going to win, but by the look on his face I could see something was wrong. He knew that a couple of college scouts were coming to see him and might would offer him a scholarship. All the runners had lined up. You could hear the crowd swell with cheering

The starter said, “Take your mark.” The crowd was silent. Then a gun shot rang through the air.

The runners were off and Matt was already in first place. He was running way above record pace. Then it happened, almost as if it were in slow motion. I could see Matt start to fall forward, head first, and hit the ground falling in another runner’s way. The other runner was moving so fast that as Matt fell, he could not slow down and ran right on top of Matt’s leg and Matt screamed out in pain. The whole crowd made a loud gasping noise. Matt lay motionless on the ground, his face was covered in blood and dirt and contorted with pain. The paramedics ran on to the field and slowly lifted him on to a stretcher.

Matt broke his leg in three places and was told he would never run competitively again. When Matt returned to school, he was different. He seemed depressed. He used to be the first kid to make a joke, but now he barely talked and avoided pretty much everyone. A few weeks after

that, Matt's older brother, Nate, was killed in the war. I attended the funeral, along with my family. I was almost afraid to talk to Matt. He seemed as if he was lost and just floating through life half awake. From then on any communication I had with Matt was short and gruff. He had definitely changed from who he used to be. During the summer he got his cast off and started hanging out with a bad crowd from school. Matt was going in downward spiral, and by senior year he was gone completely.

I always thought that when I walked across the stage at graduation, Matt would be there to cheer me on, but that never happened.

I took one bite of cereal, it had become a soggy mush. I put the rest of it in the garbage disposal and placed the bowl and spoon in the dish washer. As I looked up I could see that the news was on. What On the screen there was a picture of a man. I knew it was Matt. I ran and turned the sound up. Matt was dead he had been shot early this morning in what the reporter was calling one of the worst drug wars to date. My body went limp. I felt as if I had been punched in the stomach. I fell to the ground and with my face in my hands, I began to sob uncontrollably.

The doorbell rang. I got up slowly and went to the door. I checked the peep hole, but no one was there. I opened to the door and found a single envelope with my name neatly written on it. I picked up the envelope and walked inside. I opened the envelope and there was a letter. it read:

Avery, I'm still alive, but I'm running.

Matt