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Break

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Break

Elaina Erola

When my brand new car first touched the truck I did not save it, and when it punched out the headlight, although my hands were on the steering wheel, I do not remember turning it away. The sharp, steel corner tore a gash down the side of the car until it collided with the solid inner bones and steel of the vehicle, the sacred interior parts. When the car refused to move any further, the jolt whiplashed up my neck and sent a shock to my brain that suddenly put me back in the driver's seat of a wreck.

I was having trouble breathing that day. It was because of the black button-down Oxford, black pants, and black shoes against the black leather interior of the car, but that was the uniform, and I was expected to be the example. It was really hot that day. Maybe not hot the way it is hot in New York in August, or hot the way it is hot in Florida during hurricane season, or hot the way it is in Mississippi ever. It was just too hot for me to breathe that day. Northern Californians only do summers as Indian summers. We endure from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and put our kids back in school, before a day ever hits eighty.

That Saturday was September 20th of 2014, the day of Arcata's North Country Fair. The fair was always well attended, and it was mere days after Humboldt State University's fall semester started. Artisans came from all over to get the first access to a student's financial aid disbursement, by tempting them with a bounty of hand-carved wooden bowls, handmade soaps, and fine jewelry. As a college student, I too had loved the fair, but today it was only an obstacle between me and a parking space.

By that time, I had been the manager at the Arcata RadioShack for six weeks and for five months had been nurturing

my dream of getting into law school, quietly protecting it and defending it. Many people were overjoyed for me, but dozens of my friends and family were concerned, and it was like announcing I was moving into management all over again. Did I know the field was dominated by men? Did I know that the nature of the legal field would do everything it could to keep me small, keep my arguments unrecognized, and keep my voice unheard? The minds I was trying to convince, didn't know. They knew what they thought they knew about being an attorney. They had heard it was a lot of work, a lot of hours, 60, 70, even 80 hours a week. They had heard it was a lot of reading, a lot of research, a lot of problem-solving.

For six years, I had stood behind a register trying to explain to customers that I was not their enemy; I was their advocate. I wanted to help my customers, but I needed to stay within the confines of what was legal, what the corporate office would tolerate, what wouldn't damage the business to the point that it wouldn't function. I spent hours researching problems and fabricating workarounds, manipulating technology and computer systems to force it to achieve something it was not meant to do. I analyzed data every day, agonizing over which hours during the week we were more apt to sell more batteries and then tried to recreate that environment to fully understand cause and effect. In law school, we would call this the actual and proximate cause.

It was hard to explain my job, or what I had made my job, as anything other than a lowly cashier, and so I felt I couldn't explain how it could translate into law. So I carried my dream tightly, because only I saw the thread that connected my present to my future. The more the dream grew and steps were fully realized, the more every day working for RadioShack was less painful, less humiliating. It meant that every day I buttoned up the black shirt to sell a dozen car chargers for the iPhone 5, I was moving farther away from a life that I had resigned myself to, let myself get lost in, and closer to a

life where I could play the leading role.

I maneuvered my slate-gray 2009 Subaru Legacy through the tiny streets of the residential town and dodged pedestrians that had their children in tow, a beer in one hand and dreadlocks down to their backs. I finally made it safely to Wells Fargo and let a little bit of the anxiety melt off of me. As my car was stopped I tried to run through my mental checklist again, only managing to tick “find a parking spot” off of it. In a black Wells Fargo bank bag, I had a two-inch thick brick of cash. On this busy Saturday, our deposit was close to three or four thousand dollars, and it was only three in the afternoon.

Troy, the previous manager, had kept Arcata staffed at around 200 hours a week, which meant with a staff of eight employees, everyone had 25 hours a week, depending on college class schedules. When I inherited the store, I inherited that schedule as well, and I didn’t want to change it right away, so that day I had a full staff. But they were ready to go home. Lunch breaks needed to be taken, and as soon as I arrived at the bank, I felt the urgency that I needed to get back.

I opened the door of my car and slapped a black kitten heel on the searing hot pavement, breathing in air that was just slightly cooler than the oven that was my sedan. I clicked my way across the parking lot carrying the cash tucked under my arm like a Pomeranian, and then clicked my way across the tiles of the bank floor joining the back of the inevitably long line. As soon as I came to a rest, one more thought flooded it’s way back in. The LSATs were in one week.

The LSATs had to be taken to get into a law school accredited by the American Bar Association, and they meant nothing to anyone except the admissions board. The questions asked absolutely nothing about law, and they determined everything about your fate. I was aiming for a score that would allow me into a school with a Native American Law program and a financial aid package. I needed a financial aid package. I was studying every spare minute I had. The popular option was to usual-

ly take a prep course, but because there wasn't one available in my area, I was teaching myself.

I moved up in line. The bank security camera always provided high definition close-ups of the second person in line at the bank. I hated looking at myself in that camera. Sometimes, I could only see that I had been gaining weight, and sometimes it was that my hair was unkempt, and other times I would catch my reflection out of the corner of my eye and be attracted to the striking woman in the monitor, before realizing it was me. I always tried not to make eye contact with the woman in the monitor no matter which version of me she was.

Another step forward. I held the cash at my waist and tried not to see anyone. I had just cashed out a 401k with RadioShack that I used to pay off my credit card, but I still had so much debt. My student loans were still another \$10,000, and another \$10,000 in credit cards that had sold me an extravagant lifestyle that I could not afford. I had made the goal of at least paying off my car so that I could lower my insurance payments before taking off for law school, but even with my new raise, it was another enemy of my precious dream.

Another step forward. Besides running the store and studying for the LSATs, I was working on my second internship with the Yurok Tribal Justice Center, an hour north in Klamath California. I didn't have any experience working in a law office and I could see that without an internship or a bar card, it was going to be impossible to get hired. The atmosphere of law offices seemed to be that all the attorneys were perpetually busy and no one had time to train anyone. Some certifications existed for legal secretaries and paralegals but considering I was going for the full Juris Doctorate; it seemed like a step in the wrong direction.

I was working ten hours a day Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and sometimes on Sundays. Every Wednesday I would rise at five a.m. to catch the carpool from Eureka to Klamath. I would shadow an attorney from eight

a.m. to five p.m. and then catch the carpool home.

The work was draining. The attorney and I handled a lot of divorces, custody battles, and domestic violence issues. Sometimes after a day interning, I would collapse into my bed with my silk blouses, skirts, and high heels still clinging to me, too tired to take them off, and just fall asleep that way until morning.

I was with a bank teller now, the cool air from the fans blowing on me, and the sheen on the counter weary from exchanges of wealth. The gold nameplate told me my teller spoke Spanish. I handed over my girth of cash to deposit and explain very succinctly exactly how I need my change. This many ones, this many fives, this many tens, dimes, nickels, quarters and so forth. I hand over a separate bundle of one to supply the funds for this and an official Wells Fargo change slip, documenting exactly what I was handing them, and exactly what I needed back. The teller was able to figure out how many tens I needed before asking me to repeat the entire order again.

As I stood there in the bank waiting for the teller to stumble through elementary school math, I thought about the taste of beer. I thought about a cold, salty, yeasty pale ale and how much more patience I could muster if I knew there was a beer waiting for me at the end of the night. The beer was in a place where the guy that I had been seeing broke things off with me a couple weeks ago on Labor Day. I had started a causal relationship with this partner because he was non-committal, and I figured that once I started law school I could leave him. I tried to convince myself that this relationship had benefited me more than him, but his assertiveness in ending things first shattered my denial. I had made all the right moves to avoid rejection, yet it had found me at 1:30 in the morning on a teetering bar stool, awash in glowing red lights.

“Is there anything else I can do for you, Ma’am?” The teller jolted me out of my self-pity. Ma’am. That comment was a deliberate slight. I was only twenty-eight. I recounted the order and explained to the teller that he had shorted me a

dollar which I needed in quarters. The teller didn't have any more quarters in his till so he had to go buy them from another teller. I pushed my heels into the tiled floor and tried to breathe in the cool air coming from above me. Finally, the teller returned.

I gathered my change off the counter and scooped it into my now much heavier bank bag, thanked the teller and left. Trying to get out of the parking lot was difficult with the traffic and the detour around the fair. I tried to play some music. Only one week left until the LSATs. I did a mental checklist again. I had my paperwork filled out, I had my printed ID card, I had my.... OH SHIT. I had completely forgotten that the LSAT required you to bring in TWO official passport photos to take the test. Where could I get passport photos taken? Didn't I get them at the post office the last time? Isn't there a place here in Arcata I could take them? When would I have time to do that between now and next Saturday?

I signaled toward a shopping center, remembering there was some kind of mailing store near there that did passport photos. I was on a residential street now, my car drifting maybe 20 miles an hour past houses and cars lining the streets, crammed into the spaces. Passport photos. Tribal Court. Red Light. "MA'AM." LSAT. Red Lights. Lunch Breaks. Suddenly, it was like every thought was present in my mind at the same time, like someone took every single beverage out of the fridge at once, each one of them manageable and palatable by themselves, and dumped them all down the drain, a swirl of color and chemistry, the liquids now impossible to distinguish.

There was a flash of white, and then it was like watching my own life as a movie. The car was still moving, and my hands were still on the wheel but I was no longer in control of it. I was an audience member, just as eager to find out what happens next as any other viewer. I didn't steer it, but the car drifted slowly to the right, towards the bumper of a delivery truck, the steel corner like the needle on the spinning wheel in Sleeping Beauty's story. I was moving toward it absent of my

own will, and I couldn't stop it.

I was not moving very fast. Any other driver who had not just had a shortage in their brain would have been fully able to avoid this accident, but I was not a participant here. I could only watch. The noises were terrible but they could not force me to move or react. Only the blast of an unstoppable force colliding with an immovable object, ricocheting up my brain stem forced me back into my own life.

After the crash, everything went into high speed. There was already traffic piling up behind me. I put the car in reverse and pulled it back off of this steel monster that had violated it. I heard pieces of it fall into the street, plastic and rubber bouncing off the asphalt. The rusty brown, the muted color of steel of the industrial delivery truck was unchanged and I was in pieces. It wasn't a fair fight. I pushed the car back into drive, aware of the stream of traffic behind me and the stream of traffic coming at me. There was no place to pull over. There was no place to stop.

I drove the wrong way down a one-way street and pulled over to the right immediately in front of a fire hydrant, where two children were selling lemonade. My throat was dry and the heat snatched breaths from my chest. The children's mother watched me cautiously as I tried to do five things at once. I called my insurance company first, then I hung up. I tried to call AAA. I needed to get my car out of here. The insurance agent took my information and let me know they'd call me back as soon as they could find a driver.

As my flight response rose, all I could think about was how badly I needed to get out of here. Then I remembered I couldn't leave without all the change getting back to the store. The store couldn't make cash transactions if it didn't have change, and if it couldn't make cash transactions, it couldn't stay open tonight. The majority of our sales, close to eighty or ninety percent, were in cash. Without the ability to make sales, our top spot in the district would fall overnight.

Somehow I lost my phone. It was in my hand and then I

didn't have it anymore. I had to call the store, I had to call the insurance company. I got out of the car; I stood up. It was gone. My head whirled in panic and I ran over to the mother watching over her children in the yard on a beautiful sunny September day. "Can I use your phone?" I asked hysterically, and a bit too loud. I tried explaining quickly, "I just got into a car accident and I have to move my car, and I can't find my phone." The mother, who had two five years olds, didn't even react as she calmly went into her house and handed me her cell phone. She seemed to want to tell me that I had never experienced a real emergency in my life.

She handed me her Motorola touch screen and I called my mother. My mother was thousands of miles away on the other side of the country and could do nothing for me, but my hand automatically dialed her number. I told her I was in a car accident. I hit something. I tried to convey my panic to her, tried to get her to telepathically know that I needed her to calm me down but she only heard the wild nonsensical string of words her daughter was attempting. She said "See Elaina? This is what happens when you take on too much—."

And then I did the cruelest things I've ever done to my mother, whom I love so much: I hung up on her. I could not explain that I was not in a position to calm her down right now. I could not understand that she was not just my mother but a person who reacted to things and got upset when people she loved got upset. I could not make any more words.

I made another attempt at a phone call and tried to breath slower. Somehow, the conversation with my mother did calm me down and I figured out that if I had been talking on my phone in the car before it was missing, and I had never left the car, the phone could not be far. I sat in the driver's seat with all the windows closed and I used the mother's phone to call my number. A buzz came from under my seat. I very sheepishly returned the phone to the woman and thanked her profusely.

The shopping center was only one more block and I couldn't handle the helpful pedestrians explaining to me I was facing the wrong way anymore so I moved my car there. The parking lot was not much better. It was a shark tank of cars circling looking for a parking spot to get to the fair. I defiantly parked my car in at the end of a line of cars that was not a parking spot, but still gave drivers plenty of room to get around me. The sharks did not like that. They gave me dirty looks as they drove by slowly, and I ignored them.

I called friends to see if anyone was available on the busy Saturday to take me home. I called the insurance company again. I called the store. One employee, Kevin, was working that day and had their car, but they were out at lunch. I asked my assistant manager to please have him call me while he got back. My mother tried to call me back continuously as I made these calls. I did not pick up.

Once I had filed a claim with my insurance, contacted Kevin to pick up the change, and had someone coming to take me home, I finally returned my mother's call. I knew she'd be angry, but I knew it would be even worse if she thought I couldn't handle this situation on my own. She said she was one minute away from calling the police. She asked me what was wrong and I couldn't tell her? Why had I just driven my car into a delivery truck? Why had I just added another problem to my plate? Only after I could assure her of all the elementary tasks I had completed and I could talk with a level voice, did she let me get off the phone with her.

I surveyed my position again and determined there wasn't even enough room for a tow truck to get in this parking lot. So I started the engine. I drove my car to the outskirts of town near a city park, parts of my car scraping the road and more pieces falling off of it as I moved forward, the drivers who saw me trying to tell me I was insane with their alarmed looks. The short journey was worth it because when I finally got to the park it was deserted. I got a returned call from the tow truck driver and told him where I was.

The air was beginning to cool into the evening by now, and I exited my car and sat down on the cold grass. I was okay now. I fielded minimal requests from strangers walking through, asking if I was okay or if I needed any help. I couldn't stop looking at my car. It didn't deserve this. Maybe I deserved this because I was trying to break into a world completely unfamiliar to me, that I didn't deserve to be a part of. I didn't come from money, I didn't have college graduates in my family tree. I thought maybe the universe was trying to give me a sign.

Kevin made it to the park. He was a tall cheerful young man who always had a good attitude and uncontrollable black curly hair bouncing behind him. He hugged me. He collected the change and my keys to the store so an extra person could stay on tonight and lock up. I thanked him and thanked him again, a little embarrassed but grateful for his kindness as an evening breeze blew past us. It was finally the end of the day.

My mother would take off work the following week and we would stay in a hotel the final four days leading up to the test. She would feed me and talk me through some of the most difficult ideas. She would do this without me asking her to. She would do it because she loved me, and only mentioned a couple of times that if this was the field I wanted to work in, I would need to learn to manage stress better. I would take the LSATs next Saturday and get a perfectly adequate score.

I would remember that because the accident happened while working at RadioShack, the corporation would pay my deductible to fix the car back to brand new, and while it was being restored I would drive a gray minivan all over town, towing with me only my anxieties instead of children on their way to soccer. The car would eventually heal. I would eventually heal. And I would learn for the first time, legs splayed out in the grass, as the day faded, that I had a breaking point.