

Greer



JULY 21, 2016

I KNOW THIS IS THE last time I will be able to write, can feel the strength slipping from my fingers and the clarity slipping from my mind. There is so much to say when you are running out of time. It all feels so important, and yet also absurdly trivial. I am just one person. My struggles have so little bearing on the rest of the larger, wider world. At the beginning, I rushed, worried, finding people to take over my newspaper column and my Instagram account. I hurried to pass off all my responsibilities at the nonprofit, to train new people so Daddy wouldn't have so much to do at the company. Now it all seems so pointless. What does it matter?

Even still, I hope I made a difference in my short time. I think about a woman who came to hear me speak this last time, who looked sad and troubled, who looked like life had won. She told me that my words had helped her through her

divorce, had given her the strength to go forward and find a new career she loved, had eased her fear of starting over. I think about the woman we built a house for, the one who had lost everything in a fire, the way her tears felt against my cheek when we stood in the front yard staring at it, when she was too emotional to even step inside. I think about the children who drew their mothers cards to congratulate them when they finished our job skills training program and we helped them find employment.

I wouldn't go so far as to call it a legacy. But I'm surprised to find that I don't care about that anymore. A legacy means nothing. It's a life that matters. And I know, without a doubt, that we helped to give those women lives they could own, that they could celebrate. It fills my heart, even now.

I can't imagine that, even in heaven—if there is such a place—I won't feel the pain of losing Parker, of being away from my beloved husband. I worry about leaving him behind, about what he will do. I worry that I have ruined his life, even though he says that I have made it. I feel deep anguish and guilt about the pain I have caused him, about the tasks that he has had to perform these past few months. It terrifies me to know that the worst is yet to come, the lifting and feeding and bathing will give way to much worse. And now I can only pray that it's fast.

I can't imagine that, even so far away, I won't pine for the babies we never got to have, those embryos I had to leave behind, put back into that cold and impersonal freezer. A mother should never have to say goodbye to her children—even the ones that might never be.

I know that being with my own mother there in the great beyond will be a comfort. It soothes me as I begin a slow walk down a narrow corridor that I hope is leading somewhere even more glorious than I can imagine. It helps me push away the fear that there is nothing waiting for me on the other side, only darkness.

When I was growing up, when I would get in bed at night, my mind would often race with scary scenarios or bad dreams. My mother would tell me to think happy thoughts, to fill my head with chocolate drops and peppermints, ballet slippers and tutus. Now I fill my mind with my first wedding dance with Parker, the way the lights twinkled around us, the way he held me so close, how I knew I would always be safe in his arms. Even now, I may be leaving, but I am still safe in his arms.

I don't know if Parker will ever read my journals, but I suspect he will. I would. So, Parker, if you are reading this, please know that leaving you is the worst thing I have ever faced. Worse than losing my mother, worse than dying myself.

I think you might find in these pages some parts of myself that I am ashamed of, some parts that, if I'm honest, I'd rather you never knew. For those parts, I am sorry, my love. I truly am. But please know that nothing in these pages changes the absolute certainty in my heart that you were my only one.

I am writing you a letter, and I will leave it with your mom, who, as you know, I loved almost as if she were my own.

She will give it to you when the time is right. She will know. Mothers always do.

Amelia



DREAM JOB

AS I OPENED THE DOOR to Palm Beach Conceptions only an hour after the most emotional scene of my life, I realized I should have been sitting at one of my friends' houses, sobbing into a pint of Häagen-Dazs and a glass of rosé. But, damn it, I had been working on getting this interview for more than three months. Crying wouldn't help. Writing, I knew, would.

I waved to two of the women in the waiting room, who called, "Hi, Amelia." I'm sure they were wondering why I was here, if Thad and I were trying to have a baby. Even the gossipiest socialites in town couldn't already know about my new, Thadless life, could they?

The thought gave me heartburn. What if *everyone* knew? What if I was the only person in all of Palm Beach who had been out of the loop on the truth about Thad? I couldn't stay

here now. I couldn't bear to stick around knowing that I was the scandal of the week.

Maybe I could go back home to North Carolina. I had a decent amount of contacts now. I could freelance. But I wasn't sure if I could make enough money freelancing to live. And try as they might, my parents weren't in a position to help me. Plus, there wouldn't be any alimony. I'd been the one paying our bills, while Thad "focused on his novel"—which I now knew was code for focusing on Chase.

I couldn't very well throw Thad out of his own grandmother's apartment. Even if I could, I'm pretty sure no one wants to sleep in the chintz-filled bedroom where her husband has been having sex with someone else.

All at once, this terrified, vulnerable feeling came over me. But at least I still had my job.

I didn't have a single friend who still had the same job as when they graduated from college, so I guess that made me a little bit different. But getting hired at *Clematis* magazine had been my dream. Growing up, the daughter of two very refined Southerners, *Clematis* had been as much a part of my life as church on Sunday and my grandmother's pearls around my neck. *Clematis* was aspirational, a symbol of the person that I might become one day, someone well traveled and well-read. Someone who could speak authoritatively on art and new museum exhibits and the importance of music in society. Someone like my mother.

I had taken early on to investigative pieces. Getting to the bottom of a secret, discovering a sordid underbelly, was my

real forte. But I also loved to tell people's stories. Real stories about life and love, hardship and heartache. About the way that people get back up when they fall down. In fact, my very first piece at *Clematis* had been about a disgraced young heiress whose father had been caught up in the Enron scandal. In a matter of days, she lost everything, the cushy, beautiful life she'd always known pulled out from under her. Years later, only in her midtwenties, she had begged and borrowed from every friend she had left to launch a makeup line that had sold for millions to Sephora, landing her back on top once again. Storytelling showed me that it's not our failures that matter; it's what we do after that counts.

There was no doubt about it: I was in the midst of the biggest, baddest failure of my life. I guess, in retrospect, there had been signs, a few rumors. Being from North Carolina, I should have known that where there's smoke, there's fire. But Thad laughed the rumors away.

I knew when I walked out of the apartment that this wouldn't be a normal divorce. If Thad had left me for another woman, people would rally around me, curse him for how he had betrayed me. But now that he was leaving me for a man?

Well, of course my girlfriends would hate him. They didn't have a choice. But strangers, and acquaintances, and *society*? They would all cut him slack. He was finally living his truth. There would be pity for me, of course. And maybe even whispers that our marriage had been for appearances.

I exchanged pleasantries with the women I knew, forcing a smile, getting close enough to smell their Jo Malone

perfume and see the diamonds sparkling in their ears, hoping that they couldn't see how I was dying inside.

As I sat down in one of the chic leather chairs, I couldn't help but realize how different this was from the waiting rooms of my youth with their standard-issue medical office chairs with the upholstery that itched the backs of my legs. This waiting room smelled of soothing essential oils, not anti-septic.

As I picked up the latest issue of *Clematis*—as though I couldn't have practically recited its contents—all I could think about was that I should have stayed in Raleigh. If I had continued on at the little newspaper outside of town I interned at for two summers in college, if I had taken the job they offered me, my entire life could have been different.

I'd loved working for that little newspaper; I had loved getting to do absolutely everything, from writing to editing, proofreading to graphic design. I had even learned to take a decent photo or two. Those summers made me the journalist I am today. I wasn't a one-trick pony. I knew every element of putting out a publication.

But when I saw the salary package they could offer, I realized that even I, a single girl in a small town, couldn't live on it. And, to be honest, I felt a little bit ashamed. I had been number one in my journalism school class, the editor of my college magazine. By all accounts, I was destined for journalistic greatness. I couldn't work at a small-town newspaper for the rest of my life.

Even still, I actually didn't expect to get the job at *Clematis*. It was a smaller, core group of journalists. And if it didn't work out, I was stuck in Palm Beach—which, admittedly, isn't a bad place to be stuck—with no New York City publication on my résumé. If I'm honest with myself, I was scared. When I was in college, I said I stayed in Raleigh so that I could be close to the beach, drive home on the weekends to soak up the summer rays. And I guess that was true, in some ways. But when you got right down to it, I was terrified of being in a big city, scared to leave home, intimidated by the great, wide world beyond the South.

Plus, *Clematis* was my dream job. And even though it was less money and a less prestigious position in the eyes of the world than a New York magazine, I believed with all my heart that if I took it, it would pay off. At a mid-sized publication like *Clematis*, I could have the opportunity to write both investigative stories and profile pieces.

I had been so nervous moving to Palm Beach, renting the smallest apartment on the least noteworthy street with a girl from Craigslist who I had never met. (My parents would have killed me if they'd known.) I didn't have any friends. In some ways, it was a much bigger risk than going to New York with a handful of college friends. But there were vestiges of my Southern upbringing everywhere. The trappings of city life, but the manners and protocols of a small town.

And then I met Thad. He was handsome and kind and made me feel like I was at home in this new world.

I had gotten my dreams early. So I guess I was getting my comeuppance early, too. I was only thirty-five, and I was going to be joking about my starter husband.

I knew I was in real danger of crying when a very pleasant nurse with Texas-sized hair opened the door to the waiting room and said, “Mrs. Williams, Dr. Wright will see you now.”

Mrs. Williams. I wasn’t going to be Mrs. Williams anymore. I was going to go back, as quickly as possible, to being Miss Saxton.

On autopilot, I followed the nurse as she opened the door to Dr. Wright’s office, which was so sparse it was clear he didn’t do a lot of actual work in here. I put my game face back on like my daddy taught me on long days at the softball field. “Are you the one who has to call the patients?” I asked.

“We all take turns,” she said. I could tell she wasn’t sure if she was supposed to talk to me. I supposed a reporter in a doctor’s office usually didn’t mean much good. But I wasn’t there to get her in trouble. I was there to sniff out a trail; I was writing about what happens to frozen embryos once they are no longer needed.

I wanted to talk to parents of these fertilized eggs. Did they destroy them? Adopt them out? Donate them to science? Did they have more children because they couldn’t stand the idea of doing any of the above?

“So you only call them when it’s time to make a decision?”

She shrugged. And then she made a tiny, simple gesture that would end up thrusting my life so far off its axis that my divorce would seem like a blip on the radar. She pointed to a

thin stack of paper on Dr. Wright's desk. "Yeah, once they've been in there for three years with no activity, we start calling the parents. They pay a bundle to keep them frozen, and our freezer space is always at a premium, so we try to keep on top of them." She paused. "But that list is the ones we can't get in touch with. After a few years of being unable to reach a contact, of not being paid for storage, we consider them abandoned."

I nodded. "Then what?"

She shrugged. "That's the hard part. We don't want to destroy them or donate them for research without the parents' consent, but eventually, we're going to have to make some hard decisions." She paused. "Dr. Wright is a little behind, but he should be here shortly."

I smiled cheerily, wanting more than anything for her to get the hell out of the room so I could snoop. "Please tell him to take his time," I said. "And please reassure him I'll be brief."

As soon as the door closed, I practically pounced on the first page of that list. I didn't know what I was looking for, but one of the hurdles I was facing was finding parents to interview for this article. I needed real-life patients to tell me why they'd decided to destroy their embryos, adopt them out, etc., and the listing I had placed on HARO, a website where journalists and sources connect, wasn't doing much good. In this case, no one wanted to help a reporter out.

Maybe I would know someone on this list and could lead them into a discussion without their knowing I had broken all

kinds of laws and without their doctor breaking HIPAA, which I was one hundred percent sure Dr. Wright wouldn't do. This was the kind of office with a secret entrance for its high-profile patients.

I scanned the As, flipping quickly through the alphabet. When I got to the Ts, my eyes focused, and I gasped audibly. I heard a hand on the doorknob and practically flung myself into my seat, trying to look calm, even though my heart was racing out of my chest.

I breezed through my cursory list of questions. I just needed Dr. Wright as a quoted source on questions I knew the answers to, so it wasn't that hard. I actually skipped a few because I needed to be alone with this moral dilemma.

I had seen a name on that list that I recognized. I wasn't supposed to know that those embryos had been abandoned. *It isn't any of my business*, I repeated to myself. But what if he didn't know that his embryos were even here? What if a decision was made about them that he wouldn't want?

As I walked out the door, I said nonchalantly to the nurse, "Thanks. And good luck."

Without even looking up from her paperwork, she said, "Thanks, hon."

I stopped on the street and took a deep breath, realizing that I was walking in the direction of a home that wasn't mine anymore. I'd just check into the Breakers and luxuriate for a few breaths before I decided what to do. I stuck my thumb on my banking app. Nope. Maybe I'd check into the Colony instead. One of my friends, the marketing manager there, had

promised me a too-good-to-be-true media rate if I ever wanted it.

I closed my eyes for just a moment, trying to make the swirling in my head—which had become so fast and furious I almost felt like I could see it—stop. All I could see was their names: Thaysden, Greer and Parker.

Hadn't I already inserted myself way too far into their lives once before? I decided I had, as I began walking in the direction of my car, planning to go straight to the Colony. But walking away—from my life, my marriage, and even someone else's problems—wasn't something I was capable of.

I tried to tell myself again that I couldn't, I wouldn't. But I had no choice, really. I could never live with myself if I didn't tell him.

“Hey, Siri,” I said, “call Parker Thaysden.”