

## *Opening Drawers*

*by Haley Tanenbaum*

Jeff's father was what might be called a well-respected lawyer. The kind of man who wore three piece suits, expensive shirts and the finest shoes wherever he went. Jeff had never aspired to be much like his father.

Like his dad, he went to the University of Michigan. But since he had always wanted to become a teacher, and so he chose the School of Ed over the law school. However, upon nearing the completion of his undergraduate career, he veered from the idyllic road less travelled. Economic truth replaced the more transcendental truths which he had enjoyed studying so much. He thus surveyed the landscape of salaries available to the educator, whereupon he decided to go to law school. He shared this decision with his father, who imparted neither encouragement nor discouragement, nor any advice whatsoever. The response was surprisingly lukewarm, which Jeff expected.

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Near the end of his last year of law school, having done very well, Jeff accepted his sister's invitation to attend his nephew's graduation from Montessori school.

"Sure, I'll be there," he responded to his sister, laughing, "a ten year old graduating? What a bizarre concept, I mean..." his sister interrupted.

"I'll pick you up at 4:30." His sister was not interested in engaging in one of his lengthy debates over a mundane topic.

After the graduation ceremony, his sister led him to the class party, where he was introduced to his nephew's young teacher, Rebecca, whom his sister aptly described as "very sweet and really cute. You should meet her." It became clear why he was invited to this tortuous display of praise.

Though interested, Jeff's tendency was to shy away from such an introduction. When he was the age of these young graduates, he had asked a girl to "go out" with him - even though he had nowhere to "go out" with her - whereupon he was promptly laughed at not only by the subject of his affection, but by several other kids

who became privy to his intimate endeavor. The impulse to avoid that kind of rejection again never fully left his psyche.

“No thanks, I gotta get home and study. Finals are . . . .”

“No you don’t. You’ll do fine. I want you to meet her,” his sister retorted.

His older sister thus forced the introduction, pulling him by his wrist through the crowded, hot and cramped classroom, such that it would have caused an embarrassing scene for him to pull away.

“Hi Ms. Buckley, the graduation was wonderful, so cute,” his sister said, giving the teacher a hug. “I wanted you to meet my brother, Jeff, he is almost done with law school and he asked to meet you.”

This of course was completely false, that he asked to meet her, and Jeff felt a familiar dizzying heat of stressful anticipation welling in the top of his head.

Their first conversation proceeded awkwardly, with Jeff pointing out how absurd he found the idea of a grade school graduation. He argued that ceremonies of passage should be reserved for accomplishments not so easily and passively achieved, and that he was sure Rebecca Buckley would have rather been doing something other than attend this “graduation” with all these bothersome parents.

“You might just be right about all this, Jeff,” she said, “but then I wouldn’t get the chance to meet the uncles. So I’m okay with it.”

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Jeff and Rebecca started spending a great deal of time with each other. Their relationship developed rapidly.

Feeding their quickly forged connection was a complement of unfulfilled vocational desires. Rebecca had initially wanted to become an attorney, like her dad. But with six older siblings, there weren’t enough resources left for the extra three years of schooling required of a lawyer. So, Rebecca settled on teaching. This dichotomy – of Rebecca being, and Jeff having wanted to be, a teacher; and Jeff becoming, and Rebecca having wanted to become, an attorney – fed the depth of the relationship from its genesis.

In the ensuing months, Jeff was seldom without Rebecca.

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Shortly after he started his job at the law firm which paid its first year associates the most money in town, Jeff and Rebecca announced that they were to be married over the Thanksgiving weekend, a mere two months away.

At first, Rebecca's dad was reluctant about this quick wedding, particularly so when Rebecca proclaimed that it was "meant to be." As the date neared, though, he warmed up to the idea and gave the union his blessing, which was important to Rebecca.

Jeff's father expressed neither approval nor disapproval, and seemed rather indifferent.

In January, Rebecca was pregnant. In April, Charlie was born. Nobody ever questioned the haste with which this child entered the world. Somehow, it seemed natural and appropriate. "Immaculate," as Rebecca evasively joked when others plied her for the details.

Rebecca scheduled Charlie's christening almost immediately. At the family luncheon that followed, Jeff gave a toast. He read from a small, worn notebook, speaking of his wife and their new son. The attendees do not remember what he said, but when Jeff saw his father fighting tears, he quickly ended the speech. Everyone understood why.

\* \* \*

A few days before Charlie's second birthday, Jeff sat in the office of a pediatric orthopedic surgeon on the top floor of the Children's Hospital. Charlie was clumsily fooling with some worn out toys, and struggling to drag himself around. The office was silent, with the exception of Charlie's braces scraping across the floor.

The Doctor walked in, set a file folder down on the desk, and sat down in his high-backed, leather chair. He put on his glasses before he looked at Jeff.

Preferring to not make eye contact with the Doctor, Jeff stared out through the large window at the light snow flakes that had been falling off and on for weeks.

Under better circumstances, these flakes might seem the real life backdrop of some Norman Rockwell scene. This day, however, had more the inevitable downward spiral feel of a certain Edith Wharton novel, which Rebecca had recommended he read before they married.

As the Doctor commenced to speak, Jeff thought how much easier life would be if he were one of those inanimate snowflakes.

The Doctor picked up his pen, “while possible, it is unlikely, almost certain, that Charlie will not be able to walk, but we will run all the tests for . . . .” Jeff did not listen to the rest of the Doctor’s ponderings and speculation concerning possibilities, impossibilities, medical advancements, et cetera.

Instead, Jeff stared at the shelves, immediately behind the high-backed chair, while the Doctor continued to talk. These shelves were lined with pictures of the Doctor’s wife and children on vacation at the Great Wall of China, on some beach, at the top of a ski hill. It was time to leave. He was feeling that hot welling in the top of his head.

“Doctor, thanks, I gotta go,” said Jeff, as he picked Charlie up off of the floor. They left the office, rode the elevator down to the lobby, and traversed the snowy path to the parking lot. It felt good to hold his son.

Jeff took off the little boy’s leg braces so he could fit into the booster seat, which was carefully positioned behind the passenger seat of the car. The snowflakes continued to fall and sparkle in the bright sun. They were beautiful, but Jeff did not notice.

\* \* \*

It happened on a hot, humid day at the tail end of the summer. Rebecca had come out of the house holding Charlie’s hand as he walked by her side. He had just taken his first steps a week earlier and was progressing quickly. She was calling for Jeff. Jeff was building flower beds in the back yard for Rebecca, as he had been doing the previous three weekends.

Jeff knew that Rebecca was irritated as she put Charlie in the baby car seat, because he still hadn’t moved the seat from behind the driver’s side to the passenger

side. Rebecca had been asking him to do this repeatedly for about a week, and he hadn't gotten around to it.

"Jeff, can you please take a break from the garden and move that seat sometime today? It's a total pain to reach Charlie when he's behind my seat. I would do it, but I can't figure out how the stupid thing works."

"Yeah, sure. Why do they make these things so difficult? I would do it now, but I'm all dirty. When you get back, okay?" He smiled, knowing she knew he just didn't feel like doing it.

"I guess it's not a big deal, I'm just going a few miles to pick up my prescription," she said as she turned to buckle the baby into his seat.

He watched as she went through this exercise, and, when she turned around, he wished he was not so dirty and sweaty, as he had a strong desire to hug and kiss her goodbye. But it would have been a sin to dirty that pale yellow sun dress that she wore so perfectly. Instead, Jeff asked if he could take a picture of her, and, before she answered, he ran into the house to get the Polaroid he had just purchased. There was a peaceful calm in that moment that he wanted to capture.

It took about 5 minutes for him to find the camera, and finally he came out and said, "smile." By now she had removed Charlie from the car and was holding him on her hip.

She repositioned Charlie onto her other hip, shifted her weight, cast a smile, and he snapped a picture of her. As she backed out of the driveway, he watched as the picture came into being. When he looked up, she was gone.

\* \* \*

A short time later, Jeff heard the phone in the house ringing. At first he ignored it, but, when it rang again a few minutes later, he went inside to answer it.

"Do you know Rebecca Jane Hawthorne?" The tone was serious.

"Yeah, why, she's not here."

"I'm a police officer, there's been an accident," he paused.

Jeff felt a chill course through his body. The officer's voice was quivering and hesitant. He heard typing in the background.

“Rebecca is my wife.” He dropped the phone.

\* \* \*

Jeff sat in the law firm's conference room, at the same table where he had interviewed for the coveted job a few years earlier. As he waited for the managing partners to arrive to consider his request, he had the Polaroid picture in his hand.

The quorum arrived and sat down in the leather chairs, which squeaked upon bearing the weight of these men.

The one chosen to speak for the group explained, “Jeff, you understand we're very sorry for your loss. You know, we've done what we can to make this easier for you. I really couldn't imagine anything worse than what you have gone through. How is Matthew?”

“Charlie? They say he'll be okay, but he probably won't walk,” replied Jeff.

“We're sorry. We really are. Is there anything we can do?”

“Not really. Thanks.”

“Okay, Jeff, we've decided we can't let you file this lawsuit. We're not a personal injury law firm, we just can't do it. You can't do it.”

Another partner asked, “Why don't you just hire a lawyer? Someone would take this case.”

“I'm not going to do that. I have to do it, and I'm going to.”

“Jeff, that's not right. You don't, and you shouldn't. We won't be able to do this. Also, when insurance gets involved, you could end up suing one of our own clients. It's not happening.”

Jeff stood up and slid a piece of paper across the table toward the partners.

“Then, I hope you will accept my resignation.” He walked out.

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Jeff dropped Charlie off at his sister's house at seven o'clock in the morning. The deposition was scheduled for nine o'clock in the same high rise office building where his father worked. However, Jeff did not tell his father that he would be in the building that day, which was unusual. He knew this building well, for, when he was a young boy, Jeff had spent a good deal of time in it. After Jeff's mom had died, his father would often take him to work with him on the weekends and give him free reign to ride the elevator up and down and explore the various floors.

As he drove downtown, Jeff felt for the first time that there was a purpose to his becoming a lawyer. He was going to make this person whom he was deposing pay for what she did to his family. Though not at all happy, he smiled as he drove.

He exchanged no cordialities with the witness before the deposition commenced. He had prepared several dozen pages of questions, which he had worked on for weeks, often through the night. He was exhausted as he began mercilessly firing off his questions and accusations.

This tortuous deposition went on for hours, finally hitting its crescendo in the late afternoon, as the sun was beaming through the conference room window directly onto Jeff's face:

"How fast were you going?"

"Did you see my wife's car parked on the right side of the street?"

"What caused you to swerve?"

"Did you see my wife taking my son out of his car seat before you hit them?"

"Were you even looking?"

"What did it sound like when you hit them?"

"What did you see?"

"How did you feel? How do you feel? How do you feel?"

“Objection! Jeff, dammit, come on, I know how you feel but this is really crossing the line,” boomed the frustrated defense lawyer, who had given Jeff a lot of leeway, given the circumstances, but was not going to let this improper questioning continue.

After some argument, the witness proceeded to testify, through choking sobs, that it had been the most terrible day, and the last thing she saw was a beautiful woman in a sun dress taking a little boy with curly hair out of a car seat. And then all black. The image, she explained, was permanently fixed in her mind.

During a silence between answer and question, the witness then mumbled something that Jeff did not quite hear.

“Court reporter, read that last thing she said back, I didn’t quite get that,” Jeff said.

The Court Reporter rolled the tape back and found her place, “here is what the witness said: ‘why did she have to be in the street with her baby?’”

Jeff was stunned. He knew the answer to this question. Had he moved the car seat over to the passenger side, as Rebecca had repeatedly asked, she would not have been standing on the street-side of the car as she was taking Charlie out of the seat. She would have been on the sidewalk. Safe. He stared down at the table and said nothing.

“This deposition is over. Everything, everything is over,” said Jeff angrily.

He gathered his things off the table, not taking the time to put them into his briefcase, clumsily pushing them all into a pile and pulling it up to his chest. He rushed toward the door, dropping the papers with his questions and his colored pens.

At the elevator, he punched the button and, as he waited, his eyes welled over and the top of his head was burning hot.

When the elevator door opened, Jeff saw a familiar shaped man inside, with his head down reading some papers. Jeff stumbled onto the threshold of the elevator, needing to get far away from that sordid scene in the deposition room. The man looked up and saw his distressed son standing there. Stunned by the visage of

his son in this state, he did not know what to say. Rather than try to speak, he put his hand on his son's back, took his briefcase from him, and moved him off of the threshold of the elevator so that the doors could close, whereupon they rode that familiar elevator down to the lobby.

### *Afterword*

Decades later, I was tasked with cleaning out my dad's office after he died. I chose to take the stairs up to his office on the sixth floor, as he had always insisted I do, in spite of my condition. The door to his office was plastered with notes of remembrance from his students.

His drawers were brimming with years' worth of papers of all sorts, pictures, old father's day gifts, and, most important to me, the notebooks he had carried with him from as early as I remember, and which, until he passed away, I had never had the opportunity to read. It took me years to get through them all.

These notebook musings provide the bases for the above described events. My dad seemed very open and honest in these private writings, and so I believe that my narration is very true to form.

The last page of the last notebook warrants reproduction in its unadulterated state. He scribbled out a poem, and addressed it to my mom and me just before he died. I know this because his notebook was opened to this page, on his desk, where one of his students found him, lifeless with a pen in his hand.

*From whence they came  
As thieves in the night  
From whence they came  
My Beacons of light  
Thunder and lightning and sun and rain  
Toil together a rainbow became  
A mount of vivid color and hope  
Of joy and life; the end of strife  
From whence they came  
I do not know  
But pray to Whence I one day go*

Underneath these words, he had taped the Polaroid picture of my mom and me.