

Choices and Chances

It was the first time she had been in the house since the divorce, since her only son decided he would rather not live with his clumsy, alcoholic mother. Valerie didn't blame him for choosing her ex-husband and his new wife over her. She wasn't exactly sure why she had even been invited to Chase's birthday party in the first place. Maybe after having heard about her ten-month stint in rehab, Paul convinced their son to invite her. Or maybe Chase didn't even know she was going to be there. Her mind was racing with the different possibilities. She was sure she was just being paranoid, but she couldn't help it; her inefficiency as a mother and wife mortified her. In just a little over two years, she had drowned eleven years of marriage and twelve years of motherhood at the bottom of bottle after bottle, and she knew there was no one else to fault but herself. Despite her past mistakes, she still made the effort to show up to her previous home, gift in hand, with a repeating chant of sobriety on her mind.

Though the fact that the decision to invite her had been last minute—she received her invitation exactly a week before the day of the party—she was thankful to have been invited in the first place. She had been searching for a way to reach out to her son and had been struggling to come up with a solid solution that would repair her damaged relationship with her only child.

As she found the courage to walk through the door, she noticed that things in her old home had changed. The changes were subtle, but still shocked her nonetheless. A large, potted plant had replaced an old handsome coat hanger that used to be positioned next to the front door. She had received that coat hanger as a present when her grandfather passed away and forgot to collect it when the divorce had been finalized. Her music room was now what looked like a study, and the overall feel of the foyer felt *elevated*. It wasn't as homey as she remembered, but it was still inviting. There was a feminine touch that she couldn't describe. Of course the house

would be different, she told herself. The foundation would be identical to the one in her memories, but the identity of the house was no longer of her own volition. She was a stranger in this house—*of course the house would be different and there wouldn't be pictures of her on the walls*. She knew this before she had arrived, and yet it was still jarring—coming into this familiar place and finding it irrevocably different.

She made her way further into the house, smiling at the people she passed. Seeing as Paul had invited most of his family, she recognized a few of the adults and children there, but there were a few unfamiliar faces. She assumed these people were a mix of Julie's, his new wife, family members and Chase's friends. It saddened her that she didn't recognize any of her son's friends, but she tried not to dwell on it. This was something she learned in therapy; she had a problem with lingering on things that upset her, and she didn't know how to let go, but there was something about seeing her favorite picture of her and Chase removed from the hallway that she couldn't shake off. She could still see the outline of where the frame once rested.

The picture had been taken at the aquarium. Chase had been six at the time, and like any other six-year-old, the colorful rainbow of fish and other aquatic creatures on display had enraptured him. In the picture, Valerie was holding her son up against a tank as he pointed to a clownfish, hosting in sea anemone. Thinking about the picture, she could still hear his gentle voice, full of wonder.

"Mommy," he had exclaimed. "Look at the fish! It's hiding!"

She smiled inwardly at the memory, and it helped her ease some of her tension. Before she and Paul split, before she had started drinking, she and Chase had been extremely close. Against the advice of her own mother, Valerie decided on being a stay-at-home mom from the moment of her son's birth. Her mother, who taught college psychology at a local state university,

thought she would grow bored spending the day at home with no mental stimulation, but Paul had encouraged it. What was more stimulating than having to keep up with a growing child? So Valerie quit her accounting job soon after Chase's birth. She replaced her CPA exam workbooks with books on child development and firsthand accounts on what it was like being a stay-at-home mom. The once tidy home became littered with baby pacifiers and rattling toys, and Valerie felt like her life was complete every time she looked into her baby boy's green eyes. Unlike Paul, she had been there for every single one of Chase's milestones: his first word, the first time he crawled, the first time he ran across a room. He wasn't a fussy baby, and he grew more independent every year. She could see so much of her husband in her son, and her happiness seemed almost overwhelming at the time.

Valerie convinced herself that her mother didn't know what she was talking about since she had been a single mother for the majority of Valerie's life; her father had died of acute liver complications when she was only five, and she had little memories of him. Her childhood was splattered with moments in an afterschool daycare and eating dinner in front of the television alone. She didn't want the same kind of life for Chase. She and her mother looked almost identical, but they had opposite personalities.

"I just don't think it's a good idea, dear," her mother had told her in response when Valerie finally made the decision to be a stay-at-home mom.

The conversation happened before Chase's birth, and Valerie had invited her over for dinner—just the two of them. She was only four months pregnant at the time, barely showing. She had cooked her mother's favorites: ginger glazed mahi mahi, garlic mashed potatoes, and Parmesan roasted Brussel sprouts. She even drove thirty minutes from her house to the nicer liquor store that carried her mother's favorite brand of pinot noir. Valerie knew her mother

wouldn't approve, but that didn't stop her from trying to please her. All she wanted was for her mother to be happy for her. She foolishly convinced herself that maybe if the dinner she prepared was remarkable, it would help lessen the blow.

"I know that you think I should continue with the tests, but I just don't think handling all that studying and a baby is something I can do," insisted Valerie. She got up from the dinner table to pour her mother another generous glass of wine.

"Valerie," her mother said as she took a sip of the newly filled glass, "you can't expect Paul to be the only one supporting your family—"

"I'm not *expecting* him to do anything like that, mom," she cut her off. "I just think that maybe I should wait until after the baby is born to make such a huge decision. It's not just about me and Paul anymore—it's about our child."

"I'm just saying, sweetheart, I know how you get—you're going to get bored taking care of a baby all day, every day. And yes, having a child is a lot of hands on work, but what about the financial responsibility? Children aren't cheap. We're lucky that your father had a good bit of money saved up before he died—"

"I'm aware of this, mother."

"You're only twenty-three, Valerie. You and Paul have only been married for a year. I just worry about the effect this will have on your relationship."

"What are you trying to say?" she snapped at her mother. "It's a little bit too late now for *this* conversation, isn't? I'm already pregnant."

"Sweetheart, there's no need to raise your voice, that's not what I was suggesting at all. I'm just worry about you and wonder if you've considered all your options—"

“I’m not going to have an abortion, and I’m not going to give my baby up for adoption, if that’s what you’re going to get at. I’m having this baby whether you like it or not, and I’m going to try to give it the best life I can. Even if that means I take off of work for a little while.”

“That’s what all parents want for their children,” her mother had said sadly.

After Chase’s birth, Valerie’s decision to dedicate her time to her son felt like the best decision she had made in her life, second to marrying Paul. However, as much as Valerie loved being able to witness Chase’s childhood, once Chase was old enough to go to school, she noticed she had less to do around the house. She hated that her mother was right.

When Valerie had begrudgingly admitted this to the woman, she encouraged her to resume studying for her CPA tests, and the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. She knew her mother had a point; what was she going to do while Chase was at school for eight hours? Since he was spending less time at home, she should too. When she brought up the idea of becoming a CPA with Paul, he reminded her that between Chase’s soccer practices and piano lessons, she just didn’t have the time to think about work, let alone becoming a certified public accountant. Besides, at the time, Paul had recently been made a partner at his father’s law firm. They didn’t have to worry about money. He didn’t *exactly* give her an ultimatum, but she understood she had to choose between her family and a job. The choice was easy and not one she thought she would come to regret.

Valerie wandered through the house, trying to find Chase. She checked the kitchen and the backyard, but she still hadn’t found him. Was he avoiding her? She hoped not. She had spent weeks dreaming of being able to reconcile with her son, she was not about to let the opportunity slip pass her. Something her therapist had encouraged her to do was to take charge and responsibility of her actions and desires. If she wanted something to happen, then she needed to

do everything in her power to make sure it did. When he had brought it up in therapy, he asked if she could remember the last time she took charge of her life.

When Chase was seven, Valerie and Paul tried having another child. Her mother had been right again; she had grown bored at home and was longing for a new sense of purpose. Chase was growing up faster than her mind could process—one day he was begging her to let him sleep in the same bed as her and Paul, and the next he was too embarrassed to hold her hand in public—and she thought there had to be more to life than Parent-Teacher Association meetings and being sucked into volunteer activities. She felt that the volunteer work had been meaningful, she had worked to raise money for a local nursery school and helped their community collect supplies for an orphanage starting out in Haiti, but at the end of the projects, her volunteer work was done, and she wasn't necessary anymore. Whereas the people in charge of the organizations went back to their jobs, Valerie went back home to wait for Chase to come home from school. She began to feel a void that she hadn't experienced before.

“Can't we just talk about it?” she had asked, in tears.

“Isn't Chase enough for now? We have a lot going on. I don't think this house can handle another child, especially not another baby.” His voice was gruff, making it clear to her that he thought the issue was nonnegotiable, but something in her didn't want to give up. She couldn't give up.

“Just picture a sweet, little girl with your eyes—oh Paul, don't you want Chase to have siblings? I hated being an only child, and I know how much you loved being able to grow up close with your brothers. Just think about.”

“I'm really busy at the firm right now, Val, you know this. We've just taken on two major clients, and I don't know if I'll have time to help you through a pregnancy.”

“You won’t have to help me through it—just come to doctor appointments occasionally and rub my feet when they get swollen—it’s not like you’re going to carry the baby.”

He ignored her. “If these cases go well, it could mean big things for the future. We could potentially attract the attention of other big companies, and I’ll have less time to help you around the house with changing diapers and taking sleep duty.”

“That’s not a definite, though. In college, we always talked about wanting a big family, Paul, this is our chance—”

“—this is our chance to give Chase everything he could want in the future. We could pay off our mortgage on the house. Make sure that he can go to any college he wants to go to. If we have another baby, we could potentially take that away from him.”

“We sell this house and move into a smaller home if that ever became an issue—”

“Baby, I just don’t think it’s in the cards for us,” he had said firmly. When Paul pulled out the pet names, Valerie knew it was because he was done arguing. He wasn’t big on being overly sentimental, and that was one of the things that made her fall in love with him. She wasn’t into frills or cheesy romance lines—she wanted someone grounded in reality, and Paul had constantly been that person.

“Maybe it is,” she had said back. If it shocked him, he didn’t let it show. After he closed arguments, she had never tried to argue back. But this was different. She wasn’t a firm believer in fate or destiny, but something was telling her that she was meant to have a second child. It took weeks more of convincing to get Paul to agree to trying to have another child, but once he finally did, they found themselves expecting another baby soon after.

Six months into her pregnancy, she woke up early one morning with a sharp pain in her stomach and blood all over their sheets. The doctor in the emergency room said she had

experienced a spontaneous abortion, a miscarriage. It wasn't her fault she had lost the baby, probably something wrong chromosomally. Paul told her that it just wasn't meant to be, and she should leave it at that. They *didn't have time* to get caught up in losing a baby when life with Chase was keeping them occupied. Her mother worried about her in the months that followed, saying that she thought that Valerie needed to see a therapist.

“Everyone deals with grief differently, Valerie. The important thing is that you deal with it instead of keeping it bottled up. I can recommend some people to you.”

Valerie asked Paul for his opinion—she had been confused, lost, and desperate for some sort of solace to help fill the hollowness in her womb—and he told her he thought their lives just needed to move on, there was no use in focusing on what might have been. *It wouldn't be fair to Chase*. She agreed. The void that had begun before her second pregnancy was still there and had grown a little bigger, but she pushed her sorrow to the back of her mind and focused on her living child. If Paul could move on, then so could she.

It wasn't the loss of her second child that drove her to alcohol. When Chase turned eight, her mother died in a car crash—that's when the drinking became a part of her daily routine. A drunk driver had hit her mother. For weeks, Valerie mind stood frozen, and all of a sudden, it felt like she experiencing things from a stranger's point of view. Her mother wasn't there to give unsolicited advice on how Valerie should live her life, wasn't there to keep the memory of her father alive. She never had the chance to ask if alcoholism was a genetic predisposition.

She thought her mind and heart could handle anything after the death of an unborn child, but there was nothing that could have prepared her for the harsh reality of confronting her mother's death. She had never been a big drinker, Paul had been the crazy one in college, and so even after months of therapy she still wasn't sure how it began.

The weeks following her mother's funeral were a cloudy haze, while still strangely crystalline clear. She tried explaining it to her rehab therapist on various occasions but struggled to come up with words that adequately described what she had felt each time.

Sure, she had a few glasses of wine every now and then, but all of a sudden it was like she had been hit in the face by a tsunami and was drowning in alcohol, looking for an explanation of the void that had quadrupled after her mother's death. A few drinks turned into too many in a short amount of time—she watched herself drink her pain into oblivion from the outside looking in, desperately praying she could ball up her sadness, throw it into the universe, and it wouldn't dare come back. She no longer attended Chase's soccer and baseball games or volunteered around the neighborhood; instead, she spent most of her time sitting at their kitchen counter on a barstool with a bottle of wine in front of her. And then one bottle turned into two, then three, and wine turned into whiskey drinks, which turned into drinking straight vodka.

Prior to rehab, Valerie had convinced herself that she didn't know why she had turned to drinking, but once she started her mandatory therapy appointments, it all started tumbling out of her. The realizations of her life were like wildfire running out of her mouth, scorching her throat as they rumbled to the surface. She had married too young, the loss of her second child, the lack of respect from Paul, her intellectual failures, her inability to cope with her mother's death, the end of her one-sided marriage—all of it was finally unleashed from the hidden chambers of her heart and mind like an untamable dragon's fire. All of the things that had gone wrong in her life reverberated in every single fiber of her body and echoed in her bloated brain.

The promise of Chase's forgiveness was the sole source of hope that kept her on the track to becoming sober. She hadn't even tried hiding her drinking from her son, which she supposed was the worst part. It disgusted her that she could have been so selfish to let her relationship with

her son deteriorate the way it had. He would come home from school to find her drunk in the middle of the day, spinning around on her favorite barstool, and he'd help her into bed like he was the parent and she was the child. Memories like this were the reason why she opted out of moving into a sober living home and found an apartment in his school district. She knew he had a step-mom now, but she was aching to show him that she was ready to be his mother again, his real mother. She knew she wouldn't be able to erase the damage she had done, but she was willing to do anything she could to make up for it.

She scanned the backyard one more time before returning back into the kitchen, which was the one room in the house that was entirely renovated. Gone were the cherry oak cabinets and rustic looking island, and in its place was a sterile and modern kitchen with stainless steel appliances. The cabinets she'd chose had been replaced by slick, white ones, and the island now had a marble countertop instead of wood.

Paul was alone in the kitchen, opening a bottle of merlot

"Paul, do you know where Chase is?" his name felt foreign as it left her mouth, like an unrecognizable language. There were children running around throughout the house and adults scattered around, and yet she still hadn't found Chase. It was like he was actively hiding from her. The hand that wasn't holding the birthday present felt like it was twitching, like it was longing for a cold drink to hold, but she was sure she was only imagining both of it—the yearning for a drink and her son's avoidance.

Valerie knew Chase didn't cry when Paul told him they were getting a divorce because she had asked. Paul had already kicked her out of the house by that point and she was living off of the little bit of money he gave her to keep her away from the house—he had come home to a botched Baked Alaska attempt where she had burned down almost the entire kitchen, Chase

trying to help her put out the fire. She looked around, waiting for Paul's answer, not wanting to look him in the eyes, not wanting her worst fears to be confirmed, not wanting to remember things she tried so desperately to forget. Everything in the kitchen was so clean that it seemed to sparkle; all memories of her existence in the room had been erased.

"I'm sure he's around here somewhere," said Paul hesitantly. "You're probably just missing him as you walk around the house. Or he might be outside in the pool—we had it installed a few months ago and he really loves it. Julie signed him up for a swim camp over the summer."

"Oh," she said, not sure how to respond. Her eyes wavered as she tried to think of words to say. "How does he like her? Julie, that is—do they get along?"

"Chase loves her. She signed up to be his baseball team's snack mom, and he even asked her to come in for his class's Career Day. She's wonderful with him—they just—they really get along, and it's more than I could ever hope for."

The words sounded like they were stumbling out of Paul's mouth like uncontrollable word vomit, and before she could help it, they had made eye contact during her attempt to look at the ceiling to prevent herself from crying.

In rehab, she woke from nightmares of losing her son to Paul's new wife after hearing he remarried. Her therapist convinced her there was no way Chase would allow another woman to replace his real mother, no matter how many mistakes she made. That it would take time, but Chase would eventually forgive her. Something about unconditional love.

Her hands began to sweat, and Paul saw how her eyes had widened, and it felt like every inch of her skin was being pinched. Her body's passionate reaction to Paul's words made Chase's gift slip out of her hand and fall to the floor, and they both bent down to pick up the

present at the same time. Paul still had the bottle of wine in his other hand—her eyes darted to it because she was afraid he would drop it while trying to reach for the gift—she knew he saw her eyes look to it and what it could imply.

“I’m fifteen months sober, and I go to AA every week.” Valerie could feel Paul’s accusation melt into her pores and the obligation to defend herself leaped out off her tongue before she could stop herself. When he didn’t respond, she continued, “Thank you for inviting me today, Paul. I’ve been waiting for a chance to show you—to show Chase that I’m ready to be a part of his life again.”

“Okay.”

“I really mean it.”

“Okay. Don’t mess it up. It took a lot of convincing him to let you come here. Julie really pushed for it.”

Valerie was taken back. Maybe Paul’s new wife wasn’t so bad. “Okay,” she nodded and took a deep breath. “Okay. I’m going to go find him.”

She walked up the stairs toward Chase’s bedroom with confidence in her stride. She would speak to Chase, and they could start over. She could do it. When she got closer to Chase’s room, she saw that his door was cracked open. She inhaled deeply and knocked on it.

“Come in.”

He didn’t look up when she entered the room, and she tried to make as little noise as possible. He was lying in his bed, playing on a handheld video game device.

“Chase,” she said as she entered, her voice breathless. She thought she sounded fragmented and foreign, like time had briefly slowed down just for the moment his name left her mouth. She looked at him, and her body felt like it had released all the tension she had been

carrying since she arrived at the house—like the softball-sized knot in her stomach had exploded into a million filaments, creeping out of her pores and into her son’s bedroom. His eyes, his face, his voice—they were all the same, but so different. She was angry with herself for letting him slip away from her. She wanted—no, *needed* his forgiveness; she needed another chance to make things right with him.

“Mom?” Chase sat upright, dropping his game. Her heart fluttered when she heard him call her that. His voice was like a familiar stranger’s, and she was sure that she had heard it in her dreams. He sounded just like her baby boy, only a little deeper and more self-assured. “Sorry, I thought you were Julie. How—what are you doing here?”

“Julie invited me.” She didn’t know what she had been expecting, but it hadn’t been his nonplussed attitude. She supposed she hoped he would have been more excited to see her again, but she knew that was probably wishful thinking. Realistically, she thought he would have been more outraged than confused to see her—she didn’t know if he had heard about her going to rehab, or even that she had moved back into town. She walked closer to his bed with trepidation, like he was a scared, small animal that had been cornered. “Can I sit down?”

He only shrugged. “If you want.”

She sat down, placing the gift on his bed. “Can we talk?”

“We’re talking right now.”

“Right, well—happy birthday.” A normal parent might have been dumbfounded by Chase’s nonchalance and uncurbed confidence, but it only made Valerie smile. Now this was more of a reaction she had been expecting. She could deal with hurt and angry. Rehab had trained her for this moment. “I got this for you,” she motioned toward the gift, “but I want you to

know it's not much—I'm a waitress at Hal's Diner right now, did you know? It's near your school." She paused. "I missed you."

"That's good. I didn't know you were in town," he said. He didn't make any motions to touch the present she had bought him. He just continued to sit in his bed, hands folded in his lap. It encouraged her that his voice wasn't cold or accusing. All she had to do was apologize, and he would accept it, and they would be able to start over with a clean slate.

"I've been back for a little while. I didn't know how to reach out to you, and I didn't want to overwhelm you." Valerie took another deep breath, reaching her hands out to his. "I came here to apologize to you. I know I've made a lot of mistakes, and I want to make it up to you. I know it will take time, Chase, but I'm sober, I'm here, I'm ready to be your mom again."

Something inside Chase shifted, she could see it. She was wrong when she had thought he was confused and not angry. His confusion has masked his anger. He pulled his hands out of her grip, like they were diseased. "You're ready to *be my mom again*?"

"Maybe that came out wrong—"

"You don't get to decide to be a parent when it's convenient for you," he snapped. "What are you even doing here? Like *really* doing here? What do you want?"

Valerie didn't respond. She didn't know what to say.

"You know, I didn't think you'd actually show up—it's the only reason why I agreed to let Julie invite you. If I had known you were going to come, I would have told her not to bother." Chase's voice still wasn't cold. Her resolve was crumbling down around her, and the bedroom suddenly felt more like a prison cell. Her tongue felt like sandpaper against the roof of her mouth, and she desperately wanted a drink. She could tell Chase wasn't trying to upset her and that he was just telling her the truth, which was the worst part. He didn't want her here.

“I want to make it up to you, Chase,” she said quickly, trying to get her thoughts in order. She was beginning to panic. She wasn’t properly prepared for this moment—she had come out of rehab thinking that everything would be okay, that she would be able to build up a relationship with him again. She hadn’t even thought about his rejection because the idea had seemed too farfetched. Chase was her son. What about unconditional love?

“You almost killed me—you almost killed both of us!” He stared into her eyes, mouth open, face bewildered, like he didn’t know if he should laugh or cry. “You can’t make it up to me. It doesn’t matter how sober you get, or what kind of job you work at—it’s not going to erase the things you’ve done. You haven’t even apologized to me yet, and you’re acting like things will go back to normal! I don’t understand why you’re here.”

Valerie realized that Chase’s voice wasn’t like a familiar stranger’s voice; it was just a stranger’s voice. She didn’t know this boy sitting in front of her because she had missed too much of his life already. The panic that had begun to build was bubbling up inside her throat, threatening to escape and make things worse. *She* felt like the cornered animal now, and her instinct to flee was urging her to leave, but her motherly instincts were frantic enough to tell her to keep trying.

“I’m so sorry,” she cried, desperate to change his mind. “What can I do to make things right? Tell me what to do—I’ll do it, Chase, I swear I’ll do it—just give me another chance!”

But none of it mattered. In that moment, Valerie finally realized that the months of rehab and therapy couldn’t prepare her for this moment; nothing could. Chase was still young, he wasn’t going to see the progress she’d made in her sobriety—he didn’t want to see it, to see her change. He would always remember the faltering woman who forgot to feed him when they were home together. He would never forget eating cereal for dinner or helping her bathe when she was

passed out, and he'd never remember the woman who sang him lullabies and tucked him into bed. He was too angry, too hurt.

"I think I should leave," she said after a moment of uncomfortable silence. She got up and walked toward the door, not waiting for his reply. She didn't think her heart or mind could handle anymore, which made her feel like she was a clichéd, overdramatic actress, but the air in the bedroom was tighter and more constricting now than it had been when she first entered. She needed to get out. "I'm sorry, Chase. I shouldn't have come."

As quietly as she could, she discreetly left the house, doing her best to avoid contact with anyone, and she began walking to the closest bus stop. She didn't have a car; it was one of the many things she had lost in the divorce. At the bus stop, she sat on a bench, opened her wallet, and counted her cash. She had enough money for a drink or two. There was a ringing in her ears, telling her that one drink wouldn't be too bad, but a thundering in her chest was telling her no. She was over a year sober, and her son just said he didn't want to see her. She felt like she deserved a drink, but was it worth it? When the bus arrived, she smiled sadly to herself as she got on. Her legs felt like they were full of lead and her footsteps thudded every step she took.

When the bus stopped, she got off. She walked toward her destination, and when she arrived, she opened the door and closed her eyes. Valerie opened her eyes and sat down at the bar. The ringing in her ears was gone, as was the pain in her chest. She was ready to forget.

"A gin and tonic, please," she told the bartender.

"Coming right up."

She was in a part of town where no one knew her so one drink wouldn't hurt.