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## My Ill-fated Trip to Starbucks

*Here is the world. Beautiful and terrible things will happen.  
Don't be afraid.*

—FREDERICK BUECHNER, *Wishful Thinking*

By January 10, 2008, it had been about twenty-eight years since my dad divorced Mom. I was forty-six years old, living in Colorado, and pulling into a Starbucks parking lot on a Thursday morning when my cell phone rang.

My sister Sherri blurted, “Dad has shot Sandy.”

I had seen Dad and his girlfriend, Sandy, just three months earlier. They were both happy and alive. Not a single bullet hole between them. My numb brain couldn't comprehend this news. “What?” I asked.

“Dad shot Sandy,” Sherri repeated, “and his picture is all over the TV news. They say he's armed and dangerous. And there's a manhunt, and the schools are all on lockdown. This can't end well, Tootie; I need you to call Mom. You need to come to Kentucky now!”

I navigated safely into a parking spot; my world was slightly blurry, similar to the fog that descends after receiving one of those dreaded middle-of-the-night phone calls. As I got out of my car, Sherri was still talking frantically, and David, a friend I was meeting for coffee, stood in the doorway of Starbucks, looking puzzled.

At this point my knees buckled, and I saw my mild-mannered friend

moving swiftly toward me. My mind was paralyzed by shock, everything playing out in slo-mo.

I must have looked pale, because David placed his arm under my own and helped me step up into his SUV. As I gazed out the front window at nothing in particular, I told him the story in fits and starts. He was in shock too.

"I have to call my mom," I said, "and then I have to fly home."

Speaking to my mom brought on a wave of tears—she and Dad had been divorced for years, yet remained friendly. I was thankful that my two sisters, Diana and Sherri, would be keeping vigil with her.

Tears turned to sobbing, which brought about nausea. I turned to David and said, "I think I'm going to throw up." I climbed out of his SUV, and in front of God and the whole world, I vomited in the parking lot.

Then my sweet, precious friend David, who has a slight stutter—exacerbated when he's nervous—tried to find the right words as he patted me lightly on the back. This act made me smile. I knew he was doing his best in the midst of his own shock over my family crisis, but, frankly, being doubled over in a dress and hose in a parking lot was not my finest hour. We were just supposed to be having coffee!

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**My father's picture with the words "armed and dangerous fugitive" draped across area TVs.**

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Thank God David took control and called my superstar assistant, Laura, who made all the travel arrangements and drove to my home to pack my clothes, including a black dress for what was sure to be a funeral. My husband, Tommy, gave me a lift to Denver International Airport, more than sixty miles away. I had about two hours to get there and board.

I had learned from Sherri that my dad shot Sandy three times at close

range and then fled the scene on foot. A countywide search ensued, which included school lockdowns, helicopters, dogs, state troopers, and my father's picture with the words "armed and dangerous fugitive" draped across area TVs. (Two years earlier he had completed a ten-year sentence in the state penitentiary for killing the lover of his third wife.)

While Tommy was driving à la Starsky and Hutch toward Denver, Sherri called again. "Diana has gone off on her own," she said. "She's gone to hunt down Dad."

My sister Diana is the spitting image of my father, and like him, she often acts first and thinks later. She and Dad are both known for their hot tempers.

"Diana thinks he may be hiding out at Greer Park (our family's land)," breathed Sherri. "And the news says the area is surrounded by state troopers. She and Dad had a huge fight yesterday. She's determined to tell him she loves him; she says she has to ask for his forgiveness."

"Call her back, Sherri, and tell her to let the police handle it!" I almost shouted. "She does *not* want to live with the visual of Dad in a shoot-out with the cops. I'm almost at the airport. I'll call when I change flights in Chicago."

Boarding my flight in Denver, I had no clue whether my father was dead or alive. As soon as we landed and I got a cell signal in Chicago, I called for an update. The outcome was still uncertain, but Sherri provided a few more devastating details: The police had found Dad, but he had shot himself with a shotgun, blowing off half of his face. Both he and Sandy were on their way to the hospital in Lexington.

We all know life can change in a moment. On January 10—the day of the shooting—I never imagined I'd be pacing Concourse A at Chicago O'Hare en route to my hometown, Waynesburg, Kentucky. But there I was, in the midst of a family crisis involving my dad again.

My morning had started like most others, except for one other major wrinkle that I was still reeling from: Lee, one of my twin daughters, had announced three days earlier that she and her boyfriend had an unplanned

pregnancy (I'll tell you about it later). As a result, I was a prime candidate for large doses of prescription meds and perhaps weeks of shock therapy. But through the chaos, I did have one solid thing going for me. I had staked my life on a strong faith in God. I was confident that the God who had guided me through a lifetime of mishaps—both molehills and mountains—would help make order out of the dual dramas unfolding in Kentucky and Colorado. He was a faithful God, of this I was sure.

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I boarded my flight to Lexington, Kentucky, and into the unknown. And I took out my journal and began to write out prayers for all of my family. As I struggled to process what was happening, I remembered scriptures in the Bible like this one:

Bless our God, O peoples!  
Give him a thunderous welcome!  
Didn't he set us on the road to life?  
Didn't he keep us out of the ditch?  
He trained us first,  
passed us like silver through refining fires,  
Brought us into hardscrabble country,  
pushed us to our very limit,  
Road-tested us inside and out,  
took us to hell and back;  
Finally he brought us  
to this well-watered place.  
—Psalm 66:8–12, MSG

I lived and breathed promises such as this one as the plane ascended to 32,000 feet. And I knew that a peaceful, well-watered place was somewhere down the road.

### *Kentucky Heartbreak*

When I arrived at the Blue Grass Airport, my sister Sherri and my best friend, Lona, were anxiously waiting, and we rushed to the hospital. We found the wing that my father was in; law enforcement officers from every agency in the state surrounded it. I half expected to see the mounted police turning the corner on their trusty steeds.

Sadly, we were refused entry to the ICU wing. If we wanted to see Dad, we'd have to get a judge's order. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (aka HIPAA) prevented the hospital staff or the police from giving us any information about Dad's condition. We didn't know whether he was dead or alive. We didn't know, that is, until we overheard he was scheduled for surgery. We left the hospital thinking that surgery was good news. They wouldn't operate on a dead man.

The next morning, after planning our strategy over much-needed coffee, we manned the phones. After making many calls, we were finally able to find a friend of a friend, who's a judge, to provide us a password that would give us special access to information about Dad's condition.

The password was *giraffe*. (Honestly, who would ever suspect zoo animals?) We called the hospital, gave the nurse the secret word, and she told us the bare-bones information about Dad.

He was alive. And Sandy was alive. They had been healthy just a few months earlier when they had visited my Colorado home. Their current critical medical conditions seemed surreal.

Sherri and I decided to make the hour-plus drive back to the hospital. We were tired of judges, secret passwords, and HIPAA laws. We wanted to see him.

This time we got farther—the ICU waiting room—and straight into the bosom of Sandy's family. They were waiting for Sandy's arm surgery to be completed. We wondered what kind of greeting we'd receive from them. After all, what would you do if you ran into the daughters of the man who came close to murdering your mom two days ago?

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I approached Sandy's daughter. She was twentyish and looked exhausted and disheveled. "I'm just so sorry," I said. "I don't even know the words to say." She graciously received us.

Because Sandy wasn't in police custody, Sherri and I could legally visit with her. When Sandy came out of surgery, I asked her daughter for permission to see her. The daughter agreed, and Sherri and I put on standard green scrubs over our clothes. We also put on fitted latex gloves and masks and then entered her room.

Sandy was still mentally out of it. She looked awful, swollen, and bruised. Her face, neck, and shoulder were still covered with buckshot from the double-barreled shotgun. I prayed over her and held her hand. We shed our green hazmat gowns, and I loaded Sherri down with our coats and purses. She would work as my Sherpa for this mission. Sherri and I then left. I felt stunned and mournful.

Having been inside the ICU wing, Sherri surmised the unit was shaped like a horseshoe. Dad had to be here somewhere. And I was determined to see him!

We slipped quietly through the hallways like two criminals on our way to a heist. As we rounded the corner near the nurse's station, I spotted

two state troopers. Bingo, we were getting warm. We continued to push ahead, and I watched one of the officers walk away; the other was guarding the door.

We ducked into an empty office marked Comfort Room, and each of us took a deep breath. Then I poked my head out the door and spied on the guard through a giant, curved mirror on the hallway ceiling.

“There’s a huge cop guarding the door,” I said to Sherri as a joke. “You bring him into this room and flirt while I slip in and visit with Dad.”

Sherri responded with something to the effect of, “Why do I always have to be the one flirting with the big ol’ police officer? How about you do that and I’ll go find Dad!”

After this brief moment of comic relief, we left the room kind of tickled, nervous, and frightened all at the same time. Would we actually get in to see Dad? Would the guard kick us out? Arrest us?

We decided to take the high road and just ask the officer if we could visit with Dad briefly.

The guard stepped toward us. “Far enough, ladies,” he said. “No visits.”

I launched into my spiel about our being his daughters and having come all the way from Colorado. I whispered the code word to him: “Giraffe.” I asked if we could talk to someone higher up. He agreed to make a call to his supervisor. Meanwhile, we hit the nurse’s station and said *giraffe* again, and we were given an update: Dad had lost an eye. They couldn’t save his cheek. They inserted a plate in his jaw so he could eat. He was stable—for now. Just as we were digesting this news, the officer approached and granted us permission for a ten-minute supervised visit.

The police officers searched us and then handed us hospital togs. Once again we suited up in scrubs, gloves, and masks. Sherri and I were pit-of-our-stomachs nervous at this point. Sherri seemed to be paralyzed with panic.

Three days, four hours, and fifteen minutes after the shooting, we

entered the hospital room of my father, the man who has caused my heart to swell and fall for so many years. The first things that hit me were the machines and the smell. I inhaled iodine. It smelled cold and sterile. Then I spied Dad lying there so still. It was one thing to hear about his massive facial injuries; it was another to see them. The reality of his situation was sinking in and making me physically ill.

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He woke up as we approached, and I said, "Hey, Dad, it's Tootie." Sherri and I both leaned over and kissed him.

He said, "Whadya'll doing here?"

"Just checking on you, Dad," I said.

He asked about the kids, and I told him he was going to be a grandpa. "Lee's pregnant, and you've got to get well because you're going to have a new grandbaby."

It was unreal to think that my dad shot and nearly killed someone, and we were standing there exchanging brief snippets of family news. A strong brew of anger and grief, love and hate, bubbled up and made me weak in the knees.

How did we come to this place? After his last stint in prison, he promised never to put himself in that position again. He made solid plans for the years ahead. And now he had blown it all away. Now he was physically suffering to boot. It was almost unbearable. I wanted to shout: "You had ten

years in prison to reflect and to dry out from alcohol abuse! Ten years away from cigarettes! Ten years from the wrong kind of women and so-called friends! And ten years to find yourself a new life! What the heck happened?

Dad's downward spiral had begun after he divorced my mother. He was controlling and jealous throughout their marriage. I recently asked her what it was like.

"If he told me to turn right, I turned right," she said. "If he got jealous of my friends at work, I'd quit. I once bought a new car by myself because I was tired of breaking down in the middle of nowhere. He didn't say anything about the vehicle on the phone, but he came home from a week on the railroad and took it for a joyride. A couple of months later, he put sugar in the gas tank and destroyed it."

Dad's subsequent wives (and girlfriends) hadn't quite seen life the same way my mom had. The other women had fight in them. In fact, Irma, the woman he left Mom for, moved out of their mutual house and took everything, every last penny, while Dad was away. He came home to find only a mug and coffee pot left. Irma's selfish act devastated him.

Drugs, alcohol, and rough living took our whole family to very bad places. Soon after Irma left, Dad's brother walked into the local elementary school, found his wife, who was the school secretary, and shot her to death. He then took his own life.

Eventually Sherri's and my time with Dad had to end. The officer jolted us out of our brief but intense conversation with him. "Ladies, it's time to go," he said.

I started crying. Sherri started crying. It was the kind of involuntary weeping where the tears fall fast as rain. "I'm heading back to Colorado tomorrow, Dad," I told him. "And you need to rest and be a good patient. This officer let us in to see you, and he is a good man. He'll be watching out for you. We love you a lot."

Dad laughed in his Dad kind of way, the way I remembered as a little girl. I wondered if he grasped the severity of the situation or had

blocked out the events of days earlier. I leaned over and kissed him. Then we walked out. But before we left I hugged that big brown teddy bear of a cop and said, "Thank you so much for being part of our miracle. You'll never know the gratitude."

The officer told me I must know someone in high places to have gotten such approval. I told him that I knew the biggest Boss in the universe, Jesus Christ. The guard responded that he, too, reported directly to this King. We all had tears in our eyes.

Sherri and I left the hospital and walked into the cold Kentucky air.

### *Travails in Trailers*

The experience of visiting Dad had stunned us. Sherri and I hit the closest "watering hole." And in addition to a glass of wine, we needed to plan. First, we had to get an attorney for Dad. Second, we needed to visit his makeshift home, which was a camper, the next day.

Dad's camper was situated on the property of a colorful friend named Huli. Sherri, Diana, and I launched out early the next morning for Huli and Little Huli's farm. Upon arrival we were relieved to find there were no police cars in sight. We spotted Huli and Little Huli in the barn tending to their tobacco crop. Huli was sweet, and he stood up for Dad. They had been friends forever. He was very obliging and told us to go through the camper and take what we wanted.

As I approached Dad's home, another big fat wave of emotion hit me. This stuff was part of his life, his history. And he'd never see any of it ever again. Dad would never see the light of day outside a lattice of barbed wire in a prison courtyard.

I walked through the home in a sentimental haze. Here were his plate and fork in the sink. And there was his breakfast nook with a bulletin board littered with pics of my Colorado family—just me, Tommy, and our kids.

I called my sisters over to the photos: “Just in case you needed proof that I was his favorite,” I quipped, pointing at the photos. They rolled their eyes.

Diana walked around collecting things and mumbling, “I’ve been looking for this Crock-Pot” or “Here’s my fishing pole.” I explored the shower and looked through his cabinets. What kind of toothpaste did he use? What brand of soup did he buy for himself? I wanted to see the little details that made up his routine. I wanted to make those connections with my own habits. In spite of his horrific crime, he was still my dad, my blood.

As we loaded up his belongings in trash bags, including several flannel shirts, my Grandma Thelma’s Bible, a vacuum cleaner, canned goods for Mom—basically, our inheritance—I felt sick to my stomach.

A flood of emotions and thoughts has enveloped me since this event in 2008. My dad is daily reminded of his transgressions as he serves a life-plus sentence in federal prison. As his daughter, I have asked myself, “Who the heck is this man?” I mean really, *Who is this man?* It’s hard to separate logic from emotion, and yet as a somewhat rational adult, I can see and smell the craziness in all of this.

Even now, I’m angry, hurt, disappointed, and mostly sad. I’m sad for Dad. Sad for me. Sad for my sisters and Mom. And sad for my community of friends and family in my small Kentucky town.

### *Relationships and Grace*

But let’s get back to angry. How is it that the deepest emotion of love can run so closely to the emotion of, dare I say, hate? I love my dad, but I hate him for the suffering, pain, and strife he’s caused me and countless others. Yes, I’d take a bullet for my father . . . but I also want to choke the life out of him from time to time. I’d like to think I’ll find peace or resolution for this conflict on this side of heaven, but it’s unlikely. Some parts of life are

just messy. And I believe that God is in the midst of messy, gray areas and unfinished business.

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At the same time, I'm smitten by grace. It's only by the grace of God that I can open the letters my dad sends to me and visit him each and every time I'm in Kentucky. It's only by grace that I can pray for him when sometimes I want only to lobotomize all memory of him. And it's only grace that allows me to authentically grieve for his loss and the brokenness that has consumed him.

Our family members are part of our identity, our story. We can't write them out of our history. Therefore, we have a compelling need to redeem our histories, which prompts us to extend grace to family even through horrific circumstances.

So what does *grace* mean? It's often defined as "unmerited divine favor." Author Philip Yancey writes, "Grace means that there is nothing we can do to make God love us more . . . or to make God love us less."<sup>1</sup> He says, "Grace, like water, flows to the lowest part."<sup>2</sup>

I show kindness toward my dad because he's my dad, not only because I have this love-hate thing going on, but also because I have been the recipient of unmerited favor throughout my lifetime. As my mom likes to say, "more times than you can shake a stick at." Yep, I've blown it over and over on dinosaurian and microscopic levels and every stratum in between. And it's the memory of that favor, the memory of those second and third chances that keeps me extending it to my dad and others. (Keep reading and you'll see many of my own failures.)

Grace means taking positive action even when our hearts aren't touched or moved and our feelings are less than benevolent. Then grace becomes an act of obedience to God.

Sometimes I blow it still, though. My comfort comes in knowing that even when I fall short, God does not. He is there each and every time with forgiveness and that indescribable, unmerited favor for me yet again.

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## **HOT ARTICHOKE AND SPINACH DIP**

Sherri and I consumed a large amount of this delicious stuff after leaving Dad in the hospital.

### **Ingredients**

- 1 cup thawed, chopped frozen spinach
- 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> cups thawed, chopped frozen artichoke hearts
- 6 ounces cream cheese
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cup sour cream
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> cup mayonnaise
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>3</sub> cup grated Parmesan cheese
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> teaspoon red pepper flakes
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> teaspoon salt
- <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> teaspoon garlic powder

### **Directions**

1. Boil spinach and artichokes in 1 cup of water until tender.
  2. Drain and discard liquid.
  3. Heat cream cheese in microwave for 1 minute, or until hot and soft.
  4. Stir in rest of ingredients and serve hot.
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