



Personal Narrative

On a good day, a tostada at Baja Fresh is a fine meal. On a bad day, it is not. This day in particular was not a good one for me. And pushing around beans on a plate did not make it better. I sat at a table closest to the corner of the restaurant and slouched over my dish, every now and then half-heartedly forking up a chunk of beef and lifting it to my mouth in a display of eating. My little sister sat next to me, glaring at her oily fish taco. The bright red of the glossy chair behind her accentuated the paleness of her face. We both said little to nothing, but shifted in our seats, and occasionally my glance would meet hers, but the eye-contact would never linger for more than ten seconds. My tall father, with dark circles chiseled under his eyes, ate his carne asada taco too quickly to actually taste it. He too looked pale, sickly. The usually buoyant curls of his hair were cropped close to his head and it seemed to me that his face drooped, sagged like a wilting plant. The smell of fried meat and cilantro pervaded every part of the air, so much so that I felt it hard to breathe.

I've always been an anxious person, but the emotion I think most accurately represents my feelings that day is not anxiety, but dread. Anxiety in its most heightened forms leads to panic, to a flood of emotion that takes control of the entire body and mind. But dread is something different. Dread is being in control, while at the same time knowing your actions are not enough to prevent the terrible thing that is yet to come. Dread is a terrible feeling in and of itself, but as a child, it's overwhelming because everything is in extremes— either so big or so miniscule, so important or so irrelevant— and you don't see life in the grand scheme of things. Suffice it to say that I was confused, caught in the middle. And looking back, maybe the

circumstances were worth dreading over. I wonder if I had just said what I was feeling, then maybe all the chaos, or at least my share of it, would have dissipated. But back in sixth grade I found it hard to voice my opinion, because I didn't know how to say what I was thinking. And if I did muster up the courage to finally say something, what if it was the wrong thing to say?

"How are you doing?" my father asked over the table, attempting to mitigate the palpable discomfort.

"Fine," I grumbled, shooing away his attempt.

"Look, I know this is difficult, but—"

"Can we not talk about this?" I interrupted.

"If that's what you prefer." Most of our conversations around this time went this way, which is to say, nowhere.

There is a lot I remember about that day. The Baja Fresh pit stop, the silent car ride, and the formidable tall tinted windows of the courthouse all make up a fuzzy picture in my memory. In retrospect, we stopped at Baja Fresh in an attempt to sedate ourselves from the imminent pain, because eating is a way of numbing, and in my family, we much prefer numbing to feeling. Throughout the entirety of their divorce, both of my parents gained weight. My mother binges when anxious. She will eat an entire box of Oreos in the span of an hour, take out the scale she hides under her bed, weigh herself, and cry. And my father drinks, mixes up martinis from mid-afternoon until late into the night, despite the fact he has hepatitis and shouldn't be drinking at all. I do the same. Not with sugar or alcohol, but with television. When I'm anxious, I'll watch shows for hours, even if I'm not interested, until my brain feels hazy and numb, and then I'll fall

asleep. I see the jagged green and red lettering of the Baja Fresh sign, and I think of this, my hereditary need for numbness.

As I sat in the car, my father's silver 2006 Audi, I thought of what a courtroom would look like. What a judge would look like, too. And I thought of what to say. It was impressed upon me from a very early age that my parents were bad people. My father in particular was, for a while, a villain in my mind. He has a bad temper, screams and curses and throws silverware when he accidentally burns the steak or spills his drink. And even though I knew he would never hurt me, his frequent screaming fits would make me shudder, tense up, and I grew to detest going to his house for weekly visits. On top of that, I was fully aware that my mother was my sole financial provider. I saw the stress she endured (the tired eyes, the gained weight) and consequently, resentment for my father piled up, day after day. This resentment was compounded by his being forever stuck to a bed with empty shot glasses scattered on his desk, while my mother seemed to always be on the job. I thought for sure he must be a lazy, feelingless monster, but looking back I realize he was severely depressed.

As we got out of the car, my heart felt like a hammer pounding against my rib cage. My father was wearing a black suit, and I was still wearing my green plaid skirt and white polo, having been pulled out of school. My little sister was in her school clothing as well (not a uniform but a light blue dress, because she didn't go to private school).

"I just want you to know," my father, breathing in deeply, said as he shut the car door "no matter how this goes, I will always love you." His voice was weak, and I knew he was trying not to cry. There is something about seeing your dad tear up as a child that is jarring. I felt a sense of shock and shame at the same time. He was supposed to be the bad guy, and I couldn't let him

blur the image I thought I had a clear picture of. In an attempt to shut out the sadness I felt (numbing, numbing, numbing) I turned around and walked ahead without a response. I still regret doing that.

The courthouse building was tall, with black windows that seemed to stretch interminably toward the sky. We shuffled through security with other dreary people sporting dark suits and ever-present under-eye bags, and as I stepped past the metal detector, I wished to never come back to this sad place. We walked through the labyrinthine halls for what seemed like a very long time until we reached a waiting room, and then all of a sudden, a tall, slender man wearing a freshly-pressed navy suit and carrying a large briefcase strode over to us. The man shook my dad's hand and whispered into his ear. After a brief exchange, the man turned his eyes to me and my sister. My father, getting the cue, said, "Julio, these are my treasures, Ava and Ella."

"Pleasure," Julio said in a nasally drawl, outstretching his free arm. I had heard of Julio, full name Julio Bardavid, from my mother. And from what I knew, he was the slimy fraud ripping apart my family with his own bare hands. If my father was the villain in my mind, Julio was his wicked accomplice.

The meeting with Julio didn't last long, as he slinked off to take care of other lawyerly business, but my sister and I soon spotted my mother and ran over to greet her. My father stayed behind in the opposite side of the waiting room.

"Hi, Babies!" she said, bending down to embrace both of us. "How was school?" I remember hugging her and appreciating the warmth of her body and the smell of her gentle jasmine perfume. She wore a simple grey pencil skirt and a white blouse.

“Fine,” I said, remembering again what we were here to do. I rubbed my knuckles against my lips, something I reflexively do when nervous.

She must have noticed my anxious gesture because all she said in reply was “Just tell the truth, and nothing more.”

I don't remember entering the actual courtroom, but I do remember the feeling of wanting to melt into the floor once I realized both of my parents would be watching me testify. As I walked in, I saw them sitting with both of their lawyers and my stomach tightened. I remember feeling disoriented, not knowing where to go, where to stand. My hands shook with the rush of adrenaline, and I thought that I might collapse onto the floor. The judge, a short woman with a grey pixie cut, ordered the clerk to bring in two folding chairs and place them in the middle of the large open room. Sitting down, she motioned to me to join her. I walked over, feeling that I myself was not moving, but that the floor was pushing me toward the chair. All I wanted was for someone to give me a hug, but the judge opted to shake my hand instead.

“Now, Ella, I'm going to ask you a few questions, and you're going to respond truthfully,” she said. “Do you know the difference between a truth and a lie?”

“Yes,” I said, squeezing my knees for comfort.

“Ok, good. I'm going to ask my questions now. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Do you feel most comfortable with Mom or Dad?” As if a ghost seized my throat, I suddenly lost the ability to speak. I peered back at my parents, at Julio and my mother’s lawyer, Nick I think his name was, and everything I had been forcing myself to contain for the months leading up to the hearing came out in tears. Uncontrollable tears. I cried so hard in that moment that I had to gasp for breath between sobs. I continued to look at my parents, their faces contorted with heartache, and felt like I had to pick between the two. For the past four years it had always been Mom or Dad, one or the other, but I couldn’t pick, not then, not now. I sobbed until I had to be led out of the room. My father is not a perfect man, nor has he been the perfect dad, but I loved him, still do. Even though I knew he didn’t pay a dime for my education, for doctor’s visits, and dentist checkups, I loved him. Even though he was loud and his house was filled with clutter, I loved him. But more importantly, I knew he loved me. And as I walked out of the room, out of the building, to the car, I knew that from then on, it would always be Mom and Dad, and no one could tell me otherwise.