

BLINK

*I do not want to foresee the future. I am concerned with taking care of the present.
God has given me no control over the moment following.*

Mahatma Gandhi

Grey drizzle oozed down the window pane over the kitchen sink, distorting the slice of muted green that revealed the back yard foliage. Jack Cooper watched the images drip, merge and run down to nothing over the top of the damp Journal-Constitution he held. He held the Leisure section open behind his coffee mug and English muffin, but he never read the Leisure section. It was a prop. Just like the immaculately maintained landscape he watched converge in unnatural images on the glass.

“Will you take me to school today, Daddy?” Quinn asked quietly. The grey had even muted his normally vibrant eight-year old daughter. He lowered the paper to smile absently at her round face, all big blue eyes and freckles framed by strawberry blond curls.

“Me too.” interjected Jackson, his five year old mini-me.

“Your Mom is gonna take you guys. Like always.” He smiled, trying for warmth and failing miserably. “Daddy has to work. Somebody’s gotta pay for those Fruit Loops.” He poked a finger at a Loop in Jackson’s cereal bowl, momentarily drowning it before it popped back up. Jackson giggled.

“Mommy’s mad again.” Quinn almost whispered. Her eyes darted to the stairs in the hallway outside the kitchen.

Jack took a deep breath, buying time. “Sweetie, Mommy’s not mad at you.” He couldn’t honestly say that Mommy wasn’t mad. He noticed that Jackson was looking at his lap, too, Fruit Loops forgotten. “She’s just stressed. She loves you both very much. And she loves being able to take you to school.”

“What’s stressed?” Jackson asked, resuming his slow slurp of the cereal. Before he could frame an answer, Quinn spoke up.

“It’s when you want to do everything perfect, and you try really hard to make everything perfect all the time, and when something or somebody isn’t perfect like you want them to be, you get all mad and sad

at the same time.” She spoke slowly, but with that slight disdain for the ignorance of five year old brothers.

Jack had inadvertently dropped the newspaper on top of his breakfast as he stared intently at his daughter. Sometimes he forgot just how intuitive she could be. And how much more grown up she was becoming.

“Stressed is when you’re working very hard on something and you want it to be....” He hesitated.

“Perfect.” Quinn frowned.

“Successful. So you think about it a lot, trying to think of all the ways you can make whatever it is better.” Her father finished, frowning slightly at her. “Your Mommy just wants us all to be the best that we can be.”

“Well I am the best Jackson Junior that I can be.” His son pronounced gravely, around a mouth sloshy with cereal. That made Jack smile in earnest.

“Yes, you most certainly are, little man.” He wiped his son’s mouth with the already-soggy napkin beside his bowl. Then he turned to Quinn, who was now gazing out the same window he had been. “And **you** are the bestest daughter any Mommy and Daddy ever had.” He reached across the table and gently tugged a curl out straight. It sprang right back into place as Quinn turned to look at him, a tentative smile playing on her lips. “Mommy and I love you both very much.”

“How much?” Jackson giggled. It was a game they played.

“I love you more than chocolate.” Quinn threw in, grinning.

“More than ice cream!” Jackson crowed.

“More than all the stars in all the galaxies in the universe.” Jack grinned back at them.

“More than all the dinosaurs!” Jackson screamed louder.

“More than - “ Quinn started.

“What is going on in here?” Delaney Cooper demanded as she rounded the corner, phone in hand, covering the mouthpiece. She swept her dark hair, cut in an up-to-the-minute style, behind one ear as she shook her head. “Kids, go get your bags and coats on, we’re leaving in two minutes.” Sighing loudly and shooting Jack a harangued look, she took her hand away from the phone. “I’m so sorry Michelle. The kids were going at it again. You know how it is. Sibling rivalry always” Her voice faded quickly as she left the room.

Jackson had jumped up and run from the room, hopefully gathering his school things. Quinn stood at the sink, putting her bowl and Jackson’s into the sink.

“We weren’t *going at it*.” She mumbled, just loud enough for Jack to hear.

"No, you weren't. But you ARE going to be late if you don't get your things together." He carefully lifted the paper from the remains of his breakfast. Quinn just sighed. "I do love you more than the universe, you know."

"I love you too." She said, without smiling. "Do you think Mommy loves us?"

"Oh sweetie, Mommy loves you more than anything." He tried to maintain the earlier smile.

Quinn sniffed as she ambled slowly toward the hallway. Jack watched her go with a guilty heart. He should know what to say to her. The right things to say. He should be able to make her smile. He sighed and folded the paper. This had gone too far, he needed to talk to Delaney again. Did she realize that the kids were getting older now and couldn't be dismissed with a bright toy and a cookie so easily anymore? She had to know what her inattention was doing to her kids. To her family. To her marriage.

"Okay kidlets! Time to go!" Delaney chirped over-brightly from the foyer. Jack poured his cold coffee in the sink and walked to the foyer to say goodbye to his family for the day. "Quinn! Hurry up!" Delaney shouted up the stairs just as Jack rounded the corner at her side. "Oh, Jack. Michelle was just telling me about this fantastic seniors' community. I thought we might check it out for your Mother. Michelle and her brothers moved their Dad over there and he just loves it. Lots of social activities, they take them shopping, and to museums, and have hair stylists come in special – "

"I thought we'd discussed Mom moving in here, to help with the kids after school."

"I know, but don't you think she would be so much happier in a place with people her own age – " her green eyes flashed as he interrupted her.

"She would be happier here with her family." Jack clenched his jaw. "She's said repeatedly that she doesn't see enough of her only grandchildren. And she could help with the housework – "

"Quinn!!" Delaney screamed right over him. "Where is she? The drop-off line gets longer with every minute and some of those people just have no respect for those of us on a schedule. Talking forever to their kids before they let them out. Kids spilling everything from their book bags and holding up the line." She sighed to the room at large.

"We're not putting my mother in a home." Jack said, quietly. Delaney just tutted in his direction.

"Jackson, did you brush your teeth? Good?" she ignored him as she shoveled items from one outlet-store designer purse to the other.

"We can't afford it. She would hate it." He waited while Delaney made Jackson blow his nose into a tissue she'd plucked from one of the purses. "And it's not going to happen."

"We'll have to talk about this later." Delaney finally huffed. "Quinn! We're leaving!" she turned at the door and gave him a quick, dismissive peck on the cheek before hustling Jackson out the door. Quinn came rushing down the stairs, pulling her winter jacket on and bouncing her book bag behind her.

"Have a great day, sweetie." He smiled, helping her into the second sleeve of her coat. "Love you."

“Love you too.” She said, unsmiling, and slammed the door behind her.

Jack sighed again, listening to the engine of Delaney’s big SUV struggle to fire up. It too wasn’t used to the uncharacteristic cold snap. If it was going to be this cold, it should be snowing, not raining, he thought. But it rarely snowed in Atlanta. On those rare occasions when it did, the city shut down with the first flakes that lingered on the ground. This far south most drivers weren’t accustomed to winter road hazards, so they ran out to buy milk and bread as first flurries flew and stayed home for the duration. (Usually all of two days at most.) And if there happened to be any accumulation at all, the city wasn’t equipped to deal with winter – a silly use of tax dollars in the deep south, so roads went untended until the sun came out again. Only to melt and re-freeze when the temperature dropped the next night, forming black ice. You couldn’t see it, couldn’t know it was there until you’d hit it and your car went sliding out from under you across the road, uncontrollable unless you steered into the skid and rode it out cautiously. Outside, the cold rain continued, just wet, no snow or ice in sight.

“Is that what I’m doing? Steering into the skid? Just hoping to get past it?” Jack mused, holding the dining room drape aside to watch the SUV disappear into the drizzling greyness. His tall form slumped a bit as he dropped his head and ran a hand over his short, light brown hair. He let the drape fall and turned from the window to head upstairs for a shower.

“Hello Kelli!” Delaney chirped, leaning across the front passenger seat towards the open door.

“Miss Kelli can’t talk to you in the drop off line.” Quinn reminded her mother as she slid out of the car. “It’s against the rules.”

“Yes, it’s okay Quinn. Mommy knows the rules. And I know Miss Kelli.” Delaney answered while straining around to the back seat to help Jackson with the seat belt of his booster seat. “Okay, hurry, Jackson. You dropped a paper there.” Jackson claimed the crumpled paper and bounded from the car.

“Bye Mommy!” he called over his shoulder as he ran for the school entrance. Quinn hadn’t said good bye. She was already gone when Delaney looked up from Jackson’s seat belt and missing paper. Delaney smiled brightly and waved to Kelli, who was huddled inward under an umbrella on the curb, before pulling away.

Her smile fell immediately as the drizzle and half-light swallowed her. She pulled out of the school parking lot and turned towards the rest of her day. She had only twenty minutes to get to the coffee shop where she met weekly with her Bible study group. She wasn’t entirely religious herself, but it was a very influential group of ladies that met at the Jumping Bean every Thursday. Katie Grayson, who led the group, was married to the deputy mayor; Amy Mason had been P.T.A. president at the prestigious, private high school in their kid’s district for the last three years; Connie Burke was the first wife of a famous local entrepreneur, and Margie Preston was the Pastor’s wife at New Life Baptist Church where they all attended. Some more often than others. There were other members, but these were the women that Delaney courted every Thursday. Margie, in particular, called attention to any late-comers.

Mondays and Wednesdays were filled with various volunteer positions in all the best organizations. And recently she'd added tennis lessons on Wednesdays that she'd taken up since learning that Shelly Goldstein, celebrity attorney's wife, was looking for a new partner on her ALTA team.

Tuesdays she spent volunteering at her kids' school, working with the ESOL students, learning English as a second language, and then going to the gym in the afternoon. Fridays were for all the domestic chores – the grocery store, the bank, the dry cleaner's, the doldrums. Thursdays, like today, were for Bible study group and gym again in the afternoons. Today she had a Spinning Class, followed by a Tae Bo Class, followed by a dip in the gym's pool. It was a challenging workout, but she met up with other influential Atlantans during those classes that could further her, her husband, and her kids along the road of life.

She arrived at the Jumping Bean early enough to get a front-row parking spot. Of course, Margie was already there, at the table in the back corner, waiting. Bible study held no real interest on most days, and this was one of those days. Delaney had warmly greeted each of the other women as they arrived, and then sat quietly, smiling benevolently through the session. There were too many highly opinionated (and highly beneficial) women at the session for Delaney to express her own opinions. Her strategy was to say nothing to the group at large, and agree wholeheartedly with each woman in private afterwards. It was onerous work, and she really could have been home helping Jack with his business, but she felt this was a more profitable use of her time that furthered her family in Atlanta society.

As soon as Bible study was winding down, she gunned her SUV across midday traffic to make her Spinning class on time. The Spinning class, followed immediately by the Tae Bo class, was enough to blow off the steam from the rest of the week.

Delaney floated on her back in the gym's pool, eyes closed, trying to think of nothing. She couldn't.

The kids' bus would drop them at the end of the driveway at precisely 2:50. Because Jackson was in kindergarten, they wouldn't allow him off the bus without a parent waiting in plain sight. Would Jack remember to go out there? She sighed, reveling in the last few moments of peace. You'd think, since he worked at home, that he could take a few minutes out of his busy day to meet his kids' school bus. But no. He left that to her, too. Delaney sighed and turned over to swim to the side and exit the pool.

Looking at the large clock mounted on the pool house wall, she had exactly 15 minutes to dry off, change, and beat the bus back to the house. Not enough time. She needed a couple more minutes.

Frantically swiping at her wet body with a towel, she stalked to the locker room. Reaching her locker, she stripped one-handed while dialing home on her cell with the other. No answer. She threw the wet towel on the floor and yanked on her jeans and sweater combo while speed-dialing Jack's cell. Still no answer. Damn it. Where was he?

She tried both numbers again while she stuffed items back into her gym bag, then dug through those same items to find her car keys. She was frustrated, normally she was much more organized for her day. Walking outside, she saw that the rain had turned into sleet with a few wet, lazy, snowflakes mixed in, still dripping slowly down from the grey sky.

Climbing into her car, she finally got it cranked and turned up the heater, and wished in vain for instant heat. While she waited for the car to heat up, she tried to call Jack one more time. She got the answering message and subsequent annoying BEEP once again. This time she left a message.

“Goddamnit, Jack. Where are you? I’m running a couple of minutes late and I need you to go out and meet the bus or they won’t let the kids off. Well, they won’t let Jackson off, anyway, because he’s a kindergartner and they have to have a parent in sight – damn. Just call me when you get this. I’m on my way home and will be there as soon as I can. I just don’t know if I’ll beat the bus. Could use your help. Call me.” She hung up and backed out of the parking space. As she pulled out of the gym parking lot and headed toward the Interstate toward home, the music on the radio was interrupted with a weather report warning about the freezing temperatures and wet roads. “I’m going, I’m going.” Delaney intoned to herself, stopping for a red light. Everyone was driving much slower because of the wet, slick roads, and it was making Delaney later and later for her rendezvous with the school bus. She tried calling Jack again and got voice mail.

Hanging up, she saw the light turn green in front of her and dropped the phone back into the cup holder between the seats. As she lifted her attention from the center console, and accelerated into the intersection, a dark motion in her peripheral vision caught her eye and she turned her head to the left.

Time was suspended. In the razor-sharp perception of slow-motion, a dark green hulking panel van, brakes locked, and tires sliding askew across the icy pavement, rushed inexorably toward her at a rate of speed that would crush her driver’s side door, crush her car, crush her, as it barreled through the space she currently occupied. There was no time to look away. No time to even close her eyes.

She turned the steering wheel away from the fast-encroaching behemoth – only to steer into a creeping slide toward the bridge guardrail of the Interstate overpass. She watched, wide-eyed, as the van closed the distance and crunched into her car, slamming both cars into the bridge’s guard rail as Interstate traffic still sped by below on the road underneath. Only milliseconds later, the bridge’s guard rail buckled and Delaney watched, horror-struck as the front end of her car began to dip down, ever so slowly tilting the whole car over the edge until the SUV, with her inside, was in free-fall towards the speeding, oncoming traffic of the Interstate below.

“*Oh shit.*” She thought, one hand on the useless steering wheel, the other reaching for anything else to hold onto and brace her during the coming crash. The descent lasted much longer than she would have thought as she watched a tractor trailer in the lane closest to the shoulder of the road slam on brakes, and begin to slide off the road. A Lexus was in the next lane, just behind the tractor trailer, and similarly locking up its brakes, fishtailing to avoid the vehicle inexplicably falling directly in its path. Delaney watched the Lexus slide sideways across two more traffic lanes towards the median. It would miss her, and the other traffic behind it should have enough room to stop.

Delaney’s eyes slid closed, still in slow motion, until everything went black.