



**SOMEBODY'S  
DAUGHTER**

**A MEMOIR**

**ASHLEY C. FORD**

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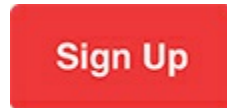
[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For my family,  
and my friends who feel like family

Although the wind  
blows terribly here,  
the moonlight also leaks  
between the roof planks  
of this ruined house.

—IZUMI SHIKIBU

*Ashley,*

*I must admit that I was surprised to hear from you. I had just come in from my institutional job, when one of the correctional officers brought me my mail. I thought that it was a book or newspaper that I had ordered, because I hardly ever, if ever, receive any mail from anyone on the streets.*

*Ashley, don't take this the wrong way, but come next year, I will have been incarcerated for twenty years, which means the letter that you wrote to me is the first letter that you have written me in almost twenty years. I was at a loss for words as I slowly read your letter over and over again.*

*You are right when you say that you are a woman now, and not a little girl. So, I won't talk to you like you are a little girl. Instead I will talk to you like you are a woman. However, don't misunderstand me, you will always be my little girl, not to mention, my favorite girl.*

*Why God in heaven gave you to me, only he knows. I do not deserve to have you as my daughter, but God gave you to me for a reason, and I am so grateful to be your father. Please! Please! Forgive me for all the pain I caused you in your life.*

*I am going to survive prison. I am going to create a beautiful life for myself. I'm going to show you and your brother R.C. how much I love you with every breath I take. Ashley, your father is coming home. I cannot promise you when that will be, but I can give you my word that I am coming.*

*Love always,  
Dad*

# 1

“Just remember, you can always come home.”

There it was. I expected and hated when my mother said those words. Two years before this call, I’d moved to Brooklyn from Indiana. Now I lived in Flatbush with my boyfriend, Kelly. Back home in the Midwest, our friends were building four-bedroom houses on one-acre lots with mortgages comparable to the monthly rent of our one-bedroom. After living in the city for a year or two, I marveled at home features I would have called standard before I left. Features like dishwashers, in-unit laundry, and backyards. The apartment we lived in now had one of those, the dishwasher. When it ran, the second phase of the wash cycle shook the floor and walls with a deep rumble. I felt it in my feet while I paced the floor.

I had gotten up from dinner to take the call from my mother. She still lived in Fort Wayne, my hometown. We hadn’t lived in the same city, or the same house, since I left for college eleven years earlier. She called every few weeks—I answered every other call—and we usually had a good time talking for ten to fifteen minutes. I’d taught myself to keep our phone conversations light, or as I liked to think of it, complication-free, without lying. I didn’t want to lie to her. I wanted to be able to talk to my mother the way I could with most other people, as myself. But she wasn’t just anybody. She was my mother, so that was impossible. There were limits. We only dove into subjects that wouldn’t end in arguments, which was mostly whatever would make us both laugh.

When she said that thing to me, that I could always come home, part of me wanted to reply, “Mama, I love you, but I’ll work myself past the white meat, down to the bone, and fistfight every stranger I run across on the street before we live under the same roof again.” That was the hyperbolic expression of a feeling I did not allow myself to verbalize, for fear of



ruining our smooth interaction. And it would have. There was no way to make it sound like a joke because in some way, I wasn't joking. I got angry with myself for even thinking the thought because I knew it would hurt her to know it had ever been in my mind. I got mad at myself too, for not saying it out loud anyway. For not caring if it hurt her, if it meant telling the truth.

Before she called, Kelly and I were eating. We were lovers who lived together, trying to find out if we had whatever turned two people in love into the kind of family either of us wanted. We decorated and burrowed into our apartment, The Nest, as he began to call our tight, warm space. We hung cheap framed prints on the walls, topped bookshelves with action figures and small stuffed animals. We created a barricade between our softest selves and the sharp elbows of the city surrounding us. It wasn't that we couldn't take a hit, we just weren't used to the pace, but we still believed we could figure it out. Either way, we were finally home, in *our* home together, and I felt protected by our walls and the love shared there between them.

In our small kitchen, I wanted to cook for everyone and anyone, which mostly ended up being Kelly. It was a developing skill, but to my surprise, I was not a disaster. It was one of the ways I was learning to soothe myself, suggested by a therapist who told me, "Take the time to feed yourself food that feels good and tastes good. Who better to do that for than you?" It felt like exactly the kind of thing you pay someone to say to you. I still did it. Losing myself in the construction of a meal was the closest thing I had to a hobby.

The night my mother called, I made pasta. I tried to prepare the food to be served hot and ready minutes after Kel walked through the door. He would have eaten my pasta at any temperature I offered it to him, but I wanted to get it right. When he closed the bookstore where he worked, he didn't get home until nine forty-five p.m. at the earliest, closer to ten if he had to count the drawer more than twice. My timing didn't always work out, but this evening I pulled it off. Our plates were piled with thick ropes of linguine in a homemade garlic tomato sauce, oozing from the ends of our forks.

When my phone buzzed on the counter, I'd squinted at the screen before answering. I'd been trying to spend less time holding or even looking at my phone. Kelly could walk away from his phone for half a day

before remembering it existed. Engaging with various social media platforms didn't appeal to him the same way. He often asked me to put mine away to be present with him, especially during meals. He wasn't wrong to ask, and I did not resent the request unless it embarrassed me. I knew I spent too much time on my phone, but sometimes I wished he could ignore that as well as I could. Still, I loved and wanted to be present with him. The only reason I gave a second thought to answering the phone during our meal was that my mother had worked the same job for more than two decades, and these days, was almost always asleep by nine, if not before. Seeing her name flash across my phone's screen worried me, so I picked up.

"Hello, Mother," I said in a faux posh voice. It was meant to keep things as jovial as the moment could stand. Usually, she would respond with her own equally posh voice, "Hello, Daughter," then we'd both giggle and tell each other something silly, or gossip, or ask the question we'd called to ask. This time my mother said, "Hi, baby," and I knew this wasn't a quick gossiping call. I walked into the bedroom to be on my own.

I shut the door behind me, and sat on the bed. My chest was tight with anticipation for whatever she said next. I started to count my breaths the way my first therapist had taught me, but couldn't remember how long I was supposed to hold the breath, or for how long I was supposed to let it out. I never thought enough about breathing until I needed to, and by then, it was too late. I've heard people describe panic as something that rises up inside them. For me, panic radiates in the threads of my muscles, bangs in the back of my skull, twists my stomach, and sets my skin on fire. It doesn't rise or fall. It spreads.

*Was it one of my siblings?* My worst fear was that my mother called to tell me something happened to either one of my two brothers, or my sister. Since high school, maybe even a little before then, I'd experienced recurring nightmares about one of them dying. Never dreamt of anything too gory, thank God. I never had to watch them die, not even in the worst iterations of my dreams. I always arrived in the aftermath, left to deal with the reality of losing them before waking and getting the chance to prove to myself my little loves were still here. My mother knew about my nightmares, and had sent me back to bed many times after I burst into her room to listen to my youngest brother's heartbeat, or watch my sister's back fall and rise with the deep and heavy, but living breath of sleep. The

dreams intensified when I left for college, and again when I eventually left Indiana altogether.

Her voice pulled me back to our halting conversation. She reassured me from the other end of the phone line. “Nobody’s hurt. Everybody’s okay.” The top half of my body collapsed with relief and I fell back onto the bed. I closed my eyes, and when that didn’t shut out enough light, laid my forearm against my closed lids until the view behind them faded into purple and black like the climax of a bruise.

“So what is it, Mom?” I waited for her to speak, and cursed what felt like dramatic pauses under my breath. We’d never found an easy way to talk about hard things, so we struggled to say anything at all in hard times. If she was calling about money, I wished she would just ask for what she needed, so I could be honest about whether or not I could help, and we could be done. My mother huffed. She sensed my impatience. That I was an adult who was allowed to be frustrated with her annoyed her whether she verbalized it or not. For all the ways we chose to remain silent, communicating our displeasure never actually required words. She spoke.

“Your dad is getting out of prison.”

My breath caught between my mouth and lungs, unsure in which direction it was most needed. My heart hit the gas, rushing blood to parts of my body calling out for it, and my hands trembled. *What were those breathing counts again? Six in, six out? Six in, seven out?* Was I going to cry? I touched my face with a shaking hand to be sure I hadn’t already started. Nothing. My mother didn’t speak, and it no longer felt like a performance. It felt right to have all that space for my words, my feelings, whether or not they decided to show up and tell me how to respond.

My heartbeat traveled to every end of me, pumping pumping pumping through my ears. I moved my mouth enough to ask the only question presenting itself with any clarity in my mind, “When?”

“In about two weeks. I just found out he’s coming home.” She paused, and once again, I was grateful to have room for my thoughts. “Are you okay?” I wasn’t, but I didn’t want to have to keep talking about how I wasn’t okay. It was a relief to know my siblings were unharmed, and she hadn’t done or said anything wrong. The ends of her questions lingered like she really did want to help, and I believed she did. The issue was that I’d been waiting to hear that my father was getting out of prison my entire life, and now that someone called me and said it was happening, all I could

feel was how much I wanted to get off the phone.

I was tempted, as I always am, to take the bait when my mother offers me empathy. Tempted by my fantastical belief that one day I will lower my walls, and she will do the same. Then I end up blaming myself for not remembering to stick to the conversational paths offering the least resistance, furious at myself for veering too far into the unexplored or exiled. Or worse, I'd be drawn into her fantasy that we were already close. If my mother and I shared anything without having carefully considered it, it was this undying ember of a dream that we will someday, somehow find ourselves reaping the bounty of a blooming mother-daughter bond, the roots of which we both refuse to tend in the meantime.

I told her I was okay. She didn't press me, and I offered nothing else. I wondered if maybe she didn't want my answers anyway, and the single thought was convincing enough for me to keep my mouth closed. I thanked her for telling me about my Dad, told her I loved her, waited to hear it back, and hung up the phone.

Dazed, I walked back to the kitchen counter and sat down beside Kelly, wanting nothing more than to be close to him. I didn't want to be touched, even as I begged myself not to cry. I laid my phone back on the counter, facedown. He was still finishing his meal, but stopped eating and turned to me. My head spun with words, images, bits of conversations, music, and colors making up a swirl of debris zipping past my face, and returning seconds later, moving too quickly for me to reach out and hold onto anything long enough to make sense of the patterns they made, or whatever they tried to tell me. If I'd had the option, I would have called my grandmother to tell her the news myself, and hear her shout, "God is so good!" as if she'd just put in a prayer request for this very outcome. She had been reliably religious, and though I never would be again, her exclamations of joy brought me comfort when I needed it most. I needed it now.

I tried to count again, to breathe, or at least go numb enough to speak without crying. My emotions moved through me faster than I could name them. Feeling any of it felt like the beginning of losing control, and losing control felt like certain death in my body, if not my mind. If I didn't process the feeling, I wouldn't feel it, and if I didn't feel it, it couldn't kill me.

"What was that about?" he asked. I picked up my fork and took a bite

of my food. It was cold now. It was still good, but not perfect. I chewed, swallowed, and spoke without looking up.

“My dad’s getting out of prison in two weeks.” I kept eating.

Kelly quit moving and stared at me, his eyes popped open, and his jaw lagged a bit, before he snapped it shut again.

“Well,” he asked. “How does that make you feel?”

“I don’t know,” I said. I looked down at my phone, wondering if I should call my mother back and say more, or ask more. But what would I say? What questions did I have that she could answer? If I knew the right words, or the right questions, I didn’t trust myself to say them the right way. If I called back, even if I needed to call back, we would fight. I felt certain that was true. Then, I stopped eating, and despite my own internal protests, began to cry.

“Kel,” I sobbed. “I really don’t know how I feel.” I sat on the stool, gulping air, and swiping at my tears. My boyfriend watched me, sat patiently beside me, and when I lowered one of my hands into my lap, he covered it with his own.

I felt like I knew my father, and I knew he felt like he knew me too. In reality, we’d spent the majority of both our lifetimes mentally constructing versions of one another we couldn’t physically confirm or deny the existence of. We dreamed of one another—what we might be like—long before we met. My uncle Clarence, my father’s closest brother, used to stare at me when we were in the same room. Sometimes I caught him. “You gotta excuse me,” he’d smile. A smile that felt familiar and safe from the beginning. “You look just like my brother, but smaller and with pigtails.” Then he’d hug me, and we’d laugh to keep the sadness away. I always wished he’d say more about the little brother he loved, the man who left me with his face, and little else. He rarely did. I didn’t see Uncle Clarence that often. I kept wishing anyway.

The few times I visited my father, though pleasant, bowed under the weight of our expectations. We were happy to see one another, but we could not always say the thing we wanted to say most and risk spoiling the other’s dream. We never discussed them, yet somehow agreed on these terms. An unspoken pact between an emotionally desperate father and daughter. Made up contracts for a shoestring bond.

“That’s okay, baby,” my father would say, when I tried to apologize on the phone for not writing. “You write me when you want to. I’ll be waiting

patiently, and happily.”

He kept writing. He wrote that I was his favorite girl, I was brilliant, and I was the best daughter anyone could ever hope for. For a long time, that was all I needed. Until, of course, I needed more.

## 2

My oldest memory is of my younger brother, R.C., eating a smashed overripe tomato. I remember the way he grabbed at the pulpy red flesh, and the way he could only hold it one way: as tightly as he possibly could. This is normal for small children who have not yet mastered their motor skills. There is no difference between holding and squeezing. They don't know any better. He didn't know any better, and neither did I. Of course, the guts of the fruit broke free into the spaces between his small fingers, and made a mess on the white tray top surrounding him. By the time he opened his hand to take a bite, there were only cold strings of bright skin and small white seeds.

My brother was too young to walk, but I wasn't. It was I who rooted around in the bottom of the refrigerator, found the food, and attempted to slice it for him with a butter knife. He'd been crying in his walker, the little wheels scooting back and forth across the floor as he flung himself from side to side. My mother slept so hard his wails didn't stir her. I didn't want her to wake up. I wanted her to sleep, and I wanted to help. My brother and I were fourteen months apart in age, so I must have been around three years old. I don't remember a time before him. I was supposed to have been a miracle baby for my mother. She'd had an ovary removed as a teenager, and her doctor told her the other one didn't work. It worked enough for me apparently. Then R.C. came along, and I was not a miracle anymore. I was a big sister, and to me, that was better. I loved him too much right from the beginning.

I saw my mother go to feed him each time he cried, so I thought food would make him happy. He was my best friend. I would take care of him. I rubbed his head and whispered, "Don't cry, baby. Don't cry."

When I was in college, one of my therapists at the on-campus counseling center told me I shouldn't remember any of this because I was

too young. He told me most people don't have memories of themselves or their experiences at two and three years old. He asked me when I started speaking. I told him that I could speak in sentences before I could walk, a fact I'd been reminded of by my grandmother every chance she got.

"You couldn't walk straight for nothing. We called you Stagger Lee!" She'd say, laughter ripping through her entire body, infecting anyone else in the room, even me, often at my own expense. "But you'd point at something you wanted and say, 'I want that!' I thought, what kind of child is this?" She'd shake her head, recreating the same confused look she'd apparently worn all those years ago.

I told him my grandmother had a tendency to oversell my childhood intellect, so I couldn't be sure if it was accurate information. He wrote it down on his notepad, and I continued to tell him my stories, or what I remembered of them. My earliest memories are sunburnt Polaroids, frozen moments gone blurry at the edges and spotted all down the middle. Then, at four, the pictures become clearer and clearer, as do the voices within them. The loudest voice belongs to my brother, before he could properly pronounce my name, calling for me.

"Hashy? Where are you? Where is my Hashy?"

My brother loved me and made it so easy to believe I was good. I was a child, unspoiled in a certain way. I didn't doubt myself. I decided and I tried. Then I'd fail and try again. Or I would succeed and go on to try something new. I was not always as afraid of the world or as nervous about the other people living in it alongside me, or what they might do to me. When my life was new, I understood in my bones how little it mattered what anybody else was doing, or what they thought about what I was doing. I believed my bones then.

When I was four years old, I taught myself to lie awake until morning. I wanted the sunrise, and I only had to stay awake to have her. When children are small, our desires seem small, even if we want the sky. Anything we want seems to be only a matter of time and effort away. It's too early to imagine what's already holding you back.

I'd been enraptured with a storybook about the cycle of the sun. I remember looking on in awe as my teacher outstretched her right arm, extending it as far as she could, her fingers spread for the illusion of an extra inch. Her left arm moved out and away from her body, though not as far as its opposite, still close enough to read from the book she held. It was



a simple and sad attempt to describe the sheer enormity of a life-supporting star to a pre-K classroom.

She said the word “sunshine,” and we said it back. Her eyes roamed the cramped space for something to support her lesson, a point of reference that might get this thing to click. The taupe tile floor, and its matching tattered and stained square reading carpet, had nothing to add. Nor did the sky, nor rain falling from overfull clouds inching down the window behind her. Still, she tried to get us to understand, to sit down, to stop talking, to want to know more about what the universe might be up to while life so far had been teaching us to be wholly consumed with ourselves.

I wanted to know. I sat quietly, and waited for her to continue the story of the sun. My teacher turned the second to last page, revealing the final illustration. Those massive swirls of orange, gold, yellow, and a smattering of sweet pinks left little cracks all over my heart.

I gasped.

I repeated the word “sunrise,” and the sound opened like a spring bloom on the tip of my tongue. There are few words worthy of the wonders they describe, but sunrise sounds like it feels. A *u* sunken to the bottom of one’s throat, and an *i*, pointing upward and onward to a warm beyond.

I’m sure I’d seen a sunrise sometime before then, and had maybe even heard the word before. The sky was already one of my favorite things. It told me what kind of day I might have. A sunny day usually meant being outside with family, especially R.C., my brother, best friend, and favorite playmate. Sometimes our mama even played with us.

Rainy days were charming too. My mother, brother, and I would sit on the couch together, small limbs draped over big ones, and watch movies. We had four or five kids’ movies on VHS and my brother learned them all by heart. Every once in a while, he would get lost in a movie, sitting, staring, and speaking every line of dialogue as the actors spoke it on-screen. My mother, grown frustrated, would yell, “Shut up or I’ll turn it off!” He would stop. But after sitting a while, staring a while, and forgetting why he shouldn’t, he’d start to do it again.

When she got tired of kid movies, my mother would put on something meant for older audiences. My brother and I would watch those too. My obsession with sunrises and sunsets was only stoked by their repeated appearances in the introductions or theme songs of some of my favorite