

It's hard being a twelve-year-old girl, no one notices you, no one cares about you at all. Well, maybe that no one part is a bit exaggerated. My dad loves me, he cares, and he always notices things about me that no one else does. My mother sure didn't give a shit about me or him. She just vanished on both of us without so much as a eat shit and die. I was only five when she left, so it's just been me and dad for the past eight years.

When I say it's been just the two of us, that's exactly what I mean. My mother, Elizabeth, left us as soon as we moved to this awful town. They had almost finished moving everything when Elizabeth she had to "Go back and pick up a few things she left behind". The problem with that is, she never came back. She ghosted us, like the seven years with him and the five years raising me meant nothing to her. How can you do that after seven happy years? No call, no letter, no nothing. Just an "I'll be back" and leave your entire life and family behind. Did she know the damage she could have done to a five-year-old little girl could have been irreversible? Lucky for me, I've got the best daddy in the world. He made sure she didn't fuck me up for life.

It really didn't seem like that at first though. It confused me because it appeared like it didn't have any effect on my dad, David. He carried on with his day-to-day life like she never existed. It felt like my unfit mother left me with an equally unfit father. The years would later prove that the complete opposite was true.

My dad was a workaholic, he was gone most of the day, every day. He would drop me off at school at 7 every morning and I wouldn't see him until he picked me up from the sitter at 7:30 every night. I got used to that pattern for six years. That was until I got curious and went through the stuff that he kept in his office.

I always knew that dad was pretty secretive about his office. He would never let me go in there when he wasn't home. It's pretty hard to keep a curious eleven-year-old out of a room if she wants to get in there. When I finally broke in, it was the most eye-opening moment of my life. It really couldn't have come at a better time honestly. Every child goes through the "fuck the world! I HATE EVERYONE!" phase. I was approaching mine in a hurry and he was about to feel the wrath of six years of unanswered questions and rage. I don't know if he was ready for it. I was.

His office was very clean, it almost looked like it was never used. The chestnut floors were always polished, the white walls were blindingly bright, the window behind the solid oak desk looked so lonely. It looked like a movie set.

When I got closer to the desk, all I could see was the laptop and a key. The laptop didn't peak my interest, I used it frequently when dad was home. The key stood out like it was screaming for me to find where it goes. I had never seen the

key there when I went in to talk to him, so it had to be something. Naturally, there was a drawer in the desk that had a lock on it.

Once I opened the drawer, I became a bit disappointed and confused. It was notebooks and a pen. I figured it was work related because it wouldn't be unusual for an accountant to have notebooks and pens. Normally I'm not a curious person, but, I figured it was locked for a reason. There had to be a secret to his life in here. What I found would change everything I knew about my dad and my life.

Journals. I guess it was the closest thing to a therapist that my dad had. When I opened the one on top I found that it left off at yesterday's date.

"April 21st, 2018: Not much time to write today. I've been getting things ready for Kat's 13th birthday. It's going to be amazing. Well, as amazing as a single dad can make it. Girls are still tough. Even at my age. I'll catch up on the little details tomorrow. I think I'll come home early and take Kat out to eat. We haven't done that in a little while"

Early to dad meant 6:30 instead of 7:30. I glanced up at the clock. Shit, it's 6:20....he'll be home any minute. I quickly put the notebook back and started to close the drawer when I decided to reach in and grab the notebook labeled #1. I guess that would be where they all began. I closed the drawer, ran to my room and stuffed the notebook with my books for school. It blended in so I didn't have to worry about it being seen. I heard the front door open shortly after I jumped into my bed with a book. Dad came in telling me to "Get dressed kiddo. Daddy wants to go dancing!" He's such a weirdo sometimes. Long story short, we had a nice dinner and bad karaoke. It was so much fun. Although, I really couldn't stop thinking about getting home to read that journal.

An obsession is what it would soon become. I'm getting a little ahead of myself though. The best place to start is going to be from the beginning. I woke up the next morning and faked being sick I wanted to read the whole first book in a day. Dad called Jessica to see if she would come to watch me. If you hadn't figured it out, Jessica is my babysitter. I know exactly why dad picked her. She's a 26-year-old, cute, redhead (Mom was a too). She happily agreed, I mean, who doesn't like easy money, right? I was "sick" and all I had to do was lay in bed all day. Dad hawked over me for about thirty minutes to see if I was faking it. I chalked it up to food poisoning from last night. That story seemed to make him feel better so he left for work.

It wasn't even a half an hour after he left, Jess brought me some juice, and I told her that I was going to go back to sleep. The moment that door closed, my lamp was on and that journal was in my hands ready to be read. I wasn't exactly sure what I was going to learn. Could it be dirt on dad? Secrets? Confessions?

Boring stuff no one cares about? I guess there was only one way to find out. I felt my heart racing as I opened it to the first page.

"June 23rd 2010: She's gone. Eliza just disappeared. I don't know why, but, without a goodbye she left and didn't come back. She was supposed to be home at 2:30, it's 8:45 now. The thought crossed my mind about how much she always said she would have loved to leave everything behind and vanish to explore the country. Maybe that's what she did. She saw a chance and took off. Then again, what if she's hurt somewhere? No, that's not the case, I spoke to her mom earlier and she said that Eliza left her phone, keys, and purse, and said she was going for a walk for a while. "Wanted to prepare herself for the new life in a new place" was how she put it. Come back to Liza. This is supposed to be our happy ending.

Poor Kathleen. She's only 5. How am I supposed to explain any of this to her? How in the hell am I going to raise her? I don't know anything about being a girl. Hair, make up, periods... there is so much to raising little girls and I don't know a damn ounce of it. I'm going to fuck this up. I'm going to fuck her up....God help me. I suppose that we will just figure it out along the way. Time to go attempt to cook for the first time. Scratch that, I'm ordering pizza. ELIZABETH COME BACK! WE NEED YOU HONEY! I LOVE YOU!"

That hit me really hard. He loved her more than anything and she just left him. Left me too. What the hell mom?!? Women can be so ruthless sometimes. One page in and I'm already emotional. This journey may kill me. You know what they say, "The show must go on." He kept writing so I'll keep reading. I turned to page 2 and braced myself for whatever may come next.

For months, I kept reading. I would finish one journal and move right to the next. I learned more that I ever thought was possible about my Daddy. My journey took me from watching a man plead with the love of his life to return all the way to seeing him become one of the most caring and loving fathers anyone could ever hope to have. My Dad wasn't the workaholic I thought he was after all. I remember the first entry that made me understand just what he was doing for me.

"August 23rd, 2010: It's been two months since she left. I know for certain that she's never coming back. I have to accept that. I need to stop lounging in the shallow pool of self-pity and grow up. I'm a father and I haven't been close to being one in two months. I still don't know shit about little girls. I did find a support group for single fathers online. It meets twice a week. It's not too far from here, I think I'll go and see what it's all about. Kat needs me, maybe this group will help me teach her everything she should know and help me show her how to do it. It starts at 5:30 tomorrow night, I'll just let the sitter know I'll be picking her up later than usual."

He started that class the very next day, like he said he would. I remember only because he wasn't there at his normal time to pick me up and I thought maybe he left too. I felt like maybe I was the problem for him and mom. That's a heavy load for a five year old. I can honestly say that, I don't think I've ever been happier to see him than when he showed up that night to pick me up. He apologized, explained that he was super busy at work. That pattern became the new normal for me. I only saw him most days in time to get a bath and read a bedtime story. It was a little difficult to adjust to at first.

I didn't know what was going to happen from day to day, but, I knew that it was going to be like this forever. He didn't work on the weekends, so that became our Daddy-Daughter time, Ice cream, the Zoo, shopping, etc. The things most little girls enjoy doing with their parents when they get to spend time together. These journals made a lot of memories stand out that otherwise just felt like normal moments in life. They were things that I assumed most parents just knew how to do. The first "normal" parent thing was in November 2010. I didn't remember the date but it was in his journal.

"November 19th, 2010: This support group has been amazing for m. It's nice to know that I'm not alone in this struggle. Some of the guys are as clueless as I am. Some of them have mastered that Jedi way. I still stand by my statement, Little girls are hard. We try to maintain one topic every class. We have covered basic color coordination and how to help with the activities that will help them grow into womanhood. We have started to have guy time as well, we will get together, watch a game and have some beers. We need guy stuff so we don't become women ourselves. Last night, we learned how to do a simple braid. Kat has never had her hair braided. I hope she loves it."

I remember that day. I woke up to Dad being silly in the kitchen. He was making French Toast, it was always my favorite. I got out of bed and let my nose lead me to the kitchen as it was being filled with the smells of the crispy bacon, sweet maple syrup and the light aroma of powdered sugar on top. That smell could revive me if I were dead. We ate breakfast together, at the time it was the only meal he knew how to make. He's pretty good in a kitchen these days. We were laughing and having a great time when he told me to get dressed because there was a surprise for me today. I put on my favorite purple dress, and then he called me into the bathroom. He told me to sit down, as he began to play with my hair. Looking back at it now, his hands moved like a sculptor would with clay, very precise and with a purpose. At five years old, I had my hair braided for the first time. I was officially a princess, all thanks to my Daddy.

As the years went on, He would become everything a great parent should be. He helped me pick out clothes, he taught me how to read more efficiently, he

even showed me how to ride a bike. Life was perfect for me. That was until the day I knew I was going to die.

"May 23rd, 2015: I can't imagine how terrifying this morning was for Kat. I have done everything for her that I could. I just forgot to go over one thing to her. It was a pretty important one too. I feel bad for not explaining what I knew was inevitable that she would discover. I thought I was ready for this moment. I was not, Not at all. I hope she will be able to face it head on. No amount of reading gets you ready for this."

His journal entry was so dark about that day. I don't know who took it harder me or him. At ten years old, I had nothing to fear about anything except cuts and bruises from playing a little too rough. You don't expect to wake up one morning and have to face your own mortality. I'm sure he can still hear the scream coming from my room. I remember how fast he came rushing into my room. I was dying. He had a look so full of fear when I cried to him, "Daddy, I'm dying. I'm bleeding to death. Help me." The look of fear turned to sympathy instantly. I started my fucking period. We hadn't covered this topic yet, I guess he thought he had more time.

I'll spare you the details, he handled it gracefully. This led to us having another talk about "becoming a woman and boys". They always tell men to treat their daughters like they want a man to treat them when the time comes. My Daddy was as perfect as they come. He was always there for me. He loved me and treated me in a way that no man probably ever could. He was always there to cheer me up/ He put so much time and effort in to being the best role model. "I'll always be here for you Princess." Until one day he wasn't...

I was all caught up on the journals. I had to sneak into his office while he was showering and read the most recent one. It got really difficult at the end, sneaking in daily and reading as quickly as possible.

The journal from yesterday was pretty normal.

"October 30th, 2018: Tomorrow is Halloween. Kat is excited, she's been invited to a Halloween Party with some of her friends from school. I think I'll dress up and pass out candy. I didn't tell Kat, but Jessica is coming over. Maybe it's a date, maybe not. I really just want some company. I haven't been with anyone else since Eliza left, maybe it's time to give it a shot. Maybe she's just after me for my new life insurance policy haha."

Gross. I mean don't get me wrong, she's hot and really flirty with him, but, he's still my dad. Ew. I hope he has fun either way. He deserves happiness or at the very least to get laid. I can't believe I said that. Shoot me. I decided to get myself dressed for the Halloween party. I was going to be the Bride of Chucky, I'm not sure if it's too revealing, but, Daddy didn't say anything about it so it must be acceptable.

The day was pretty normal for a Wednesday, school took forever, but it was over quickly, the teenage struggle. I went back to the house to freshen up my make-up, I heard that Miles might be there, he is really cute and super funny. I'm getting myself off track, stupid hormones. The party was pretty decent, Truth or Dare, lots of giggling and a few other terrible games everyone plays when they are young. I did get my first kiss though. Miles kissed me outside right before he left. It was everything I hoped it would be.

I stayed the night with the rest of the girls. I got up the next morning and had no idea that it was about to become the absolute worst day of my life. We didn't have school on November 1st, Optional Teacher Workday. Smart move by the administration, they knew that most parents and teachers would be hungover.

I left Vanessa's house around eleven in the morning, the walk was only about three miles and the scenery was quite beautiful. I figured the walk wouldn't be too bad. I was wrong. Really. Fucking. Wrong. Two miles in, I was just getting through Main Street when the car hit me. Maybe I'm being a bit dramatic, the car mirror clipped my elbow and knocked me down. The driver never stopped to check on me or even see what happened. I got up, dusted myself off and kept walking. When I finally arrived at the house, Dad's car was gone, not really unusual, it's a Thursday and he works like an adult. Jessica must have left to take care of some errands or just went back to her house.

I walked in and you could tell someone had been there the night before/ this morning. There was a pair of green panties on the living room floor. I guess Dad had a good night after all. Dishes were in the kitchen sink and the house still smelled faintly like bacon. She made him breakfast. She might be a keeper. I like her so I'm not opposed to it. The rest of my day was boring, I didn't do much of anything, except ice my elbow, which was numb anyway. I guess when you're hurting like that you can't feel the coldness of the ice. I knew it wasn't broken, but, I was going to have Dad take me to the hospital when he got home from work. I fell asleep around 6:45 that night, I panicked when I woke up the next morning around ten. I overslept. Dad never let me oversleep. "When you're early, you're on time" I could hear it in my ear, I almost rolled my eyes thinking about it.

I got out of bed and the house looked like he never even came home. Everything was exactly like it was when I fell asleep. The dishes, the panties, even the blanket was still messed up on the couch, that was one of Daddy's pet peeves. Maybe he went to Jessica's house after work. I called his phone, it was off or dead. I got tired of sitting at home and I didn't feel like going to school, I went downtown to get coffee.

I walked into my favorite cafe, and I passed a table with the typical lone customer. She caught my eye as I walked by. Her hair was Jet black, just like mine. People with black hair always stood out to me. I ordered my coffee and the cute barista boy behind the counter asked for a name. I always liked to give silly names. Before the words could come from my lips, I heard the woman speak, "Kathleen. Her name is Kathleen." I turned quickly to see how she knew my name. I made eye contact. It was the woman I had seen pictures of on Dad's desk. "My little girl has gotten so big, So much can change in eight years." Her name was Elizabeth and the bitch was back from the dead after eight years.

Without saying a word, I took my coffee and walked past her. You don't get to disappear for almost a decade and then expect the daughter you abandoned to be happy to see you. She was right behind me, "Kat please, I can explain everything. I need to talk to you." At that moment the only thing I could say to the woman that gave birth to me was, "Fuck. Off." She followed me for about a hundred yards, begging and pleading for me to give her a chance to speak. As I gained some distance between us, I heard her say something that shocked me. The audacity of her words. "I never wanted to leave. I loved you and your Father more than the air I breathe. I want to be a family again, but, you have to let me explain. My words came across my lips so cold and dead. "Talk fast, my coffee is getting cold."

She asked if we could take a seat on the bench nearby. I was hesitant, but, I figured I could use the entertainment on such a boring day. The conversation flowed out of her mouth like water, it almost seemed either well rehearsed or the absolute truth. For the better part of an hour, I let her speak. I had no questions, I didn't care what she had to say honestly. She started at the beginning. It was some bullshit story about being taken off the streets while she was taking one last walk around the neighborhood she grew up in. She went into detail about how hard she fought to get the two men off of her, but, like she did as a mother, she failed. It didn't strike anyone as odd that she had vanished, there was no missing person report made, no one panicked. To all of them, it was classic Eliza, run away when big changes happen. No one seemed to care about what happened to her. I was five. I cared.

I didn't know exactly what to think, was it all a fabricated story? Was she just doing it for attention or an excuse for being an absentee parent? Maybe she felt like she could finally be a good parent and made her return to save the day. The only thing that made me think she could possibly be telling the truth was the fact that everyone that knew her spoke of how she was an amazing woman. A picture perfect mother in every way. The few memories I had of her fit that mold. She loved us until the day she ran away. No one had an explanation for me or my

Dad. We got to a break in the story and I interrupted her, " I need to process this. I'm going home. If I feel like talking, I'll call you." She wrote her number down and I left, trying to avoid a breakdown on the way home. She doesn't get to parent on her terms.

I got to the house and nothing had changed still. I hadn't received a text back from Jessica or a Call back from Daddy. What the hell is going on? This is starting to seem like a messed up game of parent tag. She comes back and Dad vanishes. Did he know she was back? I sat down on the mess of a couch and just started thinking about everything she said. The bad day was turning into a worse day after. I didn't even know if I wanted her back. Dad probably doesn't want her back either. Then again, he has always loved her, even years after she left, he still spoke highly of her. Men are pretty stupid so he will probably take her back without a second thought. I know the teenage years are supposed to be pretty tough, but, come on, I just started them. It's already included getting my first kiss, my mother reappearing like a magician's assistant, I almost got hit by a car, and now the only solid person in my life seems to have run off with his new lover. I must have screwed up bad in a past life to be getting this hand dealt to me.

It got pretty late, 8:00 hit and still no Dad or Jessica. I was hungry and bored, so I made a TV dinner and called Elizabeth. "Can you come over? You may not be much of one, but, it would be nice to have a parent at home tonight." Worst case scenario, Dad comes home and I get to see how that plays out. She came over and we started to talk a little more. My hesitation seemed to slowly die off. We were actually starting to bond. I don't know why I was letting my guard down, but, it did feel nice to have a little girl time.

I wanted her to know how dad felt, so I went into the office and grabbed the journals. I had written down book and page numbers where he talked about her. I fell asleep while she was reading silently to herself. I woke up in the morning to the smell of French Toast, bacon, and eggs. I thought Dad might have come home and was making an apology breakfast. As I entered the kitchen, I saw that it was just mom. It feels weird to call her that already. She still hasn't earned it. She turned my direction when she heard my feet shuffling, "Is your father on a business trip or something?" "He didn't mention anything about it to me, so probably not. He hasn't been home since Halloween night, He had a date, maybe they ran away together." I was kind of going for a jab there but it may have been the truth. She looked at me in a concerned way, "Kat, I was with your father for seven years, he's not a runner. He would never just leave you. Something's not right. My voice and tone became snappy, "People can change a lot in eight years Elizabeth. You probably don't know anything about him anymore."

What she said about Dad not being a runner anchored in my head though. He mentioned a life insurance policy and Jessica in his last entry. "He had a date Halloween night, They obviously had a great time, I think I'll ride my bike over to her house and check it out. I hopped on my bike and rode over to Jessica's, it wasn't very far. Her car wasn't there, neither was my Dad's. Something's not adding up. I went inside to make sure, I had a key from when she was babysitting, in case I ever got there and she wasn't home yet. When I opened the door, I could see the house was in perfect condition, no sign of life at all. I don't know why but it scared me. I jumped on my bike and pedaled home as fast as I could. When I got home, I showed Mom the last entry Dad made, She seemed worried when she told me, "We need to look for him."

Two weeks went by, not a single trace of Dad or Jessica. Mom and I looked for hours on end, every day. There was no cell phone record, no GPS signal, no trace of him at all. I have lost the only person in this world that loved me. The only person that I loved. I stopped going to school, I only wanted to focus on finding him. The only thing I knew was, he was gone and it seemed like it had been forever. It seemed like it would be forever. My Daddy is gone. I have to stay positive, Elizabeth came back, maybe he will too. I just hope it doesn't take eight years.

Mom and I continued to look for another week. We needed to take a break so, we grabbed coffee like we usually did. I ran in and ran out. When we got home, we took the time to clean up a bit and discuss places we may not have thought to look or put flyers. We were headed out to continue our search when the front door began to open.

"Hi Honey!" That voice, it was comforting and so infuriating at the same time. Dad was home. "Don't "Hi Honey" me. You disappeared for three weeks and just think you can come home like nothing happened? You're no different from her." I said, pointing to the kitchen table at Elizabeth. A look of happiness and joy as he rushed to the table. "You are just as beautiful as the day you left us." Like I said before men are stupid. "That's it?!? She leaves without a word for eight years and you're happy to see her?!? A smirk crept across his face as he looked at mom and asked, "You haven't told her yet have you?" Before Mom could say anything I jumped in, "Told me what?" Without missing a beat, my mom looked at dad and with the most loving tone I'd heard yet, she said, "I was waiting for you, my love. I didn't know how long it would be so I kept her busy. She loves you so much. She's looked everywhere." His next words were a riddle to my ears, he smiled at her and looked my way as he spoke, "You can't find someone who isn't here yet. Kat, sit down. Your mother and I need to talk to you. You may not understand it at first,

but, we hope in time it will. Before we get into that, tell me about everything I've missed lately."

I was confused and wanted answers, but, I did what I was asked. I told him all about the search for him, how I thought Jessica had something to do with his disappearance. I went on to tell him about the party on Halloween and how I got my first kiss. "That wonderful night was erased when I got home and you weren't there. Oh, and let's not forget about the asshole that clipped me with his car. I needed you to take me to the hospital and you weren't there. I guess Jessica was far more important than me.

He looked sad for a brief moment, then he spoke, "Before I explain anything, I just want to express how happy I am that we are all together again. Eliza, I've missed you every minute since you left. Kat, I've missed you more than you know these past three weeks. That's why I'm here now. I couldn't stay gone from you anymore. Kat, your mom didn't just decide she didn't want us anymore and vanish. You didn't just come home and I was gone. Eight years ago, your mother was taken by some men when she went out for a bit. She was kidnapped and they made her suffer. It was two months before I found out what happened to her.

There's no coincidence that the day I went missing, your mom came back. She's your protector. Baby girl, when that car hit you, you didn't survive. Just like eight years ago when those men took your mom, she didn't survive." I was taken back and very confused. I could only ask for clarity, "If that's true, then how come we are all here together?" Dad's voice lowered into a comforting tone, "Princess, this is going to be hard to understand, but, after I lost the woman I loved more than anything and then I lost my precious baby girl, what other choice did I have? I couldn't wait sixty years of mundane living to get you both back. On August 23rd, 2010, I lost your mom. On November 1st, 2018 I lost you. On November 22nd, 2018, I made a choice to get you both back. It was a hard and scary thing to do, but, when I pulled that trigger, I knew that I would be home again. I would be home with my family. My life began only after it ended. I'll never have to lose my girls again. I was never missing from you, you two were missing from me. I'm sorry that I took so long to get here."

The reality hit me. I was talking to my parent's in the afterlife. My mom was violently killed, and Dad kept that from me to protect me from the horrors that the world can have. I had my life ended by a car that wasn't paying attention. I spent three weeks looking for my Dad. I couldn't find him because he wasn't here yet. He loved us so much that he decided being with us in death was more important than being without us in life. That's love like nothing else. Don't be sad for us. We are all together again.