

## **Beginnings and Endings**

by  
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It was May in Boston. Eager blossoms waited expectantly on the trees, delayed by the unexpected April snows, and now days of freezing rain. Today the rain was blowing horizontally with a force that made it difficult to walk. Holding her umbrella in front of her, Justine trudged up the street, trying to see where she was going, dodging other pedestrians. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry, trying to get somewhere fast, and still stay dry. One thing made her different from those other people, Justine thought. Those other people probably wanted to get where they were going. She did not. If only she could give in to the wind, and let it blow her away in the opposite direction.

As Justine pressed on, her thoughts drifted to Michael. He must be on his way too. She wondered how he must be feeling. She stopped suddenly and her heart started racing. Michael could be any one of these people right here on the sidewalk! He could be watching her right now! She nervously, looked around, as irritated pedestrians stepped around her. She couldn't see him now, but she would see him soon.

Justine heard the bus approaching from behind her on the street. Thinking fast, and already being on alert, she was able to jump to her right at the last minute. A tidal wave of water splashed up on unsuspecting pedestrians as the bus raced by. One man in front of her was drenched from head to foot. He stood there with his arms out like a scarecrow, not knowing what to do, just standing there. He slowly turned around, and she could see he was about her age. His blond hair was dripping and his glasses were coated with water. He couldn't see much and he couldn't see her as she tried to hold back

a smile. She continued walking past him, feeling relief that she was dry, but also secretly glad that someone else was having a bad day too.

This was not like her, Justine thought, but she immediately blamed it on the circumstances of the day. By nature, Justine was a shy person, but always generous to others. Justine rarely walked by a homeless person without giving them something, a dollar or her lunch. Some people would frown on this, and say she was enabling them, but being abandoned as a child herself, Justine felt a certain affinity with others who were lost, whether it be a person or an animal. Normally, she would have stopped and shared her umbrella and a tissue with this unfortunate pedestrian, but today, she just couldn't. Could it be because he was a man, she wondered. Could it be because he looked like Michael?

Justine was so deep in thought, from out of nowhere came an incredible gust of wind, blowing her umbrella upwards and over her head, ripping it from her hands. As she turned she could see the red umbrella as it tumbled and jumped down the sidewalk behind her, barely missing other pedestrians. One person, standing in the middle of the sidewalk caught the umbrella in midair as it hurled toward him. Now without the protection of the umbrella, she stepped to the side of the sidewalk and found some shelter behind a large oak tree. The man was walking up the street towards her, trying to turn the umbrella right side out as he walked. Reaching Justine, he held out the broken umbrella, with a sympathetic smile on his face.

“Does this belong to you?”

“Yes, thank you. You're a good catch!” she answered, reaching for the dilapidated thing. “I hope it didn't hit you!”

“No, I’m O.K. Actually, I’m trying out for catcher for the Red Sox next week”, he joked. “I wish I could have been as quick jumping out of the way of that bus going by.”

“Oh, that was you!” Justine said sheepishly, noticing his wet appearance.

There was a moment of awkward silence as she recalled her previous animosity towards him. Justine could feel herself flush.

“So, do you live around here? I mean, do you know this area?” she quickly blurted out.

Recovering, she added, “What I meant to say was, do you know how far the courthouse is?”

“No, I don’t live around here, but I can tell you where the courthouse is. You go down another block and it is on the right. A big granite building, you can’t miss it”, he replied.

Awkwardly, she thanked him, took the umbrella from his outstretched hand, and promptly dumped the dilapidated thing in the trash barrel beside them.

Turning, she headed back into the rain, this time without the burden of the umbrella, or the protection of it, facing the rain head on.

One block and one wet foot later Justine arrived at the grand structure. It was set back from the street in an expanse of green lawn. Its commanding presence and granite walls made her want to turn and run. She walked up the sidewalk to the foot of the stairs, where two huge lions lay in ominous repose. Their stoic cement faces seemed to warn her not to come any further. She wanted to turn and run, but to what? She didn’t want to be a victim any longer. She wanted to stand on her own.

Without looking back she started up the stairs, one foot after the other; all 34 of them. At the top she pulled on the massive doors, and entered the dark expanse within.

Justine removed her coat and shook out her wet hair as her eyes adjusted to the gloomy interior. She was in a huge foyer. Far to the right in a dark corner was a lady sitting at a somewhat small desk, pointing this way and that to rain drenched fellow criminals. That is what Justine felt like. A criminal. She had made a huge mistake and now she had to face the music. She still could hear her aunt repeating over and over, “Well why would you marry such a man?”

Justine didn't really want to take her place in line with the other fellow losers, so she followed the sign marked “Family Court”. This must be the right direction. Where you go to start a family. Where you go to end a family.

Justine walked down a long corridor until she found the room. She entered the courtroom and took a seat near the back. This must have been a popular choice, because it seemed that is where everyone was sitting. She guessed the farther you sat from the judge the longer it would be before you had to face him. Shaking her coat and placing it behind her, she settled in for a long wait.

The judge finally arrived and began calling cases and the minutes quickly ticked by. Justine knew Michael must be here too, but she kept her eyes directed forward. She tried to think of other things, but her mind kept pulling her to the past. How did they get to this point? Yes, they were young when they got married, but at that time, they believed that love could conquer all. With time, their dreams faded and the reality of day to day living set in. Bills had to be paid. With Justine working full time, and Michael going to school at night, there were many days they never saw each other. Justine knew

they were both under a lot of pressure and maybe the deck was stacked against them, but, she couldn't help but wonder if she could have done things differently.

Absentmindedly, Justine glanced to the left side of the courtroom, right into the eyes of Michael, who had also just looked over at her. Her heart skipped a beat as she quickly looked away. He had had such a soulful look on his face. Be strong, she told herself, just a little longer.

Justine remembered another "look" Michael gave her, a long time ago. It was the first time he hit her. She was in the kitchen, cooking dinner, and he was leaning on the wall next to the stove watching her. Whenever he watched her, it was like he was waiting for her to make a mistake. Naturally she dropped the spoon, spattering spaghetti sauce all over the floor and cabinets.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yelled. "Look at the mess you made!"

"I'm sorry, she cried. You were watching me!"

"Watching you? Are you nuts? Can't you do anything right? What are you a moron?"

Frustrated, and insecure, Justine picked up the spoon and threw it in the sink; she ran to the bathroom and slammed the door.

"Don't go locking me out of this bathroom", he boomed. Open the door, or I will break this door down!"

Reluctantly, she opened the door.

"Why do always yell at me? Why can't you be nice to me?" she said crying.

"I am nice to you! I go to school all day to make a better life for us, and all I get is grief!"

The fight went on and escalated with Michael slapping her across the face. The shock on both their faces was immediate, for Justine that he slapped her, for Michael that her lip was bleeding, and realizing that he had lost it.

Things were peaceful for a while after that. Justine tried not to argue with him and avoided getting him angry, but the fighting started up again, and the hitting got worse. Justine hoped he would change, but she knew in her gut he would not.

Justine woke up out of her memories to hear the judge call “Peterson vs. Peterson!” Her heart started beating like mad, and her weak knees barely got her up to the front of the courtroom. She and Michael had filed for divorce themselves and things should go pretty smoothly. The divorce was uncontested. They had agreed to split everything, which was not much, 50/50. All they had to do was sign the papers today and it would be over.

This is the beginning of the end, Justine thought. Or was it the end of the beginning? Was she doing the right thing? Her hand shook and she signed the divorce papers. The court officer stamped the paper with such a force that she jumped.

“Next case!” the judge commanded. “Jones vs. Jones” he called out, looking for the next unfortunate couple.

As Justine walked back to the exit, she glanced at the man and woman coming forward. She had held up pretty well so far, but when she looked at the older couple, trudging to the front of the courtroom she could see the tears in their eyes. Then she lost it. The tears brimmed up in her eyes. She felt the strength oozing from her body. She felt so empty. She marched out of the courtroom and down the now familiar hallway.

When she came up this hallway an hour ago, she was married. Now she was single. The hall seemed to lead her into the future, but what was waiting for her there?

Justine marched past the information center and up to the big doors. Her hands hesitated on the bar of the door, and she was afraid to open them. It was like her whole life was on the other side of the doors.

Justine must have stood there for a minute, because others were coming up behind her. She gave the door a shove, and was blinded as the sun hit her eyes.

The rain had cleared and the sun was beaming down. You could see a mist rising from the sidewalk, almost like steam. Clearly spring was here at last.

Sitting on the wall next to the big doors was a man. He was holding her umbrella. He held his hand out, and said, "Hi, my name is Travis. Your umbrella, it's fixed!"

Justine reached for the umbrella with a shy smile on her face. She wondered why she ever thought he looked like Michael.