

2021 MCC Creative Writing Contest
Second Place – Creative Non-Fiction Category
“Armed With Boundaries of Love” by Krystle Smith

A month ago, my father stole me the best birthday present he has ever given me.

Over the years, my birthdays have become like checkpoints for our relationship. It’s a day of the year that forces me to come back to reality. To remember that we did not have the daddy’s girl relationship I had always wished for. They have made me realize that the drugs come before me. Today, our relationship is held together by therapy sessions and boundaries. The kind of boundaries I needed when I was sixteen.

My mom had planned an extravagant “Sweet sixteen” birthday party. She had taken me shopping for a dress to match the decorations, weeks before. It was a beautiful sunny September day. My mom went in first so that she could get a picture of me walking in. I stood outside in my sparkly pink dress with a tiara on my head that had a little sixteen in the middle of it. I remember being nervous. I didn’t mind being the center of attention, especially in front of all my friends and family. But I wondered who knew. Who could see the sadness through my smile?

As I walked through the doors it smelled like cheesy breadsticks and fresh paint. They had just remodeled the hall that was attached to my favorite pizza shop in town. Everyone yelled “Happy Birthday!” The friends and family closest to the door came rushing in to give me hugs. My mom hurried over, interrupting them.

“Krystle, you have to come to the back to get your surprise!”

She linked her arm with mine as we walked.

“You’re going to cry,” she said with a huge smile, as if that was her goal.

As we walked through the crowd, I could hear people giggling and whispering. Who else noticed he wasn’t there?

“I don’t want to cry in front of everyone,” I said back with a nervous laugh. No one knew how much I wanted to cry behind my fake smile. Or maybe they did know, maybe it was the elephant in the room.

We reached the back of the hall and stood in front of a closet door. The music had quit playing from the karaoke machine. It became silent throughout the hall.

“Okay, open the door!” my mom yelled out.

Just as I leaned in to open it, the door started to open from the other side. Before the door was all the way open, I heard a laugh that was unforgettable. The tears started pouring out before I even reached her for a hug. It was my best friend, Alex. We had been friends since the third grade, but she had moved to Montana a year prior. We hugged in disbelief as the rest of her family emptied out of the closet. Part of me was glad that there was such an emotional moment. I could let the tears of sorrow hide behind the tears of joy.

“How are you here?” I asked, confused and full of excitement.

“We drove and got here yesterday,” she explained.

My mom leaned in. “I told you, you were going to cry!”

I rolled my eyes and gave her a big apologetic hug. With everything going on I had been fighting quite a bit with her. In that moment, I felt horrible, as I could see all the hard work, she had done just for me. “I’m sorry, thank you for everything.”

I looked back at Alex urgently. “I have so much to tell you! How long will you be here?”

I wanted to tell her everything right then and there. When she lived in Michigan every time, I had a bad day with my dad she would put “Mockingbird” by Eminem on repeat. We would scream it and cry until I felt better. She would be here for a week; we would have time for me to tell her everything later and have an Eminem session. My cousin started up the karaoke machine again and the waitresses started to bring over the pizzas. I made my way around the hall thanking everyone for coming and catching up with some family members I hadn’t seen in a while. Everyone I loved was there- except one.

Two days before the party my dad had gone to jail. The police had received an anonymous tip about a house with a meth lab and a van that went to go get supplies for the meth. My dad was driving his business van when he got pulled over. At the same time, police went to the house my dad had left. There was a baby and a few adults; One of the adults hid the meth in the baby’s diaper. It was all over the news and in the papers.

The plan for Alex to come had been in the works way before my mom knew that I would need my best friend as much as I did that day. Nothing could take away the disappointing thought of him not being there, but having Alex here was a good distraction, for a little while.

My dad eventually got out on bond. He dragged his court dates out as long as he could. I knew what he had done was bad, but I did not know the possibilities. “Could he get life?” A

few people had asked me. I didn't know. His sentencing day finally came several months after my birthday. I hardly listened to the judge as my dad stood directly in front of us. I couldn't see his face. His hands were cuffed behind his back and his fingers were continually changing from five to three to one and back to three throughout the hearing. The judge kept talking about his sentencing possibilities in months, which made it so confusing as I just wanted to know what he was getting. I didn't care what the possibilities were, anymore. My dad was trying to tell us how many years he was thinking he would get as the judge was speaking. Finally, the judge sentenced him to thirty months at the Marquette prison, near the Lake Superior shoreline a seven-hour drive from home. I would not see him for another two and a half years.

A month ago, I came home from work to find my boyfriend Michael, my dad, and grandma standing in our driveway. They were standing by my grandma's car with the trunk popped open. I was immediately nervous. We were trying to mend our relationship on borrowed time again and my dad liked to come over unannounced. Michael does well with my dad but dealing with an addict can be so hard. I never wanted him to feel like he had to deal with him just because I did.

My dad was trying to contain his excited smile. I recognized the smile as one he gets when he does something good but knows that he cannot act too excited because he could never erase the pain from his past mistakes. The twitch-like shuffle he does nowadays gave him away. He was definitely proud of himself for something. I pulled up next to them and noticed a few Meijer bags on the ground.

“Hi,” I said to everyone as I got out of the car.

“Happy birthday,” my dad said pointing at the bag. I could see dirt with some twigs sticking up out of the bags.

“What is it?” I asked forgetting that just a few days ago I had said I wanted roses to make a rose water spray. He said then that he knew where he could get some really rare and old rose bushes. He said he would grab them for me the next time he went through that town. I didn’t believe him.

“You said you wanted rose bushes, remember? You thought I would forget, didn’t you?”

“They don’t look too good right now but as long as you get them planted within a few days and water them every other day until the first frost, they will do great next year.” My grandma chimed in. She was an expert at plants and gardening.

“You’ll have to come check on them next year and make sure they’re alright,” I said back to her. “Where did you guys get them?”

“Oh, just a vacant home. I have seen them there for years.” He said pointing in the direction of the nearby town.

Drug addict or not my father has never been the type to steal, so I laughed it off. After all, I have adapted well to the boundaries I’ve set for myself, and I do not worry about what he does on his own time anymore. And I guess, I’d rather him break the law to do something good for one of his kids, than use drugs and drive. Maybe he could have left my grandma at home so that she wasn’t an accomplice, but she didn’t seem too worried about that. They were also working on their relationship that had been broken for years. We got talking and moved into the garage where Michael fired up the smoker grill and started dinner.

“How is your politics class going?” my dad asked.

“It’s actually better than I thought it would be,” I replied. He remembered that I was annoyed about having to take that class. But shortly into that conversation, he started talking about his case. He was out on bond and dragging it out just like he did when I was sixteen.

“I hired an attorney, and it looks like I could get only one year if we build the case right but if not, they want to slap me with five to ten years.”

“Okay, would you guys like to go inside to eat dinner?” I said, cutting him off. “It’s getting cold out here.”

This year was different from so many in the last twenty-eight years. He was present, sober, and almost enjoyable company to be around. Those are the complete opposite words I could ever use to describe him for all my past birthdays.

This year, he put me first.

In a few months, I will have to say goodbye again. I’ve learned so much from being the daughter of an addict. The pain of waiting for him to get sentenced will never suck any less, nor will the time he is gone.

Birthdays have always been hard for me, but now I know I get to choose how to remember him when he isn’t here. I could be mad that he will be leaving in a few months, or because the years of drug use is catching up to him in ways that effect his mind and body; They are a constant reminder of the past. It is rare that addicts can keep very many people in their lives. This is not the picture-perfect relationship I have in my mind; however, it is either this or no relationship at all. I choose this because I know personally, I would be more hurt if I wasn’t

in his life at all. I am armed with boundaries of love; present for the moments I am more important to him than the drugs. My sixteenth birthday and many others have been like thorns in my heart, but now I choose to see the roses instead.