Prologue

A cynic once told me, “Every marriage has one liar and one fool.” Standing in the corner of a loud party in a shabby apartment in New York City, he yelled this at me over the music while we shared a cigarette. I laughed out loud, shoulders shaking, and mercilessly made fun of his pessimism. I didn’t believe this. I couldn’t believe this because I was married and wasn’t a liar or a fool. I said as much to my friend, as we finished up our smoke, and then promptly forgot the comment.

Years later, my husband of 17 years and I drove down the coast towards Big Sur, California. Soaring blue skies, dry hills and the swaying vineyards of Carmel Valley floated past us. It was July 27th and we were on our way to celebrate our wedding anniversary. He reached out and held my hand while we laughed at a podcast on the radio of our old Toyota. I held the back of his neck as he drove. What I felt that day was love, the big kind of love, the self-assured-safety of love. I watched him while he drove and took in the man I had committed my entire adult life to. His straight black hair, once long and wrapped into dreadlocks, was now short and spiked. His thick belly was wrapped in a bright Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses that only he thought were cool rested on his forehead. Even if the pieces weren’t so original, the package was. Jose was one of a kind. A unique, complicated, beautiful man.

We headed to Nepenthe, a classic Big Sur restaurant nestled on the coast of the Pacific. Multi-colored tables cover decks that are perched on steep cliffs that descend into an ocean I never really learned to feel safe next to, even after 12 years of living in California. We took our seats on the front deck and ordered drinks. I lifted my wine glass to Jose, looked into his big almond eyes, and said, “I am so lucky to be your wife. Thank you for 17 years together.” He smiled at me and said, “To 17 more years Beca. *Feliz aniversario, amor*.”

“You know what time it is, right?” I said, smiling. I was about to rope Jose into my anniversary ritual. Every year, as part of a toast to our commitment, I liked to list the things that we loved about our life together.

“You first.” I said.

“Ok”, said Jose, smirking, “I’ll do it, but just for you. One, I am grateful we are trying to build a family.”

Me: “Two, I am so grateful for how you sing me awake in the morning.”

Jose: “Three, I am grateful for our house and the projects we are doing there.”

Me: “Four, I am grateful for how you take care of our little Rosie.”

We finished listing seventeen beautiful things about our life for our seventeen years of marriage. It wasn’t hard to do. We had a lot to celebrate. Then we feasted, as we always did, on fresh salads, fries, and steaks. Nepenthe was our spot to celebrate. And even though it was an almost three-hour, traffic-filled drive from our home in Oakland, we always made it there on the big days. And seventeen years together is one of those big days.

We first pulled into the restaurant’s sprawling parking lot on the side of Highway 1 when we were 23 years old. We had driven up from Los Angeles, our new home, after running away from Boston together and eloping against the wishes of most of my family and friends. In the spring that first year together, we drove to San Francisco, winding our way up the edge of our new coast, stopping to watch sea lions and fill our 1989 blue Honda hatchback at gas stations packed with motorcycles. We began a life of adventure then. We would travel to many parts of the world together. We would build a life out of the raw material of what we thought love was when we exchanged rings at a courthouse on a hot, July day in Boston at the age of 22.

I met Jose one night at a club dancing to Latin music. Sweating on the crowded dance floor, we shared our first kiss and promptly fell in love. I was graduating from college and getting ready to start my young life. He showed up in late March of 1999, swept into my world and changed all my plans. One night, early after we started dating, I woke up with a nightmare. Many of the things I needed to heal and to discover still laid buried deep inside me and I often had nightmares that would crush me with panic. I sat up, sweating in my twin bed in my college dorm room, panting with fear. I went to the bathroom to wash my face and try to shake off the darkness. But as I lay back down in bed, my breath was still ragged and fast. Then I made a weird decision. It was three am. The corners of my room shimmered with the demons of my nightmare. I needed to hear someone’s voice. In my half-conscious state I decided to call Jose with my mind.

Closing my eyes, I imagined him sleeping in his room across town, and said out loud, pleadingly, “Jose, wake up and call me. Jose, wake up and call me. Jose, wake up and call me.” And the phone rang. My old-school-plugged-into-the-wall-plastic phone rang at three in the morning. I sucked in my breath, afraid that I had conjured something evil.

I slowly picked up the receiver and said, “Hello?”

Jose’s sleepy voice said, “*Hola mi amor*, what’s happening?”

And with that, I was his. And that love, that story, that magic, would hold me to him even through all the bad times. It was the kind of love that I didn’t think would or even could end. As I lifted my wine glass on that afternoon at Nepenthe, seventeen years later, laughing with Jose, I never thought that it would be the last anniversary we would celebrate. I was about to learn that even the big loves could end. And despite my protests so many years earlier at that party in NYC, my cynical friend was indeed correct. Maybe not about all marriages, but about mine. There was definitely a liar and, most definitely, a fool.

**Part 1**

“The real troubles in your life are apt to be things that never crossed

your worried mind. The kind that blindsides you at 4pm on some idle Tuesday.”

-Baz Lurhmann “The Sunscreen Song”

1. Texting

I have walked into trouble so many times in my life that I thought I could sense it. After so many falls, I felt sure I could predict where the potholes were. On that final Sunday of July 2016, I felt safe and secure in my life, oblivious to the deep hole I was about to fall into headfirst.

Under the bright summer sun, my husband, Jose, and I headed to a friend’s wedding. The beautiful blue Berkeley sky shone over the mountain venue. California hawks circled lazily above us. Jasmine lingered on the wind. After celebrating our anniversary in Big Sur, we spent the next few days dreaming about our next steps. We were happy. After the first wild decade of our marriage, we were finally settled down in our late thirties. We had a home. We had a dog, Rosie, that we adored. We were working on building a family, filling out adoption papers and trying to have children with the help of in vitro fertilization. We were redesigning our little bungalow in Oakland. We loved each other. We had fun. We had a routine. We were stable.

During the ceremony and reception, Jose and I danced and drank together. We took breaks to chat with friends and at one point someone asked us how we had stayed married for so long. Usually, I was the one to jump in to answer these kinds of questions, but this time I said, “Go ahead Jose, what is our secret of success?” Jose took a sip of his rum and coke and launched into how great it was to be married. His conclusion, “The best thing about being married is that you do not have to travel alone, and you can share new places with someone.” Our friends nodded and smiled. Jose was pleased with his answer and kept chatting. Sipping my white wine, I shifted slightly on my high heels, uncomfortable. This struck me as a little strange. Considering the millions of things that we shared as a married couple, choosing traveling seemed odd, maybe even a bit superficial. But hindsight works to make connections between the small and subtle things that I should have seen but didn’t.

Jose and I met when we were 22 years old in Boston. I was graduating from college, and he was selling hotdogs at a street cart in Downtown Crossing. He was a wild, long-haired artist, free and loving. I was a controlling, romantic religion major looking to build my life. One weekend In March, just a few months before graduation, my friends and I went to a music show. It was still cold out and we all shouted and shook to stay warm as we took the T-line across the river to Cambridge from Boston University. We were fans of a local Latin ska band, so in very turn-of-the-millennium fashion with Docs, mini-skirts and thick eyeliner, we followed them around the city on weekends. My friends and I laughed and joked as we settled into the crowded bar, sipping on cheap beer, finally able to legally buy alcohol. Since my twin sister and I went to the same university, she was part of our group and joked with me while she adjusted my outfit and removed a smudge of mascara from my face as the band set up. A few minutes into the first set, I noticed a man walk into the venue. He slowly wound his way towards the front of the stage. He had long, straight black hair tied into a low ponytail, a light blue polo shirt neatly buttoned up over bright red plaid pants. He was slim and not tall, but sturdy. His face held a wide, bright smile and his almond eyes shown in the darkness of the club. Confidently and slowly, he found his way to the front of the stage and said hello to the lead singer who bent down to hug him before continuing with the show. To this day, that first image of Jose still rests in my heart. There he was: young, alive, and free. He was cool in a way I could only hope to be. I kept my eye on him as the show continued, hoping he would look my way. Eventually, he noticed me and we started to smile and glance at each other as the band played into the night. During intermission, I stood chatting with my friend Roberto, scanning the room, but I had lost track of the man in the plaid pants. As the band picked up again, I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Jose. He introduced himself and we quickly fell into speaking in Spanish, dancing awkwardly together and trying to make jokes. At the end of the night, he asked to kiss me as we exchanged numbers. We shared a brief and tender kiss. It was the first time I had ever kissed a stranger at a bar, and I felt grown up as I made my way home. We met up shortly after that night, and Jose swept me off my feet. We fell in love in a way only 22-year-olds can: we jumped. Four months later we eloped and moved to Los Angeles to start a new life together. Over the next almost two decades, we evolved into something more conventional. We settled down, we finished degrees, and got good jobs. We set up a life together. We had our problems, of course, fighting about money and chores, but we worked on them. I thought we were doing well.

Back in Berkeley 17 years later, as the wedding reception progressed, and the music turned into the inevitable mix of “Celebration” by Kool and the Gang and “Sauvemente” by Elvis Crespo, Jose got busy disappearing. This was not entirely unusual, but I noticed it. I chatted with friends and watched as Jose slipped away from his crew around the corner and out of sight. I loved that we gave each other space in our relationship, so I didn’t worry. Jose always came back. We passed each other at the wedding, stopping to chat and dance together, and then moved apart again. This was our way in the world. As the sky darkened and stars emerged over the Berkeley hills, Jose found me dancing and with a look on his face that said he was starting to drink way too much, he linked his arm in mine and asked to go outside. “Beca, let’s talk.” He smiled at me as we walked outside onto the cooling grass. I had just lost another pregnancy after our second try at in vitro and even as I danced and chatted, Jose knew that I was hurting from how hard it was turning out to have a family. He was just drunk enough to give me a pep-talk. “*Mi niña*, I know we are going to have a family! I promise Beca. One day we will have our baby and our family with Rosie will be complete. *No te preocupes amor*. We’re gonna be ok.” I smiled and leaned into him as he lit his cigarette. We stood there under the rising moon. This made me happy. Looking back at that night, I am mostly struck with how happy and safe I felt. I was in love with my husband of so many years. I was in love with the life we had built together. And I was soothed by the promises of a secure future.

The wedding wound down and I helped Jose into the car while he yelled his goodbyes to our friends. This was always my job. Not just with Jose, but with most people. I am the friend who never drinks too much and always has a way to get people home. I drove down the winding, back country roads of the Berkeley hills as the night fog rolled in. Despite Jose’s drunkenness, he was still busy texting. He was always texting. Always. It was nothing new. He said he had to keep in touch with his friends and cousins in Colombia.

Back in our small Oakland home, my husband was settled into bed, and I got myself ready for work the next day. It was a Sunday night, so I went through my normal preparations for my job. I worked as an oncology nurse practitioner in a large teaching hospital in San Francisco. My day was busy, fast paced, and full of complications. I liked to be prepared. I packed my lunch, got my clothes ready for the morning rush and settled our dog, Rosie, into bed. I decided to get some pictures from Jose’s phone of the dress I had worn at the wedding so I could show my friends at work. I picked up his phone and put in his password. There was no need for Jose to hide his phone from me. I never looked at it. I trusted him and I wasn’t a jealous or suspicious partner.

The first thing that I saw as his screen lit up was a chat from Facebook. I almost clicked out of it because I assumed it was the usual litany of Spanish obscenities that made up the “cousin chat” from Colombia. But something stopped me. It was the phrase “I wish I was there with you.”

What? I slowed down and scrolled through, my breath suspended in my throat.

This is a turning point that many of us have lived through. The moment of complete surprise when the phone rings, or the doctor walks in, or the thread of a chat is discovered. Time stops. It is that unexpected crack in the pavement, the split in time, the fork in the road. The dissonance was so loud, the air began to buzz. But this is not the worst part. The worst part, as we all know, is coming.

The texts are clear. There is another woman. She says she wishes she could be at the wedding with Jose and “make out in front of everyone.” Jose agrees. There is a long text thread with pictures of her family vacation and selfies from Jose. There is no mistaking what this is.

This was not the first time I’d stumbled into this kind of trouble with Jose. He had cheated on me before, years ago. And because this had happened and we had already been through these moments of terrible revelation, I had an unspoken and almost unconscious sense, somehow, that things would be ok. Even though I was about to go temporarily insane with rage, deep down I believed that we would and could work through this.

But first, there had to be the reckoning. And rage and reckoning are something I do very well. I stormed into the bedroom and shook him awake. “Jose, wake up! Wake up! What is this? Who is this woman?” I screamed at him to tell me what, exactly, this was. But it was clear that he was so drunk that I would get nothing from him that night. He rolled over and passed out again. So, I settled into the couch with his phone and became an obsessed detective. Quickly and easily, it became clear that this woman was the mother of his former 3rd grade student. Jose was an elementary school teacher and had more than a decade of experience in the classroom. He was a beloved part of his school community and became close to the parents and staff. Apparently, he became very close to this particular parent. I learned that she was 10 years older than me. She was tall with long brown hair and sad eyes and two children. Her social media was full of lukewarm political posts and sappy memes. I hated her with a bitterness so sour it made me age immediately. Within 24 hours, I had my first gray hair and my eyebrows started to fall out.