**The Diary of Arizona Welch**

**by Eric W. Gershman**

I turned my car into oncoming traffic, not because I wanted to die, but because I didn't want to live.

Now, the machines hiss in the ICU and doctors bustle around me. A nurse is wearing a ponytail so tight it looks painful. She is accompanied by a hospital worker – a dude – who has short sleeves and the muscles to pull them off. No smiles come my way. The staff at Presbyterian Methodist Hospital mostly refer to me as a 29-year-old female.

I feel hands maneuver underneath my body. "One two three. Lift!" Next thing you know, I am on my stomach.

"Oooh-kay then," says Short Sleeves, and rests his hand gently on my back. His accent is something east European.

Outside the window, I could make out an airplane moving across the Kentucky sky. It dances just above the cranes where condominiums are being built next door. The airplane is full of people getting away from where they were. I don’t know why my situation is any different. But it struck me as odd that the plane was going anywhere. I had tried so hard to end the world.

“The guy she hit is in Critical,” says Ponytail. “Probably won’t make it.”

Short Sleeves nods and asks about his injuries.

“Trauma to the chest. Cranial fracture. Broken pelvis. But this one, of course, will live. That’s always how it is." Ponytail gives a hard pull on my blanket.

Short Sleeves touches my arm, adjusts a bandage.

Then, they stop talking about me altogether. "Are you still going to Hilton Head?” one asks the other. The subject then turns toward margaritas. Strawberry versus, mango, that sort of thing. I had to listen to it all.

I hear that I went through the windshield. I hear they found me in the front seat of the guy I hit, like we were out together on a date. I heard this guy is a world-renowned mountain climber. His wife is apparently something to look at.

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Days have passed and I awake to find Short Sleeves in the armchair reading to me. He is reciting little stories about everyday occurrences – a morning walk, a good meal.

“Did you write that?” I ask, after he reads a stupid poem about two dogs meeting on a path.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“I love it,” comes out of me.

I would like to know if the guy I hit lived. I want to tell him I had good reason to do what I did. Anyone in my shoes would want to end the life I have. I start to think that maybe we end up in the same convalescent room and become friends. I know what I did was terrible – really bad – but maybe he was on his phone or drinking or not paying attention and it was just a little bit his fault. Maybe he could have swerved.

“You have a visitor” Ponytail says to me after what I think is a week.

I shrug. I just hope it's just not Konrad.

But of course, it is Konrad.

“Crazy AZ” says my husband, Konrad, when he sees me. I go by the name Arizona these days, and what few friends I have left call me AZ. Konrad is tall with windswept hair. We met on a horse farm in Kentucky during my sophomore year at UK. I was a promising equestrian with a minor in pre-law. He was a talented Polish trainer with blue eyes. It made sense for me to marry him so he could get a green card. He literally had no other options. We started a business together that started to feel more and more like a hustle. Konrad would get clients – guys he knew – to pay him to go to the track and then take a cut of the winnings. I don’t have the energy to tell you how that was working out. Now, he is standing over me and laughing like I’m wearing a costume. I laugh a little too because I don't know what else to do.

“AZ was supposed to crash the car so we could get a new one. AZ doesn’t have life insurance so what good is a dead AZ, heh?” He is waving a naughty finger over me. “Crazy AZ. Tssk, tssk. What would Mommy and Uncle think?”

My head is turned.

“Look at me you stupid Beech. I think you may have killed someone.”

I obey.

I pretend to sleep most of the time Konrad is here. I’m in stable condition, with two broken legs, and a cut up face that will heal. I cannot tell you who will be paying for all this. Maybe the government. Maybe my mother and Uncle. I honestly have no idea.

“They sheet-canned you at the catering place,” Konrad informs me. “It was a nice gig for us. Guess that is another thing you fucked-up.”

My part-time job as a bookkeeper for a catering company was just another part of my life that I was trying to end anyway. Eventually someone was going to sum up the catering tips and see that something wasn't adding up right. Then, they would surely ask me questions.

But they should really just ask Konrad.

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A few weeks after the accident, I am downgraded to fair condition and Short Sleeves transports me to the lounge. His real name is Davido. Another east European, which is an uh-oh for me.

Two unsmiling men are waiting for me. The room smells like what comes out of the vending machine. A TV mounted high on the wall is tuned to CNN. A headline is rolling across the screen:

*Amy Winehouse Dead at 27*

Anderson Cooper is wheeling out suicide and addiction experts who want to offer theories on why and how. But I know why she wanted to die. Anderson Cooper should just ask me.

I turn toward the two visitors. I feel important.

The first guy says, “I’m the investigator on your case.” He doesn’t even say his name. He is very handsome, but more asshole-handsome than anything else.

No response from me.

“And this is Detective Potts of the Lexington police department. We are sorry about your accident. How are you doing?”

I just shrug.

“We just need to make sure we have the report correct. You know, for insurance reasons.” The cop I call Handsome then flips me his badge.

The other guy – Detective Potts – doesn’t say a word. When he blinks, his eyes squinch repeatedly. It makes him look stupid.

Right above their heads is Anderson Cooper showing footage of Amy Winehouse’s life. There she is, performing in front of thousands. There she is, shit-faced coming out of a club and kicking the cameraman.

*Investigators are determining the cause of death*

Ask me why she died, Anderson. Amy Winehouse died because Amy Winehouse didn’t want to be Amy Winehouse anymore. Case closed.

“Mrs. Vronksky, we have reason to believe that you drove into oncoming traffic in an attempted suicide. Can you tell us if that is accurate? We just need to know so we can close our file.” The guy named Detective Potts is still silent. He just continues that stupid blinking.

“Can you tell us what happened?” Handsome continues. He is holding a notebook that looks a lot like my diary. There’s my sticker on the cover from Twin Hills Equestrian in Lexington, so yeah, that’s my diary. I keep it under the seat of my Audi, bought with my uncle’s money when my mother drove me to school. Pretty much the last I saw of her, and thankfully, him. That was 3 years ago.

“She doesn’t remember anything,” says a voice from the corner. Heads turn toward the sound and land on Konrad. His feet are up on a row of chairs. He is drinking coffee he got from a Keurig machine.

“You her lawyer?” Those are Detective Potts’ first words.

“I’m her husband. She vouldn’t have done anything like dat.”

“Like what?” asks Potts. “Like attempted murder?” He now turns toward me, and his lips are quivering. “We found this in your car,” he says. He holds up my diary.

“That’s private proo-perty.” says Konrad. “Don’t tell these assholes anything, AZ.”

“That’s evidence, Pal,” says Potts, slapping the notebook on his knee, like it’s his little treasure book of crimes. *The prosecution wishes to enter in as evidence the defendant's own diary….*

“Give it to me you Fooks!” Konrad’s hand is outstretched even though he is 15 feet away.

Detective Potts starts reading. There are a lot of words that Detective Potts considers proof of my plan to kill myself. tome, it sounds like someone who is very sad, very confused, and very trapped in a bad relationship. It didn’t even sound like a marriage, it sounds like a shitty circumstance. I honestly would not blame her for trying to find a way out. I feel for her. She came from the wealthy family in Nantucket. When she was 15, her father’s brother - a well-known documentary filmmaker – had raped her, after he had helped her to her room following a sprained ankle during a Thanksgiving football game.

Her mother suspected something, but it turned out that Mom was having her own thing with this brother - all the money came from him anyway.

Nobody wanted to fuck with that.

I see that Anderson Cooper is wrapping up the story on Amy Winehouse. Her funeral will be a small, family affair. She had been estranged from her father for three years. The father now asks for respect and privacy in this difficult time.

Suddenly there is a commotion in the lounge, and I see that Potts and Handsome are in a tussle with Konrad over my diary. Konrad knows that some pages contain coded information tracking the stolen tips that he put it in a bank account in my name, an account he well knows how to access.

Konrad is now placed under arrest for simple assault. There is a small amount of blood on Handsome’s face.

“Fook you guys and your questions! We want a lawyer!”

“That’s the lady’s call, Asshole, and she never asked for one. You just decided to stick your face in the mud, and with this little book of admissions, so did she.”

“I’m her husband!” They start to lead him out the door. I am still sitting in my wheelchair staring at them. “You say anything to them AZ and it won’t be good.”

“You may want to get yourself a lawyer,” Potts says to me on his way out. The three of them disappear behind an orange door.

I gaze up at the television.

“Amy had some material that has never been released to the public,” says Amy Winehouse's father. "We plan to make them available. Amy would want that.”

I'm pretty sure Amy didn’t want that.

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I am scheduled to be released from the hospital in three days.

Davido, my nurse and protector, is still assigned to me in some sort of continued patient care policy. He reads me his poetry. Ponytail is gone on vacation to Hilton Head.

A public defender not much older than me has been visiting me. The knot on his tie is Windsor. He has a lot of cases, but he is going to make time, get it right. My diary is not evidence, he says, it’s not admissible. He asks if I was trying to kill myself and I don't say yes nor no. My nickname for him is Going Places. I tell him that Detective Potts has sent word that upon release from the hospital I am to check in at the police station and list my whereabouts for the upcoming trial.

Davido wheels me outside onto the back patio. His fingertips grace my shoulders. His arms are powerful.

The Kentucky sun can’t decide whether to warm up the weather or keep it in the fridge. The patio is stone. The squirrels are not afraid of humans and I give them some of my peanut butter crackers. There is a man in a wheelchair on the other side of the terrace. I have never met him but I know who he is. A woman is standing next to him and both are eying me. She is something to look at, in her Givenchy heels. When I was 15, my Uncle gave me a similar pair for my birthday. He made me wear them. He filmed me in them, made a movie.

I feel uneasiness in my stomach.

“Where are you going after you get out of here?” Davido asks. His face reminds me of one of the squirrels because it’s innocent with a nose like a little chestnut.

“Konrad needs me to help with his business. He wants to do online horse betting. He says that it is going to be big and we are going to be at the forefront.”

“Where is your family? Why haven’t they visited you?”

“They don’t like Konrad and I don’t like them. So we’re even.”

“Your husband is an asshole.”

“No, he’s not. He came here from Warsaw with nothing and started a business. Both of his parents are dead. He is trying to save money to get his family out. He has a good heart.”

“Your husband is Russian, not Polish. I doubt his parents are dead. I doubt everything that guy says. I’ve seen him around.”

“How do you know?”

“Because I'm Russian and I know a Russian when I see one. He is also barred from the hospital grounds because he threw a rock through the lobby window. We had to call the police.”

The sun reflects on Davido. It shows everything that is good about him. He invited me to move into the condo he just bought, when its ready. They are the ones being built next to the hospital.

Just then, the guy in the wheelchair approaches us. He reaches out and shakes my hand, pretty much the last thing I expected. He smiles in a way that I cannot figure out. We have something shared, maybe that is it. Two people in a terrible crash that have something in common, new friends, healing together. Givenchy grasps his wheelchair with red knuckles.

“Did you do it on purpose?” he begins. His speech is slow but his eyes are quick. He is slight but you can see that he is fit and muscular and handsome, or was. He's pretty beat up.

I don’t want to lie and I don’t want to tell the truth.

“She’s recovering,” says Davido. He does not look at them.

“You can be happy that he’ll walk again, but you should know that he will never climb again. Climbing is his life.” says Givenchy. “Do you know who this is? Have you ever heard of Mark Stanton? He had one peak to go to complete the circuit. You took that from him, you fucking bitch. What kind of person….?”

“Now is not the time,” says Davido. He raises a flat hand. Gone is the innocence in his gentle face. I see something in him that makes me feel scared, and safe.

I cannot look at the couple directly. I can sense that the guy named Mark is not mad or upset. He is just intent, probably in the way he looks at a peak he is about to climb.

“What’s your name Miss?” he asks.

Arizona Ashley Welch.

“Well, I had a book deal that was going to include a final climb with a few buddies. That won’t be happening, so I guess I'll have plenty of time to rewrite the thing. I’ll be sure to get your name right for the story.”

“You can read it from your prison cell,” says Givenchy, and then, she wheels him inside.

There would be no friendly connection after all.

I don’t know what I was thinking.

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I was sentenced to eight years in prison for gross vehicular negligence.

During the trial, the cop I call Handsome read my diary for all the world to hear. The Diary of Anne Frank it wasn't. It was just me no longer wanting to be me. Podcasts and journalists weighed in on depression, suicide, journaling, you name it. But I tuned all of that out during the trial. My eyes were on Mark Stanton, the famous climber who would never climb again. He and Givenchy came every day, and heard every witness. Givenchy threw a cup of water on me one day when the judge called for a recess. I was shocked, but not surprised.

My attorney, the one I call Going Places, was charming and persuasive. He was laser focused on the attempted murder charge, which carried a minimum of 17 years. When the jury released me from this more serious charge, he seemed more pleased with himself than the outcome. After the verdict was read, he took a phone call, so we did not even say goodbye. I have not spoken to him in the 3 ½ years I’ve been in Kentucky State Correctional for Women.

The trial generated a lot of national press about the rich-type girl from Nantucket who wrote in her diary that she didn’t want to live, and ended up intentionally crashing her car into Mark Stanton, the famous climber. Psychologists and opinion makers debated whether a personal diary can be used as evidence against anyone and the talk shows weighed in.

“Are actions and thoughts one and the same?” pondered Ellen on Ellen.

“If someone writes in their personal diary that they wished the president was dead, is that evidence that they intend to kill the president?” asked Anderson Cooper.

“If humans acted on every impulse they had, we would cease to exist as a society,” commented a Harvard-trained sociologist. In the end, the story got folded into that murky American stew of privacy claims and the First Amendment. But there was a real victim and the jury was not about to forget about that.

I was deemed eligible for parole after four years, and that date is now approaching.

“28 days to go, AZ,” says my friend Oscar the Guard. He’s a big black dude who speaks with a lisp, partly due to a big space between his two front teeth. He likes to fix up cars in his garage, the pictures of which he always has ready to show. I don’t like cars but I do like Oscar. He’s never been outside Kentucky.. “Everythin’ I need is here in Kentucky” he says. Then he counts it all off on his thick fingers. “Got my wife, got my kids, got my cars, got my thoft-ball team….”

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Two activities keep me sane in prison. First, I am still pursuing my law degree from the inside and hope to be taking the bar next year. Second, I started a women’s group for depression called *Count Me In* and I have 12 women in my squad. Their names are Dianne, Josey, Mindy, Captain Kate, Willalyn, Desiree, Jasmine, Suzie, Ching, Willow, Betts and finally, Selena, my cellmate. Ages are all over the map and so are the offenses, which we do not generally talk about. Some of is painful to hear, especially the stuff involving kids. We meet weekly in a corner of the yard, the one under the overhang. My best trick is asking everyone to find a small stone in the courtyard and give it a name that best sums up what you feel about yourself. We scrape the first letter of the word right into the skin of the rock. My word was shame. We carry the rock everywhere we go in our pocket to remind ourselves that we are carrying something around that we don’t need.

“Let’s get rid of these rocks, girls,” I conclude each meeting, but I am talking mostly to myself.

*Count Me In* is a lot more than a therapy group. My goal is to combine it one day with equestrian therapy by teaching women the power of horses and how they could work with these beautiful animals to overcome fear. Warden likes it. He called me to his office one day and hinted that he would be interested in helping me expand to other prisons throughout the state, maybe even the country. I told him that I want to arrange a supervised visit for *Count Me In* to my old stable, Twin Hills. Warden is helping me with the applications for state funding but there are budget cuts up the ying-yang and I have been waiting over 2 years for approval.

When he passes me in the hall, he typically shakes his head, meaning that no news has arrived.

Konrad’s visits to the prison stopped two years ago, about the time that my family’s checks also stopped arriving at our mailbox. I heard that he lost his immigration status and disappeared back to Poland, or Stalingrad.

Davido has been helping me with the divorce. He wants me to come live with him in his condo next t0 the hospital when I am released.

“It’s a 2-bedroom,” he says, and pats my stomach in case something comes along." We have monthly conjugal visits. “Why are you still on the pill AZ?” he asks, building up the courage. “I don’t know,” I say playfully.

“Poor baby,” he says, ever the nurse. “Such a hard life.”

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Today I have an unexpected visitor.

As Oscar leads me toward Visitation, I hear a familiar accent. There is a loud argument going on. Whoever it is, he is arguing about a backpack that he is trying to bring in. The guard relents after checking its contents. The visitor sits down at a bright green table with stools bolted to the ground. There are bars on the windows. Two vending machines are empty.

“Arizona Sunset” Konrad says, and I feel that old familiar melt.

“What are you doing here?” I am still standing.

“Crazy AZ,” he coos. He had grown a mustache, gained some weight.

“Don’t call me that.”

“What should I call you?”

“I go by Ashley now.”

He raises his hands in mock surrender.

“Your boyfriend is giving me trouble, Crazy AZ.”

I don’t respond. He motions for me to sit.

“He’s making things difficult for both of us.” He has a nip of Jamison that somehow got through the guards. He offers it to me. I refuse.

“What do you want, Konrad?”

“I heard you are up for parole.”

“So?”

“I’m happy for you, I really am. You and Hospital Harry. I plan to get engaged myself. Great girl. Met her at the horse farm. Reminds me of you. Good family. She believes in me.” He holds out a tiny engagement ring. “Nice, huh?”

I shrug but it stings just a little. “I thought you left the country.”

“Well you were never that good at thinking, were you now AZ?"

“Fuck you,” I manage, but the words are quiet. I can’t even look him in the eye. Thought I could at this point, but I still can’t.

Oscar hears the interchange and moves a little closer.

Konrad pulls some papers out of a backpack.

“Your boyfriend wants me to sign these. The final straw. But I just thought that maybe we could work out a last-minute detail.”

I can see my name and signature on the divorce document. Oscar taps his watch, points to the clock.

At this point, Konrad pulls out a second piece of paper. It has a whole lot of numbers on it.

“You know AZ, our business at Keeneland Track had a number of expenses that I never got a chance to go through with you.” He takes out some reading glasses and runs his fingers down the handwritten columns. “There are travel costs – there and back – brochures, the website production. Then, there’s payroll. Lots of payroll.” He shows me the numbers, but they are illegible, except for the total at the bottom: $112,000.

“You want me to pay you $112,000 for the divorce?”

“There you go again AZ, being crazy. Of course not! We were married, it didn’t work out. You have a new boyfriend, I’ll be engaged soon. It’s all cool as school. I am just trying to move on, end things on a good note. Maybe the four of us can go to Mr. Chang’s when you get out − if you get out.”

“I don’t have $112,000, Konrad. I’m in prison. All I have is a parole hearing and that cost me $14 that I earned from working in the bakery last month.”

“Ah, you are not thinking AZ! Not your strong suit, I know! Mr. and Mrs. Welch of Nantucket have plenty of one hundred and twelve thousand dollars! I bet they have about a thousand of those! What is that house worth on Cliff Road, AZ?” Konrad spins the plastic bottle of Jamison and it drops to the floor.

Konrad doesn’t know that my mother wrote a letter informing me that she married my Uncle, and that my Dad still lives with them. If you know my family, it makes sense.

What the letter didn’t say is that she had no intentions of risking the famous Welch name by traveling to a prison in Kentucky to see her felon daughter. She had many excellent reasons, mostly related to her health and travel schedule. But I knew that my status as her adopted daughter from a 16-year old outside Flagstaff, Arizona – the name stuck – allowed my family to hang my troubled persona on the old coat rack by the door; the one everyone uses but no one really cares about.

“I don’t talk to them,” I tell Konrad, but he knows that. This time I do look him straight in the eye, but I can’t hold on. “My now step-Dad is the guy who raped me in high school, Konrad. Don’t ask me to do this.”

At this point, Konrad takes out my diary, the one that was used as evidence against me at the trial. He opens to the page with the coded information on tips taken from the catering company.

“I don’t think that the parole board will take kindly to eee-mmm-bezzlement.” He flips through the pages, holding up one that held about 30 entries. “It matches up pretty well to the bank account. You were very thorough. I count thirty grand. I wonder what that ee-quates to in prison years.” He takes out the ledger, reviews the entries and folds it back up. He places the diary and the ledger into his backpack. He smiles.

There’s a heart in my chest but it is just the same rock I have been carrying around for years.

Shame.

“I don’t want any trouble, AZ. Just trying to – how do you say it in America? – turn over a new leaf? Yes, I think that is it. I am just trying to pay my bills and move on so that you and Hospital Harry can live happily ever after. Does he do the handcuffs with you, like we did? Like Uncle did?” One of his nose hairs is quivering as he speaks. His eyes are blue.

Oscars now comes over and taps Konrad on the shoulder.

“Any trouble, AZ?” Oscar asks.

Konrad stands up. “No trouble Boss Man." He heads for the door, then turns toward me.

"Four more years in this steenk hole would really suck, AZ. Don’t you want to have kids before those ovaries shrivel up? What are you now, thirty-three?

“I’ll be in touch regarding the divorce papers, Arizona Sunset.” He smiles and offers Oscar a fist bump, but the big guard just gives him a not so gentle push out the door.

I rest my head in my hands and massage my temples.

“Tell me wuth going on AZ? That guy’s doing thom-ting to you?” says Oscar. He touches my hand.

I tell him everything and he listens, growing visibly angry.

My parole hearing is in two weeks.

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Mark Stanton had written a number of books on adventure climbing, and I had time to read, so I picked one up. There was a section about his wife that was impossible to put down.

Her name was Shauna Turner, an Australian go-getter. The section was about an accident she had had while on an eco-tour of Mount Everest, and h0w she had been left to die.

The final ascent on Everest had started out exactly as planned. As she exited her tent, she stood amongst the other 8 ecotourists who had signed up for this madness. Camp four – the final resting place – looked like a moonscape. Shauna had not slept a nano-second. At 26,00o feet, it was impossible. Nobody slept in the death zone, not even the Sherpas.

At this altitude, you could actually see the atmosphere as a dark blue layer melded with a blackness that was incomprehensible. The stars? You were in their room. It felt like they were watching you, not the other way around.

“Has everyone eaten?” Lead guide Eric Solomon asked. He is clad in hooded down jackets and an oxygen mask. His voice loses all bounce in the air. Heads nodded all around. The sound of oxygen being sucked into lungs cuts the air.

“Your gourmet breakfast this morning will be the sunrise, campers. Wait till you see what we ordered. It’s delicious. You’ll just want more.” The Sherpa closest to her chuckled. Eric’s operation was top rated, especially for safety. His company had made 50 summit attempts over 19 years, 38 successful. Over 250 people had stood atop Everest under the expertise of “Way up High Expeditions”. Amongst his past clients were an 11-year old boy and a paraplegic who had an article written about him in *Outside* magazine. And Shauna Turner of Melbourne, Australia was going to be one of his success stories. She was 38 years old, single and in the best shape of her life. She had even gone vegan.

The time was 11:30 pm.

It did not take long for the string of climbers to fall into their natural gaits. As usual, Shauna could see the American team at the front of the line, close behind the leader, Eric Solomon. Following them were the Canadians and then the Argentinians. They looked like little miners digging their way up the mountain. Shauna was following Mr. Hoshimoto, and his eldest son, 18-year old Shikura, was directly behind her. The father-son team had hiked Kilimanjaro to spread the wife and mother’s ashes after her death. Nothing technical about that, but the Everest climb was now the real thing.

Who knows how these things happen. Shauna had stopped midstep. Her purpose was to squat and pee, but of course that was impossible, so she had simply let the liquid release from her groin and got absorbed by her first layer of silk. If she had thought about it, she would have alerted Shikura behind her that she was taking a break. Everyone was routinely fixated on their own next step, where the edge of their crampon landed, and whether that step was on a rock, a slab of ice or something else.

Shauna felt Shikura’s body slam into her, and the impact pushed her aside. She realized that she was now out of the track that Eric Solomon had so carefully cut. There was no next step. Her foot was on the downside of a boulder or a piece of ice − she could not tell. She instinctively reached out to Shikura for balance, but he was already crouched down, protecting his own body. His ice ax dug into the landscape to secure himself. She was still roped in, but as her body weight pull him, he panicked and she felt the rope being cut. And it was then that she began to fall. She gave off a little yell, but it was almost like she did not want to disturb the moon and she felt that her voice would not be heard anyway. Up ahead, Eric Solomon and the others were continuing the ascent.

*“Aṅgreājīmā!,”* one of Sherpas screamed. *“Aṅgreājīmā!”*

And then, Shauna let out a scream. She felt her body tumble. She felt her ice ax slip from her hand. She felt her oxygen mask ripped from her face. She was a sled, heading down the mountain. She could not tell how long she careened down the slope. When she stopped moving, all she was aware of was that she was not dead. She lay still. On the other side of panic, is peace. She traveled a great distance, and now, she lay in the snow face down, remembering a pain in her ankle that she had not felt since Mika Jefferson kicked her off the turnwheel in first grade and she broke her ankle.

How was Mika? How was everybody in first grade? She could not remember everyone’s names. She tried and tried, over a sunrise, a sunset and then several more. She was not hungry. She was comfortable. She just couldn’t remember everyone’s names. Not even her own. What was her middle name? It started with an M.

She asked her mother, who ended up sitting next to her for a few hours, saying nothing. Nobody else came to keep her company; nobody, in fact spoke at all. That is until somebody did.

“Excuse me, Miss, it looks like you might need a hand.”

His name was Mark Stanton.

Two years later, they were married.

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My parole board meeting is scheduled for 11:50 on a Tuesday. I am in the bakery with my cellmate Selena from *Count Me In*. We are trying to follow a recipe for chocolate chip muffins, a treat for Easter.

Oscar sticks his head into the kitchen. “Ten minutes, Ashley.” He closes the door and disappears. I am glad he is calling me Ashley. Selena stops listing the ingredients. She is a beautiful girl, around 22 years old, but those looks had gotten her in nothing but trouble. Her head now falls into the recipe book.

“Please don’t go,” she says. “I mean, I know you have to go. Just don’t….go."

“I know, Selena. But you are strong now. No one can ever tell you who you are, because you know what you are.”

“Right!” she yells out, and pounds her chest. Tears are getting into the muffin mix. “Will we still ride horses one day?”

I nod. Oscar re-appears.

“Today’s your lucky day, I feel it. You’ll be ordering muffins from Dunkin Donuts soon. Don’t forget to drop a few off.”

“Thought you were on a diet, Osc.”

He looks at me with that toothy grin. “There’s my diet, and there’s my Dunkin Donuts. Neither one messes with the other.”

They say that it is possible to predict with accuracy if you are to be granted parole. Step one: you had to have served at least half your sentence. Step 2: You had to have turned your life around — not in the process, mind you – but be clearly on the other side of the fence. Step three were the character witnesses willing to show up on your behalf, a judge or the warden being the ultimate get-out-of-jail card. But many reformed inmates had gotten shot down on step four. That is the victim’s statements, and yes, they liked to show up. By the time your parole board hearing had begun, you had better have done your reach-outs and knew if they were with you or against you.

I have two victims. The first is the climber Mark Stanton, and the second is his wife —Givenchy – real name Shauna who had married the elite climber after he rescued her from Everest. The story was fantastic. Mark was best friends with Eric Solomon, the leader of Shauna’s expedition, but that relationship ended when it became public that he had not made any attempt to rescue his guest.

I have been writing letters to Mark and Shauna religiously. I was careful not to say I was sorry. People who knew this stuff urged a more nuanced approach. It just pisses people off when you apologize for your heinous behavior. The simple act of reaching had your apologies baked in.

I had yet to receive a response in 3 1/2 years.

I did attempt to get the money for Konrad. I called my mother and had my speech all laid out. She had me on speaker phone with my step-dad. My real Dad was off-island which in Nantucket-speak is off the planet. They were late for a dinner party. But in the end, I could not even get out the words to ask for $112,ooo. What was I going to say it was for? I just said "Happy Easter” and hung up.

As I walk toward the hearing, I am as sure as turkey on sundays that Konrad had laid out the embezzlement in detail and I would be tried for that crime too. If nothing else, Konrad was thorough. Ask him to pick up some Chinese on his way home, and it would be on the counter, no MSG. And he wouldn’t go to Hong Kong on the highway either. He’d go right to Mr. Chang’s, the good stuff downtown. He had access to plenty of our money--my money.

Oscar opens the door to the parole hearing. I walk in handcuffed.

I knew Konrad would be in the hearing today.

And he is.

But, so is Davido. And Mark Stanton. And Shauna.

And the Warden.

Mark has brought his dog, a beautiful English creme Golden, wearing a vest marked “Therapy Dog, Do Not Pet”. I later learn his name is Fred.

The trial begins, “State vs. Ashley Arizona Vronksy.”

“Welch,” interrupts Davido. “She is divorced now.” It’s the first I’ve heard that the divorce is final.

“State your name, sir, and relationship to the inmates,” says the Parole Chairman. I recognize him as Detective Potts, the guy who figured it all out. He has a new job. He still does that blinking thing, but now I can see that it means he is concentrating. He does not acknowledge me, and I do not see how his presence can turn out good for me.

Davido obliges the request and soon identifies himself as my fiancé, a story we had agreed to tell, though I had not agreed on marrying him. I am pretty sure that I will.

Potts reads out loud my crimes on the night of July 5, 2011. They have not gotten better with time. They are my pillow that I sleep with, the regret that I wake up with.

“Does anyone wish to add anything for the Board, for or against the inmate's release, to assist in our consideration?”

It is then that I hear Konrad clear his throat. I turn around to face him. His face is battered. His arm is in a sling. He has a black eye.

“I got a few facts." he says.

“State your relationship to the inmate,” says Potts.

“I am her husband.”

Davido now moves toward Konrad and jabs a finger into his chest. His little nose has somehow expanded one resembling a prize fighter.

“Ty yeye byvshiy muzh, kusok der'ma!” he hisses into Konrad’s face.

Chairman Potts calls for Oscar the guard to move toward the men.

“So you are not her husband?” Chairman Potts asks. “State your business, Sir.”

At this, I listen in shame as Konrad begins to describe my embezzlement. He has every detail which he reads. Dates, amounts, methods. He goes on for several minutes before he breaks it off into silence. it all adds up to this; the prisoner has a past and she is likely to continue her behavior into the future.

No one speaks.

“Does anyone else have anything else they wish to add?”

I hear the voice of Mark Stanton as he starts to speak, but he is interrupted by Konrad.

“What the fook do you mean, ‘anything else,’ you fooking moron?” He is now standing up, pointing at Potts. “The beech stole money, money that she owes me! Ask her where the fooking money is! Or I will. Where is the money you stole, AZ?”

At this, Potts motions to my friend, Oscar, who moves over to Konrad.

“Don’t touch me!” he yells and he cowers away.

“You! It was you!” Konrad leaps behind his chair, and catches his sling on an edge. “This beast jumped me last weekend at the track and did this to me in the parking lot! He said he was a friend of AZ! Arrest this piece of shit!”

“Remove the witness,” Potts says.

Oscar puts Konrad’s unbroken arm behind his back, and forces Konrad to look up at Potts.

“Mr. Vronsky, you walk into parole telling stories, you better have your facts in order. You have wasted our time with hearsay and baseless accusations and that sir is against the law, punishable by a 3-year sentence in federal jail. The district attorney will be in touch with you. But as a former detective, I would advise you to shut your fucking mouth and to never appear in my court again. Remove this asshole.”

Oscar shoves him out the door.

“Again, does anyone have anything else to add before the Board questions the prisoner.”

I hear Mark Stanton jostle in his seat. He stands up and hands the leash for Fred to Shauna. He takes a place right in front of me. His back is to Potts and the rest of the Board.

“AZ, what you did was terrible. You changed my life, forever, and took away my dream.”

I can not look him in the eye. I glance at Oscar who silently urges me to be strong.

“But we have a phrase in the climbing world. It is called “Listen to the Mountain”. What does it mean?” At this, Mark turns around and s faces Potts and the rest of the parole board. “It means that I have every reason to believe that the incident that brought me and Arizona together ended up saving my life.

“Let me tell a brief story. On the night I collided with Arizona Vronsky on that bridge, I was on my way to the airport to board a flight to Argentina to complete my final ascent that would allow me to join the 7 Summits Club. That the name for a group of less than 500 climbers who have successfully reached the highest peaks on all 7 continents. I had been training for months.

“Most of my training took place right here in Kentucky’s own Black Mountain. You might have seen me and Fred on WLXT. They had a camera crew follow me up the west side of the trail on my timed training regiments. They ended up calling it *With a Little Help from Fred* because one of the camera guys saw me packing Fred’s little duffle with my water. We climbers will do anything to lighten our load, including stuffing our friends' packs if we can get away with it.

The comment drew a laugh from the Board.

“I had signed a book deal with Random House. I was to document every day of my ascent. The reason for the interest was that I was never supposed to be a climber. I was born with a rare form of childhood polio that kept me in and out of hospitals until I was 12 years old. I was not supposed to live past my 20s. I’m 38 today.”

Here, Mark puts his fist to his forehead. He takes in several deep breaths. Outside the window, the day is full of color. In the very far distance, I can make out a sun-drenched pasture filled with white clover and the unmistakable swatch of Kentucky bluegrass. I know that horses are nearby.

“My co-climbers were my best friends; Diamond, King Arthur and Jetset--those are their climbing names. We met in our teens, climbed up Blackrock when we should have been studying, and dreamed of the peaks we would one day climb, which we did. We all got married within a year of one another and acted as best men in each other's weddings. We even formed a classic rock band to raise money to teach climbing in poor communities. The name of the band and the non-profit is the Kentucky Rock & Boulders. Maybe one of you saw us playing and recruiting one of your kids at Lexington High School?”

The members of the Board shake their heads no but they remain glued to the words of the famous climber.

“On the night of the car accident, on July 5th, 2011, I was going to take an overnight flight to Buenos Aires to meet up with the guys, have a few nights in the city and then make our way over to base camp. A game of cards had decided our route and my hand won; it was going to be the Polish Glacier Route, the most challenging, but also the most breathtaking. I think we were all secretly happy, although my winning entitled me to the lightest load. That’s probably what I was thinking about when I started for the airport and turned onto Central Bridge. I obviously cannot remember much from that night, I am sure you understand, but I suppose those details are the reason why I am standing in this room, and Mrs. Vronsky – I mean Miss Arizona Welch – is also sitting in this room, before this esteemed Board. But fate, as they say, would soon intervene.”

I pick up a bottle of water and let it wash down on my throat, no just my dry desert.

Mark too seems to catch something in his throat, but it is emotion. I watch as Shauna stands up and joins her husband’s side. Fred remains at their feet as Mark removes a clipping from his jacket and begins to read in a voice that is barely audible.

“July 9th, 2011. Three American climbers were caught in a rockslide on the northeast side of Mount Aconcagua. Witnesses saw a massive wall of rock and snow collapse off of a cornice above where the climbers were heading. Their bodies have not been located and the search for survivors has been…”

Whatever voice Mark has ceases to exist. His last words of the story are mere whispers. He straightens himself back up, and glances at me but I can say nothing.

“I would have died on that mountain, Miss Welch. The fact is as clear to me as Fred sitting there on the floor. In whatever way this can be looked at, you saved my life, and for that, I have gratitude toward you. I want you to know that.” Heads instinctively go to Fred whose eyelashes seem to mimic the sadness in the room.

I can neither smile nor frown.

“AZ, Shauna and I have received every one of your letters these past three years. We had nothing to say back to you, so please excuse our silence. But we know of your work with *Count Me In*, and your attempts to help others overcome their worst demons to become their best selves. My book deal is back on, although the subject matter has changed. It is now called Descent and it will show the power of changing goals and how life’s events can teach you to discard old dreams and embrace new ones. You are a beautiful writer and thinker, AZ, and I would be honored to have you assist me with writing my book. I would also invite you to join our non-profit group helping kids in distressed communities discover climbing.” Here he thankfully takes his blue eyes off of me and turns toward the parole board.

“I am Miss Welch’s principal victim. No one has been more hurt than me by her actions, which were inexcusable. Shauna and I have come to learn that there were issues in her life that contributed to her actions on that night, but we neither accept them as an excuse nor as a reason for her release. They are just there, and we understand them. In conclusion, I hereby request that she be immediately granted parole. We will provide Miss Welch room, board and a salary. That is, if the Board will allow it to happen. Thank you for your consideration.”

Davido maneuvers himself directly behind me. I can feel his warm hand on my shoulder and smell the sweetness of his skin.

“Thank you, Mr. Stanton,” Potts says. His exaggerated blinking now makes him look thoughtful.

Next comes the Warden. He details my rehabilitation, my work with *Count Me In*, my effect on the population.

“I strongly support Miss Welch’s return to society,” he concludes.

“It’s happening,” I hear Davido whisper. Oscar gives me a thumbs up.

But then, Shauna speaks.

She loved and respected her husband, she said, and she understood forgiveness. She admired the Warden and the difficult choices he must make with the dregs of society. But Shauna was a victim too, perhaps the one who had suffered the most. She had uprooted her life to move to Kentucky from Melbourne, Australia. She had not seen her family in years. She and Mark had a climbing company, a successful business that afforded them a certain lifestyle. That business had been lost. They had to sell their house. Every aspect of their lives together had been shattered. And then there were the medical expenses and time that she had to take off to help her husband. She once had been a lawyer, you know. She specialized in corporate mergers. She figured she had lost a million dollars, at least in unearned fees. It was all destroyed because of the selfish actions of Arizona Ashley Welch, all detailed in that miserable diary of hers.

“I haven’t been to 'Straila in two yee-ahs, have not sign me mom and Dad. I can’t travel like I used to. She took that all awhy.” Shauna then turns toward me and points with an outstretched arm. “Four yee-ahs for destroying a family’s life. I don’t think it enough.” Shauna then looks at Mark. “I’m sorry, Babes, but we are supposed to say how we feel and that is how I feel.” She reaches down and pets Fred.

I can feel Davido's hands tighten on my shoulder. I watch as Potts falls back into his role as Detective, here to protect the innocent from the dregs of society.

I sense the old feeling return to my body. I feel it enter into my struggling and hollow shell. I feel it lodge itself in every limb and vein in my body.

Shame.

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The Warden appealed on my behalf but to no avail. My parole was denied. No reason was given.

Some of my girls in *Count Me In* also wrote to the Board campaigning about how much I had helped them overcome the darkness in their souls, the darkness that led them to do what they had done. I wonder sometimes if some of those letters worked against me. If I am doing so much good on the inside, why let me go to the outside? Selena says that that is ridiculous.

“You and I are part of the system and the system has its own way,” she says from the top bunk, reading glasses on her nose.

My next hearing is in a year, so we will see how that goes.

But while being denied parole was something that was out of my control, there are two other denials that were very much in my control.

The first was that I broke off my engagement with Davido. I don’t really know why except to say that we met under strange circumstances, and I don’t need a nurse anymore. I did it quickly and he took it well. I heard that he already met another patient. Apparently, there were a few.

The second is that I told Mark Stanton that I was not going to accept the position, even part time from prison. He also took it well. He now visits me regularly and we have struck up a sort of friendship that's hard to explain and I don’t question. Things between him and Shauna did not work out, and they are finalizing their divorce. She is already back in Melbourne, he says.

“She took the dog with her, A,” he says, and then laughs. He calls me A, now. Just A. It makes me feel good, top of the alphabet.

“She took Fred? Wasn't he your therapy dog?"

“Shauna needs more therapy than me. They should move around the S's and N's in the word 'narcissist' to spell out her name. If I knew when we met what I know about her now, I might not have pulled her off that mountain.”

“You are terrible, Mark Stanton,” I say and punch his arm.

"I'm looking for a new Golden. Maybe if you know half as much about dogs as you do about horses, you can help me find the perfect one.” He has a shy look. “Maybe, when you get out of here.”

Each time he visits, we seem to sit closer and closer to one another. I’m helping him with ideas for the book, just not formally. He is nothing like I expected him to be. He can find meaning in a crack in the ceiling, and I love the way he cocks his head just slightly when he speaks to me.

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It’s been a month since the hearing. Oscar finds me in the kitchen and tells me that two people – a man and a woman are waiting for me in Visitation. At this point, my privileges are at the highest level, so I was more or less free to wander the prison on my own.

“Who is it?” I ask.

Oscar shrugs. “I don’t know but the lady has some nice shiny things.”

I walk out and down the corridor toward Visitation, stopping to sit with two members of *Count Me In*. Willalyn will be released tomorrow and Jasmine is coaching her on how to approach her kids.

“Just be their Mother,” Jasmine advises.

“Is that what I should do, Ash?” Willalyn asks me.

“You know what to do, because there is nothing preventing you from being yourself anymore. Your man is barred from the premises. You are safe and you are strong, and we are all here for you,” I say.

“But I never got to ride those horses,” she whimpers.

“You can ride your own horse now,” I say.

“Thank you. For everything.”

It is November and I can feel the cool air finally pushing the Kentucky humidity south for the season. The cement walls around me feel less and less confining. I now know what is on the other side of them and whatever fear I had brought into this place is not going to follow me outside. I have decided to sentence that shit to 'life in prison without the possibility of parole. I am prepared.

I am just not prepared for the two visitors awaiting me.

“Hello, Ashley,” says my mother. She has never called me Arizona. Although it is the name given to me by my birth mother, that business was best forgotten. Still it is my legal name.

I do not want to acknowledge the person beside her. A panic comes to my chest. I stand staring at her, and then, with effort, at my Uncle Sam.

“We were in the area, and wanted to come by and say hi. We brought you these.” She hands me a Sephora package of makeup. Oscar is now in the room and takes it from me. It must go through security.

“Thank you,” I manage to say. "I wasn't expecting you."

My Uncle looks away. He looks at his phone. He reads the signs on the walls, He checks his watch.

His cologne makes me sick.

“I heard that you are up for parole again. It sounds like you will be getting out. I was shocked that they did not release you last time. And even after the Warden vouched for you. What a thing!”

I am now staring at my Uncle.

“What brings you to Kentucky, Sam?” I ask him.

“AZ, be nice. Sam and I traveled quite a way to get here. We are on our way to the Greenbriar Hotel.”

“I said, what brings you to Kentucky, Sam? Looking for another Philly maybe?”

There are bags under his eyes and his tie can barely contain his expanding neck. But he raises his eyes and locks in on mine. “What gives you the right to speak to your step-father in that way? Your mother and I came to this rat hole to give you an ounce of dignity after you humiliated her and me and everyone in this family.”

“Ashley be nice. Coming here was Sam’s idea.” She is co-chairman of the admissions board at the Westmoor Club and she looks the part. My mother abruptly changes the subject to my sister who just got her real estate license in Nantucket.

No one responds.

“Is there a ladies’ room nearby?” Mom asks Oscar. He points.

“Sam, we have a dinner at 7 and it is still a 2-hour drive.” My Uncle nods, and then it is just him and I.

There are pigeons shitting on the windows. I trace my finger on the table. Selena just gave me a manicure so I don’t want to look too feminine, so I pull them back. He notices.

“I heard you are making the most of things in here,” he starts. “I heard that you started a group and you are looking for funding. Maybe I can help. What is it for? Your mother told me but I forgot.”

“It’s for women who got fucked and ended up in here, Sam.”

He rips me a look. There is something in his eyes that I have never seen before. I decide that it is anger, but it is not toward me, because he quickly looks away.

“Let me ask you something, Sam.”

He blinks.

“When I was 15, did my father know what you were doing to me?”

“Your father is not well and never has been. I take care of him, just like I took care of you and your mother and your sister.”

I nod.

“You want a thank you for that? For raping me.”

“I don’t want anything from you. What’s past is past. I regret a lot of it and I want you to know that I am sorry. I really am, Ashley or Arizona or whatever the fuck your name is. There were a lot of reasons for my actions, but people change. I hope to make it up to you one day.”

I can see that he wants to pet my hand in a step-Dad kind of way, but I make sure they are on Pluto.I can see my mother coming out of the bathroom. She looks like a Countess lost in a Dollar Tree store. She sees that Sam and I are conversing and deliberately slows her pace.

I tell Sam, “I’ve continuing my law studies in here. I’ll be taking the Bar, and when I get out, I plan to go into practice as well as expand my equestrian therapy program.”

“All of this is good, Ashley. It might sound strange coming from me, but I am proud of you.”

“Yeah, Sam. Law is interesting. Did you know that in the state of Kentucky it is illegal to not take a shower at least once per year?”

“Well I would hope that everyone would know that!” he laughs.

“Want to know what else is illegal?”

“Sure, Counselor.”

“Rape of a 15-year old. Turns out that all 50 states agree on that. Especially Massachusetts. And filming the crime is a whole nother set of worms. Child pornography with intent to distribute.”

His gay demeanor falls from his face like the shit coming out of the pigeons outside.

“I thought we were past all that. And there are no films.”

My mother is now making her way toward us. She is 20 feet away.

“Oh, but there is Sam. You were not as careful as you might have thought. Before I left for college, I stopped by your office one day in Hyannis, and I found something in your drawer, something I think you forgot to store. It is even time and date stamped like you filmmakers do so well. But, don’t worry, Sam, it is in a safe location. And the statute of limitations in Massachusetts on rape crimes was just extended!”

I can see the blood vessels in his neck. His fedora is pushed back and there is sweat on his forehead. He wipes it with a napkin and small pieces of paper stick to his skin.

My mother returns and sits down.

“How are you two getting along? Are you all caught up? You know, Sam here is making a film about the erosion in Nantucket. The Discovery Channel has agreed to distribute it.”

My eyes are fixed on my predator.

“Ever thought of doing a film on the inside of a prison, Sam? A good way is to do it is to actually move in and spend some time in a cell. A lot of time. Years of time. I can see you here.”

“Fuck you,” Sam seethes.

“Now Sam, what brings that out of you?” my mother asks.

“I think my step-Dad is just upset about being around a prison, Mother. It’s OK Sam, I’ll be out soon enough and then you will hear from me.” I nod to Oscar who comes over to escort them out.

I don’t rise as Sam throws darting looks at me over his shoulder. He is limping on his cane. My mother gives a friendly wave.

“We’ll send pictures from the Greenbriar!” she yells. I cannot help but feel a certain glee sweep over my being. It’s like I have launched into a cool swimming hole on the hottest day of the year, and it gives me a relief I did not know was in me, or possible.

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Last night, I threw my rock of shame over the wall.

My next parole hearing is in less than a year, and the Warden says I am virtually assured release.

Today, Warden tells me that my funding has come in for my equestrian program. Me and the girls will be having a supervised visit to Twin Hills in a month and I will be showing them the power of horses and the strength that women can find by climbing in the saddle, by confronting something that they once thought was well beyond their control. Turns out many things are within our control.

Mark tells me he will be stopping by that day with his new dog.

He named it Arizona.

*That’s all for now, my Diary. Goodnight. See you tomorrow.*

*Ashley Arizona Welch, April 17th, 2016.*