

# The Myth

*Before the phone call, I wasn't quite sure what a myth was. Greek gods were myths; I knew that. And Shangri-La, a paradise hidden somewhere at the top of the world. My grandmother was born there. But she died when she was a teenager, giving birth to my mom. That's where myth stops and the ugly facts begin. My grandfather took one look at that squalling motherless child and fled. How hideous is that?*

*That's our family history in a rotten little nutshell, infecting our lives like a curse. Just ask my mother, forsaken by her father and then her husband. What made me think my life wouldn't be next to go down the toilet?*

*Then came the phone call.*

That's all I've written on account of this bus. Bumpy! And the road, not exactly a ribbon of moonlight, but I love the way it winds and climbs and clings to the side of the valley. But rough!

"Yii! The road! Where did it go?"

With my forehead pressed against the window, all I see is the bottom of a rocky valley a long way down. And a river, icy blue, like a certain someone's eyes, reminding me why I'm here. I swear to God this bus is going to careen over the cliff, and I regret not having

finished writing my story. I see rescue workers picking through the smoking wreckage to uncover a charred notebook that contains only those mysterious lines about a myth and a phone call. But nothing about the horrible secret that robbed a girl of her entire life, and not a word about how she got her life back. That phone call did it, triggered an avalanche of events. *Oops*—I retract *avalanche*. They obviously happen all too frequently up here, by the looks of the rocks at the side of the road.

Still, we keep climbing higher and higher into a landscape so treacherous and remote that people call it “The Roof of the World.” Legend says that somewhere in these Himalayan Mountains lies a paradise called Shangri-La, and more than one village has erected a sign pointing to it: THIS WAY TO SHANGRI-LA!

We’re almost there. And the closer we get, the more my thoughts keep flipping back to that *famous* phone call. My mother answered it. During the funeral, of all places, while we were standing around the grave. I couldn’t believe it.

## Escape

It had to be bad news, the way she clutched her scarf to her throat as she listened, as if someone else had dropped dead. People were glaring at her. I nudged her.

“What is it?” I whispered.

The look in her eye—*yikes!*—maybe someone really *had* croaked. What else would make her walk away from her Aunt Gretchen’s grave? And keep walking, almost at a run, all the way to the parking lot. I wanted to escape with her, but that clueless minister was droning on about “Gretchen’s loving granddaughter,” meaning me. Which proved how much he knew.

“—who, in spite of the pressures of her final exams, did so much to ensure this perfect farewell—”

I couldn’t stand it. She wasn’t my grandmother. She was my mother’s aunt, which made her my great-aunt. My mean, bitter, grouchy great-aunt. Yes, I read a poem at the chapel, it’s true, because I’d never had the opportunity to say goodbye to a family member. In fact, Aunt Gretchen was the only family we had, Mom and me. But the instant the ceremony ended, I tossed my bunch of lilacs on the coffin and hurried to join Maddy at the car. I saw her through the window hiding behind her veil, so I knocked, just to be safe. She opened the door.

“Hurry up and get in,” she said, almost choking on tears. Real tears, I might add.

“What is it?” I asked.

“My father,” she said, starting the engine.

“What father?”

“My goddamned father.”

Sure, technically she did have a father, just like technically I also had a father. But they might as well have been dead. At least that’s the attitude Maddy took to save her sanity.

“So why is he calling?” I asked.

“He’s not.”

“Oh. He’s not dead, is he?”

“Not quite.”

“What do you mean?”

“Coma. I can’t believe it. We never hear from him and suddenly he’s dying. What a joke.” Her voice was bitter.

“Where is he?” I asked.

She lifted the veil and stepped on the accelerator before the funeral party could descend upon our car.

“I can’t believe he’s alive,” I said. “Where does he live? How did he get our phone number?”

“He’s in Greece,” she snapped. “His lawyer wants me to come.”

“What did you say?”

“What do you think I said?”

“I think you told him to f-off.”

“Roxy, please!”

“You’re not going, are you?”

Silence.

“Maddy?”

That’s what I call my mother—Maddy. We never went in for the *mom* thing.

“If you think I intend to see that man, even if he *is* on his deathbed...”

The look she gave me for assuming she was going to Greece made me feel like an idiot. Obviously, she wasn’t crazy about doing the *daughter* thing either. Her tears, though, made me wonder what was really going on inside her. Her father had abandoned her, God’s

truth—just walked away when she was a baby. Dumped her onto his sister, Gretchen. He had never contacted her, and now he was dying. The whole thing was making me sick to my stomach. As a matter of fact, I’d been feeling pretty crummy all week.

“What happened to him?” I asked.

“His head,” she said.

“What about his head?”

“Brain damage or something.”

“How?”

“Boat.”

“It sunk?”

“They don’t know what happened.”

“How did the lawyer find you?” I asked.

She wasn’t listening. I thought she was going to break the steering wheel off. “If anyone thinks I’m going to Greece to take care of him after he left me like that...”

“And he didn’t just leave you. He left you with *you know who*.”

“That selfish, narcissistic, pathetic man, James Bearsden...”

That was Maddy’s Gretchen impersonation—the exact words Aunt Gretchen had often used to disparage her brother, whom she never forgave for dumping little Maddy on her. But Maddy’s rant typically went on longer than that. She seemed to have run out of venom.

“You forgot *irresponsible* and *immature*,” I said.

Maddy laughed.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” I said.

Her laughter turned into sniffles, and she brooded in silence all the way home.

For all her gazillion faults, Maddy wasn’t such a bad person. But as mothers go, she was high maintenance, requiring infinite patience and compassion. Back in our apartment, I watched her at the kitchen bar as she nibbled designer salad mix, one bitter leaf at a time, out of a plastic bag.

“Excuse me, *Mother*,” I said, as kindly as I could, “it seems to me that, despite everything, he’s still...you know...your father.”

I hadn’t expected my voice to quaver and my eyes to prick with tears. I might have blamed the funeral for making me so edgy, but the truth is I’d been on the verge of tears all through my final exams.

I intercepted Maddy’s feedbag so that she’d look at me, so I could search her face for some sign of compassion.

“And he *is* dying,” I said, thinking maybe she should go to Greece to see the old man.

She snatched her lettuce back as if I’d stolen her stash of self-pity.

“Let me make you an omelette,” I said, stepping over to the fridge for eggs, onions and tomatoes.

Maddy Hunter, the actor with the big red hair, collapsed into a chrome barstool, all arms and legs and leopard-skin spandex. I’m sorry to say that my mother is no beauty. Smoking had carved premature cracks in her face, and her neck is a mile too long. But her look gets her challenging roles that have earned her excellent reviews. A recent one praised her portrayal of a woman struggling to contain her inner monster. The reviewer wrote that he couldn’t take his eyes off her for fear Maddy might kill herself. Of course, Maddy did have plenty of reasons to do exactly that, starting with a belief that she had killed her own mother, which, let’s face it, she had done, in a manner of speaking. Can you imagine living with *that* your whole life?

I gave her an onion to chop, and she turned the task into an Academy Award-winning performance of a woman shredding the remains of her heart.

“I’m thinking Gretchen knew where her brother was all these years,” she said.

“No!” I said. “And kept it from us? She’d have to be a psycho.” I cracked some eggs and whisked them wildly. “Anyway, you don’t know that. You can’t know that,” I said. She responded with a riff of aimless cleaver hacks. “You don’t know that, Maddy,” I repeated.

“I know it as much as a person can know something without actually knowing it,” she said. It was neat the way she punctuated

her argument with percussive chops. “He was her brother. Think about it,” she added. “She must have known.”

I had to admit, as ugly as the notion was, it was feasible. I turned on an element and started to sauté the onion.

“Okay,” she said. “Okay, yes, you’re right, someone should be there...”

I smiled at her and whisked the eggs some more. *This is good*, I thought.

Then I heard her mutter, “...when he dies.”

Maddy picked up the cleaver again and began to julienne the hell out of some lettuce. I hurried to finish cooking the omelette.

“You should really be there *before* he dies,” I suggested. “That would be the whole point.” I could imagine a dramatic deathbed reconciliation scene.

“Well, I can’t go, can I?” she snapped. “I’m busy.”

That ticked me off, since I’d gone to the trouble of making her a damned omelette. So I stepped out onto the balcony where I always felt better, surrounded by my potted plants. The ornamental orange tree needed some serious TLC. Our cat had climbed it and broken off several branches in an attempt to get at its sour oranges, of which there were already precious few—just like our family, that stingy plant bore little fruit. The cat bit into one and had the runs for a week. I ran my fingertips over the splinted limbs. Tears blurred my eyes. I leaned on the balcony railing and stared through gaps in the high-rises to the mountains beyond. *Mountains of loneliness*, I thought, and felt anger at my pathetic family. My father, for example, last seen heading north to search for gold—or his sexual orientation, according to Maddy. Considered dead. And my grandmother—what had she done to deserve death by childbirth? Imagining her gruesome end made me break out in a sweat, since the same fate would probably await me if I were ever to have a child, which wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility. In fact, during certain—*ahem*—sessions with my boyfriend, Doug, excuse me, my now *ex-boyfriend* Doug, I felt the family curse hovering over me like a vulture.

For a second, I imagined myself in Greece with my grandfather. I

hated him, sure. What else could I feel after living with Maddy and Aunt Gretchen all my life? But after all, he *was* my grandfather. And I suddenly thought that it might be nice to have a real grandfather, even if he *was* half-dead. As I stood there in the darkness, twenty-one floors up, I realized for the first time how different we were, Maddy and me. She'd as soon chop down our family tree as give it a drink of water. Perhaps it was time I had my own space. As I stood there on the balcony, I could hear the umbilical cord breaking.

What I actually heard was a cork popping.

I turned to see Maddy in the kitchen pouring herself a commiserating glass of red wine. I slipped through the sliding doors to confront her.

"So I've decided—"

I stalled, but not because I was chickening out. No, quite the opposite. The urge to go to Greece was thundering through my veins like a herd of wild horses. It startled me how strongly I felt that I was doing the right thing.

"I'll go to Greece for you," I finally managed to say.

The look on her face! "Oh, darling, no, no, no." She was all terror and relief as she raised her glass to me. "My angel of mercy, are you sure?" She kissed me on the cheek and in the next breath said, "Well, let's think about it."

"I have," I said. "I'm going."

She hugged me, her heart pounding through that scrawny breastbone of hers. Then she stepped back and looked at me suspiciously.

"This is no holiday, Roxy," she said. "Greece is not your precious Shangri-La."

"Eat your omelette," I said. "It's getting cold."

"Sweetie, I've been thinking," she said.

It was the day before my flight. I'd been watching her getting more and more anxious all day, so I didn't like where this was going.

"About what?" I asked.

"You're going to wind up regretting this."

"I'm going," I said.

"No, Roxy, I've changed my mind. I have a horrible feeling that Aunt Gretchen was right. A broken heart is all that can come of this—of going to him."

"I'll risk it," I said.

"No, sweetie, it's settled. I would never forgive myself."

"For what?"

"Trip's off, okay? It was never on. What was I thinking? Go have a nice summer. Meet a boy. Get a tattoo or something. Have fun. My God, you're only seventeen once! I wish I were seventeen again. I'd sure do things differently. Just you be careful."

We *had* been careful, Doug and I. No way was I going to be one of those girls huddled in the bathroom worrying about a missed period. Wait a second! A missed period? *Oh, my God. What day is it? The twenty-third?* I'd missed my period by a mile. What with Gretchen dying and everything, I'd completely spaced out about it. It wasn't unusual. Our bodies aren't like clockwork, but still—

*Oh, my God! Is that why my breasts are tender? And why I feel like I have the flu? Don't tell me. Please, don't tell me.*

"Roxy? What's the matter?" Maddy asked.

"Nothing," I said.

"Not nothing," she said. "I know you. What's wrong?"

I turned away. She *did* know me. Only too well. But she was the last person I'd tell, knowing how she'd react and what she'd want me to do about it. *Oh, my God.* If I *were* pregnant, the first thing I'd need to do is figure out how I felt about it. Without her bugging me. And here was a chance to get far away from her. *Greece is almost halfway around the world.*

"Maddy," I pressed, "the worst that's going to happen to me in Greece is that I wind up hating your father as much as you do."

"Exactly," she said.

"And how's that going to happen if he's in a coma?" She looked away. "Maddy? He *is* in a coma, isn't he?" She wouldn't look at me.

“So it’s a little late to pretend we’re the happy little family,” I said.

“Well, I *believe* in family,” she said.

I’d never heard that before, and I would have asked her to repeat it, but it had squeaked so tentatively out of her mouth that I knew she wasn’t acting. I kept quiet so that those words might echo in her head and, sure enough, a moment later she was giving me extra money to buy a dress for the funeral. Instead of a mourning outfit, I should buy something I wanted, she told me. Something white and summery.

*Or a maternity dress!*

It was too late to run to the pharmacy. In fact, it was time for bed. I listened to Maddy as she spoke long-distance to the lawyer who had agreed to look out for me during the week I’d be in Greece. Suddenly I was the one flip-flopping, wondering if jet travel was good for the—you know—the fetus. *The fetus!* But I would have an abortion, wouldn’t I? That’s how you dealt with a family curse. But first things first: I would buy a pregnancy kit at the airport before boarding the plane.

As I lay in bed, I kept thinking of Maddy saying she believed in family. But surely Maddy would want me to have an abortion. Was that what *I* wanted? All I could think about was my mother’s real mother, Roxana Khan, who had died in childbirth at the very same age as I am now. And here I was, pregnant too.

Perhaps my life as I knew it was over.

*Roxy, what the hell have you done!*

## Hungry Hearts

“Three minutes,” the instructions said. I read them carefully three times as the plane took off, but had to wait until the seat belt sign went off before trekking up the aisle to the washroom.

First, one little blue line appeared on the strip, but that was okay, because if a second line didn’t show, then I was negative. What agony, waiting! Then, unmistakably, a second blue line! I couldn’t believe it, didn’t want to believe it, but there it was: the pee in the plastic cup was yellow, the strip was blue, and my face in the mirror was white. I sat down again on that miserable little toilet in that cramped cubicle and cried until someone knocked on the door. The funny thing was, when I emerged I wanted to tell someone, anyone, that I was pregnant. How stupid was that? Hey, I’d just set a new benchmark for dumb: getting pregnant! I could not believe it. Mainly because I couldn’t afford to believe it. And I wasn’t finished with being a teenager yet.

I made my way on rubbery legs back to my seat, where the first thing I did was reread the instructions on the pregnancy kit, hoping I’d misread. But no such luck. I couldn’t believe that people couldn’t hear my heart pounding. How appropriate that a baby should be howling somewhere about twenty rows away. I couldn’t tune it out, not until I started to compose my “Dear Doug” letter: *Hey, Dooger, you’ll never guess what...*

Well, I had a whole week to write it, although I’d probably have