

LIFE HAPPENS: A Memoir

by

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I didn't have the right, were the words on my phone. Raphael had sent the text earlier in the day, but I hadn't had a chance to read it in its entirety and respond. But I couldn't respond. I didn't know what to say. I checked the text message every five minutes, and still my brain couldn't form a lucid response. All I could think about was the time we spent together.

Three weeks. Is that long enough to know whether you've found the love of your life? And to know if you've lost him?

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After graduating from university, I moved with my then-boyfriend, Mace, to a small town outside Orlando, Florida. I had a feeling it wouldn't work between us but wanted a change. I had nothing planned after graduation. I struggled with finding a major focus and finished with a General Studies degree. Any major I found of interest, Mace shot it down, suggesting I wasn't smart enough.

You know that's a hard subject, right, or that's a lot of work, I don't think you can handle it, were some of his favorite expressions. Always accompanied by his condescending tone and smirking expression, it made me shrink back and forget about pursuing any of my own interests.

I had emotionally left our eight-year relationship months earlier but stayed. I didn't have the confidence to leave him physically and had nothing to fall back on. My whole world had been Mace, and now I was stuck.

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I remember first meeting Raphael in an online chatroom. I was sitting in my dorm room, logged in to my favorite pre-Facebook social media accounts on Blackplanet, Migente, and College Club, as I downloaded music from Limewire. A sound went off indicating I had received a message on one of those three platforms.

Hi, was all the message said.

Rafi and I talked for hours about family, lovers and friends, classes, and dorm life. We talked to each other every day since that initial message. When it came time for winter break, we exchanged emails knowing we wouldn't be able to chat online like we had grown accustomed to. Our emails were pages long. And sure, we talked about meeting one day, but because we were both in relationships and thousands of miles from each other, we never thought it would come to fruition.

And then life happened.

Mace and I had found and been living in our Florida apartment only a few weeks when Hurricane Charley hit the peninsula. As a kid from Pittsburgh who'd only seen thunderstorms and blizzards, a hurricane was something otherworldly.

Despite warnings to stay indoors, we went behind our apartment complex and watched as the eye of the storm hovered overhead. We were enclosed in a bubble, where the stars twinkled above, and flashes of pink and orange and seafoam green swirled around us. Mace and I stood close together, our hands clasped, staring up at the stars. Thunder sounded muffled as if I had stuffed cotton balls in my ears. Then the bubble burst. The wind picked up and turned the raindrops into daggers. The night sky quickly turned bright from the flashes of lightening. I could no longer feel Mace's hand in mine. I looked around and couldn't find him. I leaned against the rear of the apartment building as the thunderous roars returned to full force, rattling

the windows of the buildings, and vibrating the ground beneath my feet. It was an amazing sight to see. And a foreshadow.

Shortly after Hurricane Charley, I chartered a flight back to Pittsburgh. I told Mace I wanted to get a job and work on getting my driver's license so when I did return, I'd be able to look for jobs in the city center more easily, but the truth was I needed a reset. I needed to hear my name called. I needed to interact with more than just Ben Matlock and Maury Povich. Highways surrounded our apartment complex and we were at least five miles from any shopping center. Mace was spending 10-12 hours at work every day, and without a license or friends, I was trapped in the apartment alone for hours.

And then, like it so often does, life happened.

Days after my return home, Mace called and said I needn't return. He had spent a couple of days before Hurricane Francis helping to secure and board up windows with other teachers he worked with. He told me that during the duration of the storm, they all stayed with Jo, another teacher at his school. Her family owned a large ranch where they invited others who didn't have a safe place to stay to during the storms or those who simply didn't want to ride out the storms alone.

Mace explained that he, Jo, and her family had a long talk about me and why I had left. They and Mace all agreed that I had abandoned him, showing the type of person I was—selfish. He told me he would pack my belongings and ship them to me.

So that was it. That was how we officially ended. I was hurt, yes, but not because he had the guts to do what I didn't. No, I was hurt that the opinions of others so easily swayed his opinion of me. Selfish? Did he even try to defend me? Or was their opinion confirmation for what he

already thought about me? We had known each other since high school. He had known them days yet was willing to take their word as gospel.

The following week, with some help, I bought my plane ticket to Orlando, steeling myself to pack up my life and move for the third time in six months.

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When I first entered the apartment, it was empty and eerily quiet. A faint scent of Mace's cologne lingered in the main room but disappeared almost immediately. The sun was shining through the front windows, illuminating the table where we had once eaten dinners together. The sound of the air conditioning rumbled, and a piece of white paper fluttered in the sun's rays. He left a note filled with all the sappy clichés one puts in a *Dear John* letter—*it's not you, it's me; talking to and seeing you would make things too difficult; I love you, I'm just not in love with you*. I crumpled the paper and threw it away.

I took a deep breath and looked around the apartment for the boxes he and I broke down when we first moved in. Later, as I sat in his apartment with my stomach grumbling as I ate the only food left, a pack of Hall's Vitamin C Defense drops, it struck me that Mace had left me stranded and left me to fend for myself. Lucky for me, I had a guardian angel on my side.

* * *

Knock, knock, knock. I stopped mid-pack and quickly walked to the front door. A wave of anxiousness swept over me. I held my breath as I opened the door. There he was, smiling shyly just across the threshold. Raphael.

"Hi," he said quietly.

I smiled back at him, maybe too wide.

"Hi." I stepped out of the way to let him in. "It's nice to finally meet you."

Rafi stood right in front of me. His eyes smiled, and he wrapped me in his arms.

“It is so good to finally meet you,” he said in my ear, stressing each word. “In the flesh.” We pulled apart and stared at each other.

“Ready to go?”

I nodded my head. A simple yes was all I could muster. It felt good to be in another’s presence, to see their lips move as they spoke, to see their chest move as they took in a breath. Those are just a few of the things you miss when you’ve been sentenced to your own solitary confinement.

Rafi and I sat across from each other at Bahama Breeze, the aromas of exotic fruits and spices wafting through the open-air restaurant. Even though this was our first physical meeting, you’d be hard-pressed to tell. Everything that we were online had transferred to reality. He was just as sweet and just as interesting as he was in the chatrooms. Knowing I had nothing to eat at the apartment, Rafi made sure I had enough food to take with me for a late-night snack and breakfast in the morning.

A couple of days later, our second night out, Rafi took me to the movies. I remember sitting in the darkened theatre while *After the Sunset* played on the big screen. We sat close, talking in hushed voices so those around us weren’t disturbed. He grabbed my hand and interlocked his fingers with mine. I tightened mine around his, and we sat this way for the remainder of the movie.

When the lights brightened, Rafi didn’t pull his hand away, nor did I. We walked out the Cineplex, to the parking lot and to the car. He drove me back to the apartment. He grabbed my hand to help me out of the car and we walked slowly up the two flights of stairs to the apartment door. I opened it, and we went in.

We stood silent for a moment. I offered him some water, but he declined.

“I need to get going. I have to get up early tomorrow, and still have a long drive home,” Rafi said.

I walked to the door, and when I turned around to say goodbye, Rafi was right there. He took the half step towards me, leaned his face to mine, and kissed me.

I still remember how his lips felt. Soft and firmly pressed against mine. His scent was intoxicating, and I pulled myself closer to breathe him in deeper. He had an air of familiarity. I felt safe and secure. I *trusted* him.

I wanted him to stay. I didn't want to let go. I didn't want to fall back into what had become my reality. I was tired of falling asleep to *Matlock*. I wanted to fall asleep to the sound of Raphael breathing beside me, me in his arms, knowing I was safe, believing he could heal my heart, believing nothing bad could happen to me there.

But, instead, Rafi pulled away. He kissed my forehead and said goodnight, hurrying out the door and pulling it shut behind him. I wedged myself between the front windows and the table. He walked to his car, hesitating several times, turning as if about to come back to me, and then turning back to his car. I knocked on the window as he opened his door. He waved at me and blew a kiss as he drove away. I felt exhilaration and excitement and happiness—emotions I hadn't felt in months.

The phone rang as I changed in to my pajamas. I grabbed it and laid on the couch.

“Home safe?” I asked.

“I am,” he replied. He hesitated. “Did you enjoy yourself tonight?” That wasn't the question he wanted to ask.

“I did, thank you.” I smiled. I couldn’t help it. There was an unspoken electricity between us. I felt it long before we met face to face, but that just solidified it for me. I hoped he had felt it, too. We stayed on the phone for another hour before I made him go to bed.

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I circled the apartment, organizing items I needed to pack. What I called the guilt money Mace had dropped off two weeks before to help me secure a moving truck was in the bedroom hidden in my jewelry box for safe keeping. That is, until I heard keys jingle and the front door swing open, Mace poking his head in.

He stood in front of me like he just walked out of a superhero movie, or like he was on the cover of a romance novel. What’s funny is he paused as if I were supposed to fall at his feet and beg him to take me back. What’s funnier still? I had no reaction.

The face staring back at me was unrecognizable, not the face I remembered. Something had changed within him... or within me. The shine I used loved about him had tarnished. I stared at him hard for a long time, trying to find an inkling of recollection, but he was gone forever. The Mace I had once loved no longer existed in the physical form. Only in my memories.

“Ashley!” My eyes focused on him.

“Huh?” I turned and walked into the bathroom, avoiding his eyes.

“Did you hear me? I said where’d you put the money I gave you?”

I leaned out the bathroom door and pointed to my jewelry box across the room, not exactly sure what was happening. He walked over and pulled out the folded bills.

“I’m taking Jo to Universal Studios today.”

I blacked out for a second. My mouth tried to form words but instead I stood at the bathroom door staring at him, dumbfounded. He turned his back to me.

“You have more than enough here, and she’s never been. I thought I’d take her. Like on a real first date,” he said, counting off a few hundred dollars. He pulled out his wallet and slid in the money he siphoned, returning the remainder to the jewelry box. He turned back around with a stupid maniacal grin running across his lips. Was that plastered on for my benefit, or his?

He stared at me for another second, then walked out the room. I heard the front door open and close with a slam. I could hear the keys jingling and the lock bolt. I stood at the bathroom sink, head lowered. I leaned against the wall behind me, my heart hurting. How could someone be this mean? Was he always this way and he hid it from me? Or did I choose not to see it?

I had had enough. I had reached my limit. I slid down the wall, tears cascading down my cheeks. I sat on the floor, head on my knees, shoulders heaving.

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“You’re awfully quiet,” I nudged. Rafi and I started sitting next to each other when we went out to eat. Our arms, hands, or legs were always touching.

He didn’t say anything, just smiled at me. But it wasn’t his normal smile. His eyes were a bit sad. Something was on his mind.

“What are you thinking about?” I prodded.

He shrugged his shoulders, taking a deep breath.

“It’s hard to explain.”

He struggled to find the words to speak, so I let it be. On the way back to the apartment, he turned to me as we stopped at a red light.

“About your question, you know, when you asked what I was thinking about... I’ve been listening to this song nonstop since you got here, since I first saw you,” he said shyly. “And it explains how I’ve been feeling about you, about me, about this whole situation.”

He turned on the radio and queued the CD player to the fifth track. As the R&B beat came through the speakers, he looked back to the road and pressed down on the gas pedal. His hand found mine and we both held on tight.

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Through the front windows, the sun cast yellow, orange, and red light along the pale walls and carpet. I walked from room to room, making sure I had packed up everything in the apartment that was mine. The movers had arrived five days prior. My suitcases were at the door.

I heard keys jingle. I said a silent prayer, thanking God that that would be the last time I had to hear those damn keys.

Mace walked in. He looked taken aback by how empty the room was. Without saying a word, he started walking through each room, shaking his head as he passed me.

“Wow, you really left just the couch, the bed, and the table?” He asked.

“Well, since I’m so selfish, I decided to leave you with everything that was yours and take everything that was mine.” I stood at the counter, arms crossed. I didn’t know what to do with him there. I felt uncomfortable and cornered, like a prisoner awaiting inspection by the warden.

“Such a witch,” he mumbled, shooting me a look as he came out of the guest room. My cell phone rang then. My taxi was waiting outside, ready to take me to a motel. Raphael thought it would be best for me to stay closer to him, so we’d have a bit more time to spend together before driving me to the airport the next day.

“You can have your apartment back. I’m leaving tonight,” I said, grabbing my handbag.

Mace looked stunned. What was he playing at? Did he really think I would stay? That I would try to get him back? His eyes narrowed with sadness as a knock came at the door. I opened it and let the taxi driver in.

“I’ll take them,” Mace said to the cab driver as they raced for my suitcases. He followed the driver down to the car. I stayed behind, making one last round through the rooms. I left the key on the counter and walked out.

My driver stood by the car as Mace put my bags in the trunk, and slammed it closed. He looked at me as I walked down the steps. I avoided his eyes. The driver walked to the back-passenger’s side door and opened it for me. Mace waited, hands in his pockets, watching my every move.

“You don’t have to do this, ya know?” He said. “You can stay until your plane leaves. I’ll even take you to the airport.”

“I’d rather not,” I said.

Mace waved, the sad look still on his face. “I do love you, you know?”

I had enough. I let out an exasperated sigh as I slid down on the seat. My driver closed the door and walked to the front of the car, shrugging his shoulders and smirking as he passed by Mace. He got in, put the car in gear, and drove away. My last image of Mace was his large frame growing smaller and smaller in the rearview mirror.

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Raphael found a parking space close to the airport entrance. I hurried to the check-in line. The agent printed and handed me my boarding pass. Rafi pulled me aside when we got to the security checkpoint, grabbing my hands. He stared down at them, our fingers interlocked. He looked in my eyes and pulled me close, letting go of my hands to wrap his arms around me.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me these last few weeks,” I whispered. He squeezed me tighter.

“I would do it all over again,” he said. He kissed my neck. “I wish we had more time together.”

I dug my face in his shoulder. I didn't know what to say. I was exhausted. I was scared at how much I had loved being with him. I wanted to stay there in his arms, but I wanted to get home. I was torn. My heart was breaking all over again.

“You'd better go.”

We pulled apart just enough to look into each other's eyes. Our lips met between us one last time. He pulled me closer again and squeezed me tight. I held back tears. Our bodies swayed in unison as we stood embraced. A boarding announcement was made for my flight. Reluctantly, I started pulling away.

“I'll miss you,” he whispered.

“I'll miss you, too,” I whispered back. With plane and claim tickets in hand, I pulled further away. He held on to my other hand as long as he could. He pulled me closer one last time for a hug and a kiss on the forehead, and then stepped away.

“If I don't stop, I'm not letting you get on the plane,” he said, feigning a smile.

I backed away, finally turning toward the security check point. Each step I made I turned back to see if he was still standing there. He was. I caught a fleeting glimpse of Raphael over my shoulder as I boarded the tram, the last time I would lay eyes on him.

Though we've not seen each other since, Raphael and I kept in touch off and on through the last fourteen years. We've both had relationships, but nothing for me ever compared to those three weeks we spent together.

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I didn't have the right, the text message said. It wasn't my place and I had no right to ask you, but I really wanted you to stay with me. I even had a place for you to stay until we could get a place of our own.

You never told me, I wrote back.

Because I had no right. You were vulnerable at that time and going through so much. You didn't need another heavy element added on you. You needed a friend more.

I exhaled. I thought about his eyes staring at me, his smile. I could see it as clear as if he were sitting in front of me. My phone buzzed.

What are you thinking about? He messaged.

What was I thinking about? I was thinking how, after all this time, do you tell someone you made a mistake and should have never left? That you should have stayed? How do you get back all those years lost? Is there a chance to finally be together?

How do you tell someone they could possibly be the love of your life? How do you put all that on someone after only meeting them once in person, fourteen years ago? What if we've missed our chance?

Just then, my phone rang. I took it in my hand and saw Rafi's name across the screen.

"Hi Rafi," I smiled and settled in as I heard his familiar voice say my name.