

# Real Pearls

By John DiFelice

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Holly awoke in a panic.

She had hoped this night wouldn't be like the others, but her hope vanished before she opened her eyes. She looked at her alarm clock, expecting it to read two a.m. or three, but it betrayed her with "10:02 pm" glaring at her from the face of her phone. She had been asleep for less than five minutes. She had slept a total of twenty minutes over the last two weeks.

The groans of the wide planks of her floor announced her flight. She looked around her room—the wallpaper mural of elephants at a watering hole, her poplar desk with hand-painted butterflies, the sketches of her dog she drew that her mother framed and hung—she didn't recognize any of it.

There was no time to change out of her pajamas. She jammed her feet into her sneakers, heels flattening the pull tabs as she ran out of her bedroom and then out of their cabin, trying to outrun something she couldn't name.

She heard a voice in her head.

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*Run!*

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It drowned out her mother's harried calls from the front porch.

Wild dogs chased her. Men in a car tried to kidnap her, hurt her.

But there was no car. There were no dogs. She wished there were. Anything was better than the absence of a reason.

The thoughts came fast, unstoppable, and cruel.

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*Your mother hates you.*

*Everyone hates you.*

*You will be like this for the rest of your life.*

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The moonless sky transformed their five rolling acres into a menacing landscape of hazards. She couldn't see. She couldn't breathe. She tried to run, but was tethered to the ground, frozen in a field, once familiar, that seemed vast and impassable, with mines she had laid containing thoughts of her death.

She saw her funeral, the open pine box in front of empty pews. No one came. Not even her mother. Her grave lay beyond the tree line of Bradford pears planted neatly in a row. A gravedigger lowered the box into the ground and shoveled dirt onto her. It filled her mouth and nose, covered her face and body. Her headstone bore no inscription. She would be forgotten.

She tripped on a root and rolled her foot, dropping to her knees in the wet grass. Pain, sharp and exquisite—physical pain. She welcomed it, needed it to distract her from the chaos in her head.

Somewhere, a neighbor burned leaves. She smelled it and was a child again, watching her father start the fire pit. The child was happy. She would not be that child again.

The screams came, released from somewhere deep, from the bottom of the ocean. She emptied her lungs and inhaled raggedly, struggling for breath. Her face warmed with the blood pumping to it. She tried to stop screaming but couldn't until she grabbed her ankle and squeezed it hard.

She lay on the wet grass. Her chest heaved rapidly at first, but then slowed. She closed her eyes and opened them again. Someone hovered over her, staring down. It was her mother.

Holly and her mother, Jean, didn't speak in the kitchen before school. The silence began the night Holly ran out of the cabin and twisted her ankle. It had been a week, but Holly didn't mind. There was never silence in the cabin anyway because Jean always kept the TV on. It was no longer a TV but a white noise generator. Holly read that having a TV on all the time and tuned to inane content was a form of torture used in prisons. She believed it.

Jean served Holly breakfast in a divided stainless steel tray. She had evenly dished the food into the bottom two sections and placed Holly's pills in the top three sections, three in each. She put the salt and pepper shakers six inches from the top of the tray, oriented so the edges pointed toward Holly. Jean liked them to look diamond-shaped instead of square.

Holly stared at the food as Jean cleaned the countertops with wet wipes, something she had done fifteen minutes earlier. Breakfast had been Holly's favorite meal before Jean put her on a strict diet of ancestral foods: organ meats—liver, kidneys—and fish oils, and supplements like vitamin C and D pills, magnesium glycinate, folic acid, and coenzyme Q10 for energy. Jean believed there was nothing that couldn't be cured with proper nutrition.

Jean sat across from her daughter and silently said grace. When she finished praying, she touched a necklace Holly had never seen before.

"Are those pearls?" Holly asked.

"It's so nice to hear your voice."

"You haven't been talking either."

"I was waiting for you to speak first."

Holly rolled her eyes. "So, are they pearls?"

Jean inched closer to the table. "Yes. Aren't they pretty?"

"Are they real?"

"Yes. They're lab-grown."

"That's not real."

"They're better than real. Each pearl is perfectly round and smooth."

Jean rubbed one of the pearls between her thumb and middle finger. "No imperfections."

"Perfect for you," Holly said.

Jean cut a fried egg with her fork. "Eat your breakfast, honey."

Holly picked up the salt shaker, sprinkled salt on the meat, and returned it to the table.

“You know what I’ve been thinking?” Jean asked.

“No,” Holly said.

“I was thinking that you’re turning sixteen in a week.”

“Am I?”

Jean laughed. “Did you forget your own birthday? It’s your sweet sixteen, honey.”

Holly poked at her breakfast with a fork. “That’s not a thing anymore.”

“Sixteen was a big birthday for a girl when I was young.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“It wasn’t *that* long ago.” Jean took out her phone to look at the calendar. Her thumbs hit the screen forcefully. “Your birthday is on a Tuesday. That’s OK. We can celebrate it the weekend before or after. We should have a party.”

“I don’t want a party.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t want to do anything for my birthday.”

“Sounds like someone needs cheering up. Take your pills.”

“I don’t want them.”

“Take them.”

Holly gazed absently into space. She felt anxiety build, leading to someplace bad.

“They don’t do anything,” Holly said. “You’re wasting your money.”

“If they don’t work, you haven’t been taking them.”

“You watch me take them every morning. Just like you watch me do everything else. You watch me like a hawk.”

“Don’t be difficult.”

"I'm exhausted."

"Well, sometimes I can't sleep either. It's not a big deal."

Holly's foot under the table began to shake. "Do you have any idea what I'm going through?"

"You're having some trouble sleeping. It happens to a lot of people. That's why you're going to start taking trazadone before bed."

"What's that?"

"It's a sleep aid."

"Another pill?"

"It will help."

"How do I know what that will do to me? I already feel like I'm gonna die."

"Why are you always so dramatic?" Jean pointed to the pills on Holly's plate. "These will help."

Holly grabbed the pills, acted like she was going to swallow them, and threw them across the room. "Happy?"

"Do I look happy? Maybe you shouldn't have a sweet sixteen if you're going to act like a child."

"Good! It's your stupid idea."

Jean straightened her back and threw her long hair over her shoulder. It haloed her head like a shield made of pewter.

"Do not talk to me like that." Her eyes became cold. "I have done nothing but support you your whole life. You'll never find a nice boy if you talk like that and say things like 'stupid'."

Nice boy, Holly thought. What does a nice boy matter compared to the repetitive, obsessive thoughts of death? No boy, nice or otherwise, would want to be with me.

Holly looked down at her uneaten breakfast as her shoulders fell to the floor. Jean softened.

"I'm worried about you. Why do you run out of the cabin at night? What are you running from?"

Holly raised her head, looked at Jean, and began to cry.

“Do you think maybe you’re doing this for attention?”

Jean’s question snapped Holly out of herself. She emerged angry from her cocoon and dried her eyes with the bottom of her shirt.

“Yes! That’s exactly it. Good one, Mom.”

“Can’t I ask a question?”

Holly drummed her fingers on the table, locked in one of her self-stimulating habits until she bolted upright in her chair.

“You know,” she said, “I think I do want a birthday party.”

“Really?” Jean said, delighted.

“On one condition.”

“What?”

“You have to invite Dad.”

The utterance of his name brought about a change in Jean, as if from an alchemist’s incantation. She turned to metal. Her face became gray like her hair. Her body stiffened as the magic took hold, freezing her in place, joints seized, diaphragm arrested in her chest. Holly smiled as Jean’s flesh hardened, and her eyes lay like steel, heavy in their sockets.

“Well?” Holly said.

Jean rose from the kitchen table. “I told you never to mention his name in my presence.”

“That’s what I want, and it’s my birthday.”

“You think you’re smart? You think you’re funny? Do you know what that man has done to me?”

Holly listened passively to what she called “Mom’s Greatest Hits.” Jean played them all. She recounted her father Benjamin’s evil deeds, how he cheated on her, how he verbally abused her, how he

had stripped every ounce of joy from her life. He was a degenerate, a lowlife, a pervert, and suggested that he would have sexually abused Holly had Jean not been there to stop him. Holly had heard it all before, many times.

“How could you want that man near us?” Jean folded her arms. “We haven’t seen him in three years.”

“Because of you.”

“I don’t even know if he’s still alive.”

Holly knew that Jean’s secret wish was to get a phone call from law enforcement telling her that Benjamin had been found dead.

“The man is crazy,” Jean continued, gesticulating wildly. “You have no idea. He’s insane. I protected you. I shielded you from him.”

“Then I don’t want a party.”

“You’re so ungrateful. You’re just like him.”

“That means you hate me too.”

Jean crossed the floor to her bedroom, then turned toward her daughter.

“Holly...I don’t know what to do with you anymore. You were such a happy kid; now, you’re just...weird.”

Holly felt precursors of a big panic attack: cold streaks across her chest, numb fingers, constricted lungs.

“You’re weird too,” she croaked at Jean.

Jean’s hand moved up to her necklace. “In what way?”

“That’s the thing. You’re oblivious.”

Holly stormed past her mother.

“Where are you going?” Jean asked.

“To school!”

Jean heard the front door slam shut. She ran her fingers across the pearls of the necklace. She looked at the table. Something was wrong, off-balance. Without thinking, she reached out and adjusted the salt shaker until it lined up.

It was close to ten o'clock at night, and the sleep phobia Holly acquired whispered horrible things in her ear. It told her she would never sleep again and that she would go insane, like her father. She would become a ward of the state. She saw the half moon out her bedroom window, and felt like she lived on the dark side of it.

Holly's sixteenth birthday came and went without much acknowledgment. No one wished her a happy birthday at school. Jean bought her a small chocolate cake with buttercream icing. There were two small blue candles: one for her birthday and one for good luck. Holly didn't touch it.

Shortly after falling asleep, Holly sprang from bed; Jean, awakened by the creaking of the floor, found her pacing in her room and pulling on the hair in the back of her head.

“What are you doing?” Jean yelled.

“I can't sleep! Do you understand? I don't want to live anymore!”

Jean threatened to put Holly in a mental hospital, which poured gasoline on the fire of her panic. She turned to her mother and tried to say, “You didn't want me to run out of the cabin, so I'm doing this,” but it was incomprehensible, obscured by sobs and anxiety that nearly stole her voice.

When school let out on Monday the following week, Holly began her walk home. Three teachers asked if she was OK. Holly looked at herself in the bathroom mirror and understood why they asked. She didn't recognize herself: her face, gaunt and pale, and her eyes, lifeless. Any spark in them was gone.

She heard someone yell her name as she walked out of the school parking lot. She looked in the direction of the voice and saw a man wearing an olive green flight jacket, a white T-shirt, and jeans. He stood and waved beside an ancient pickup truck with stage four rust. It was her dad.



“Daddy?”

She stopped. She hadn’t seen him in so long that she was shocked by his appearance. He looked worn out, exhausted, like a car driven without oil over mountains and valleys for thirty years. He went well with the truck.

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” he said.

“What are you doing here?”

“It’s a funny thing. I said to myself, if I do one thing in this life, I’m going to see Holly on her sixteenth birthday.”

“My birthday was last week.”

Benjamin lowered his head to think. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah, I know my own birthday.”

“Oh, well, a week late isn’t so bad.”

“Three years and a week late, actually.”

“Oh, yeah, well, we can talk about that. Can I give you a ride home?”

“I don’t think Mom will like that.”

“We’ll lie. I’ll drop you off on the street. The cabin is far from the road, she’ll never see us. Hop in.”

Holly opened the passenger door and saw a physical representation of Benjamin’s brain. The interior was layered chaos, a storage unit on wheels of things nobody would want: McDonald’s wrappers, unopened mail, coffee-stained receipts, a tennis racket, dozens of crushed Diet Coke cans, tattered, year-old newspapers from at least four states, and stacks upon stacks of books: self-help books, history books, books about war, astrology books, popular science books about black holes, and drugstore romance novels. It smelled like an ashtray.

“Find a place for your feet,” he said, smiling. “There’s nothing in there that will bite.”

As they drove toward Holly’s cabin, he asked her how her day was and then launched into

stories about himself before she could answer. He spoke rapidly, teaching a master class in pressured speech.

“The guy’s name was Jebadiah Brokeboulder! Is that not the greatest name you’ve ever heard?”

“I guess,” she said.

“I met him on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. Unlike your mother, I don’t plan much. Some people try to plan adventures, they try to plan life, but life doesn’t work that way, and if you try to plan too much, you spend your whole sorry existence worrying about details that don’t really matter.”

Details like heat, food, clothing, and your child, she thought.

“I hiked down to the bottom of the canyon on the North Kaibab Trail, sight unseen. I didn’t train, I didn’t prepare. It was the best, greatest, most tremendous experience of my life, and I’ve had some great ones.”

Benjamin pulled into a parking spot at a convenience store.

“Is this OK?” he asked. “I’d rather talk to you when I’m not driving.”

“That’s fine. So, how’d you get to the Grand Canyon? Did you fly?”

“No, I didn’t fly,” he said.

After Jean kicked him out of the house, Benjamin drove west in his sky blue Pontiac 3000. He made it to Aurelia before the water pump blew. He abandoned the car and hitchhiked across the Till Plains of Iowa and into Nebraska with its soybean fields stretching across the Great Plains for what looked like forever. In Denver, he took a much-needed shower at a YMCA and stood awestruck before the Front Range, the first Rocky Mountains that great scouts like Buffalo Bill Cody and Bob Ross encountered as they traveled west along the fortieth parallel. “Please Come to Boston” by Dave Loggins blared in his head as the narrator said how Denver ain’t his kind of town. From there, a medley of Grateful Dead songs kept a joyful vibe for him, with an addict’s yearning for a permanent high, a trapped man’s longing for the weathered asphalt of an open road, and a hobo’s dream of defecating in a

real toilet. He never had to wait long for a ride. There were always truckers and lonely strangers who needed companionship like others need air.

“Then I made it to the Canyon. You should’ve seen it, Holly. You should’ve seen it.”

Benjamin turned his head and looked at his daughter. She was crying and rocking in her seat.

“Holly, what’s wrong?”

She wiped her tears away with her fingers.

“Get something on the floor to wipe them,” he said. “There must be something clean.”

Holly laughed through her tears and looked at him.

“What’s wrong, honey?”

The tears came again and rolled down her face. “I want to die.”

“Oh. Really?” he said. “Been there.”

“Yeah?”

“Hell, yeah. Tell me what’s going on.”

Holly told him everything. She went into detail, telling him things she would never tell her mother, and he sat quietly and listened.

“I had an entire year of that in high school,” he said.

“You did?”

“Yeah. I had insomnia for five months. I was afraid to walk down the hall at school because I thought everyone was looking at me.”

Holly sighed. “That’s how I feel.”

“Oh, and guess how old I was? Sixteen.”

Holly received the message: it wasn’t a coincidence.

“What’s happening to me?” she asked. Her voice was desperate.

“Chemicals in your brain. That’s my fault. Sorry for the crappy genes. It can be triggered by

stress. That's your mother's fault." He smiled and lit up a cigarette. "Mind if I smoke?"

"Mom will smell it on me."

He threw the cigarette out the window.

"You were like that for a year?" she said.

"Yeah. I wasn't the same after that."

Holly felt her heart racing until Benjamin said, "I was stronger. Much stronger."

She felt a little better, but they had to discuss some things.

"Mom talks about you like you're Satan."

She told him about Jean's list of his evil deeds. When she was finished, his laugh exploded in the pickup cab.

"The only thing she's right about is that I cheated on her. I did. But what did she expect? She cut me off from sex for three years."

"I don't want to know."

"It's true. Plus, I have a condition that makes me very impulsive and hypersexual. That's a bad combination."

"I really don't need to know that." Holly fought the image of her father having sex, and won.

"Sorry, I have no filter either." He flashed her a grin. She smiled back as the tears ebbed.

"Holly, just so you know, I stayed away because I got it into my head that you were better off without me."

"You should've asked me."

"Maybe I should've."

He reached into the back seat and retrieved a gift bag. He handed it to Holly. "Happy birthday, sweetie."

Holly reached into the bag and pulled out a long jewelry box. She opened it to see a string of

lavender pearls. They glowed in the afternoon light with the soft luster of lilac petals. Holly had never seen anything so beautiful.

“They’re real,” he said. “Those are real pearls.”

She did not answer, too captivated by the gift.

“I bought them when I was in India.”

Holly’s eyes widened. She hadn’t known he had gone to India. She hadn’t known a lot of things.

“You know how you can tell real pearls?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Real pearls aren’t perfectly round. Each one has a slightly different shape. Things that are real aren’t perfect. Kind of like me, you know?”

Benjamin took the strand of pearls and fastened them around her neck.

“You’re beautiful, honey.”

“I’m not, Dad.”

“Yes, you are.”

She looked at him and saw the human being he was instead of the father he had never been. She saw how frail he had become but also the strength required to live as long as he had in parallel universes of sanity and madness. She felt his burden of acting a part his whole life, to pretend, simply and endlessly, to convince the world he was normal just like everybody else. For the first time, she felt his exhaustion. It matched hers.

“Thank you, Daddy,” she said.

Benjamin smiled, leaned close to her, and whispered into her ear. Although soft, the voice held the energy of the sun. She felt the intensity that once drew people to him but then repelled them and made them run from him. His voice was one of conspiracy and divine knowledge.

“I never told you this,” he said, “but when you were born, the doctor handed you to me first,

before even your mother. No one believes me, but as I held you, I saw a light come off your head. A golden light. It lit up the room, and I looked around at everyone, including your mom, lying on the table, and I could tell no one else saw it. Only me. And I heard a voice say that you were special, that God sent you to do great things.”

He vanished as she stared at him in his pickup truck. He was in the same spot, but she watched him soar into the stratosphere, maniacally laughing among the cirrus clouds in the sub-freezing cold. She could hear his voice echo off the sun and the moon and watch him ascend until he became less than a speck, an insignificant dot against the fiery background of dusk, but one whose gravity she would always feel, pulling on her and affecting her course.

“I think I might head over to China and help them sort out their government,” he said.

Holly nodded. “I think I should go. Mom will wonder where I am.”

She watched as he returned to her. His eyes sharpened with focus and he trained them on her own.

“Holly, I don’t think I have very long.”

“What do you mean?”

“My liver is shot from all the booze, and the lithium took care of my kidneys.”

She then noticed the yellow tint in the whites of his eyes, and his skin had the same yellowish hue.

“Will I see you again?” she asked.

“I don’t know, but I would like that. I’d like that a whole lot.”

Benjamin pulled out of the convenience store parking lot and drove to Holly and Jean’s cabin in silence. He parked next to the driveway’s entrance, out of view from the house. He kissed Holly on the cheek and told her that he loved her, that he had always loved her and thought about her every day.

Holly arrived home and told Jean that she had to talk to a teacher after class and that a friend’s father gave her a ride.

“How nice,” Jean said. “See? That’s what a *good* father does.”

Jean paused. Her brow furrowed as she looked at Holly’s neck. “What’s that?” she asked.

Holly touched the necklace. She had forgotten to take it off.

Jean smiled. “Is that from a boy?”

Holly hesitated long enough to make Jean lean in, then she nodded. “A nice boy.”

Jean hugged her. “I’m so happy for you. See? What did I tell you?” She reached out and touched Holly’s pearls. They had texture. She frowned slightly.

Holly ate dinner alone. Jean had fallen asleep in front of the TV, tuned to her favorite reality show. Holly went to her room and lay down, thinking about her father.

The full moon shone through Holly’s window and onto her bed. She looked at the ceiling. Something felt different. The necklace lay across her collarbones and upper chest; the fingers of her right hand touched one pearl and then another, reached as far as they could go, and then reversed, moving backwards along the strand.

She wondered if he would appear once more to tantalize her with tales of faraway places peopled with sincere yet impossible characters he’d met along the way who always sounded so familiar, so much like the father she never knew, the man who gave her life and then abandoned her for her good. She had gotten a glimpse, perhaps the last one, and then understood that a glimpse was all she’d ever had of him. Even before he went away, she’d watch as the cord would snap, and see him leave Earth’s gravity and travel to the edge of the universe, where he would learn to speak in alien tongues at the expense of never communicating with humans again.

Holly felt tired, but not exhausted as she had been. She remembered the beautiful feeling of simply being tired. She focused on it as her fingers worked their way across her necklace.

Sleep came to her room unannounced. Not like before—not like the restless waiting, the terror of closing her eyes, the gasping. It hovered over her, teasingly, before descending, pressing down, but not crushing her. She let it invade her. She took a deep breath and released it, exhaling more than she

had breathed in. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them, it was morning.