

## The Sun Hat in September

New York City, 2008. The tell-tale storm clouds lightly grazing the skyscrapers, let me know that a storm is on its way, the slow rumble of thunder tells me that I need to be on my way. As I step out of the dark black doors of my apartment, the frigid September air greets me, and intrudes its way into the small pocket of warmth I had under my coat, seeping its way into my bones. After realigning my rough, gray scarf, and tying it even tighter around my neck, I start to make my way to the office for another day of work. With each step I take on the dull, gray concrete, I can feel the storm picking up. The wind tries to steal my hat, but I hold on tight, my dark blonde hair whipping at my eyes.

As I neared the office, I could feel my determination dwindling, as if it was being sucked away with the constant barrage of wind. My grandmother passed away just a month ago, and it had really taken a toll on my work. I had been messing up numbers for weeks, and just last Monday, I forgot to tell my boss about an important managers meeting he was supposed to attend. I got a call last night that he wanted to “have a talk” with me. We all know what that means. I decided I could be a little late, seeing as I was getting fired anyway, so I took a left on Vanderbilt Avenue and turned my feet towards Burt's, and let my thoughts free.

After my grandma's passing, I found myself thinking about my life more. I had taken this job in New York for my Grandma, I hadn't even wanted to go into business, but she had raised me after my parents left me on her door step. Every morning while making breakfast she would mumble to herself about how my mom had been such a disappointment, and if only Minnie, that's what my grandma had called her, had grown up to be a business woman making a difference in the world, instead of a singer without a job. When she'd notice I was listening she would pat my cheek and say, “Don't you ever end up like your momma.” or, “You'll grow up to be successful, don't you worry.” and I'd promise her that I would be a business woman someday.

I had grown up with huge expectations of greatness on my shoulders. Since her first child had

grown up and run-off with a stranger, leaving her daughter behind, my grandma had seen it as God giving her second chance to get it right. She signed me up for sports, clubs, theater, anything that she thought would boost my chances in life. She tried to give me everything my mom hadn't had. If I got a bad grade on my report card she would shake her head, and knit a blanket or tend her garden to get her mind of the fact that I was, "turning out just like my mother." When she thought I had been sleeping one night, she talked for hours on the phone with her friend Lucille, telling her that she had known I would never amount to anything, and that she had never held out any real hope for me to become better than my mother. I had sworn to myself that night on my grandma's roof that I would be different than my mother and actually make a difference in the world. I wanted to do something in human services, but my Grandma had my whole life planned out. When I told her I had decided not to go into business she got that look in her eyes and I could see her mentally comparing me to my mother, so I told her no matter what, I would make her proud in business, it just took my whole adolescence to do it. I didn't go out at night with my friends, didn't travel, I didn't even date in high school because my grandma thought dating was what ruined my mother's chances in life.

The last technical "night out" I had was when my boss called me at 11:30 p.m. to call an emergency meeting about the stock market. I got employee of the month, because I was the only one to actually show up. I sacrificed my whole social life for that job.

The smell of freshly ground coffee woke me from my thoughts, and I realized I had walked all the way to Burt's Coffee House. As I opened the glass door to the small cafe the familiar bells on the door rang, and a smile tugged at the sides of my mouth. I stepped through the door, letting the warmth and smells envelope me.

"The usual, Burt." I said as I laid my jacket on the back of the brown, worn out chair in the corner of the even more worn out room. Burt gave me a knowing, gap-filled smile from behind the counter and started to mix my favorite drink. I plopped down in the seat and stared at the dull ceiling,

examining the cracks in the mustard yellow plaster.

“You should really change the color scheme in here Burt,” I said jokingly, “You're scaring away your customers.” I looked down from the ceiling as Burt walked over with a cinnamon bun, and the caramel mocha that I had become so fond of.

“Customers? What customers?” he said in his thick Vietnamese accent, “You're the only one!” he chuckled and patted my hand as he walked away. I watched him wandering over to the other tables, wiping them down and straightening the center pieces.

“I wouldn't be the only one if you would just change the paint!” I yelled jokingly to him across the room through a mouthful of cinnamon bun.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” he said, smiling, as he went back behind the counter and through the back doors, waving his hand back and forth as he went.

I was just finishing my cinnamon bun and washing it down with my mocha when the bells on the front door rang, and I nearly spit out my drink. Burt wasn't kidding when he said I was the only customer. The only reasons the cafe was still open was because it was so small, he leased the building above to an elderly couple, and he owned the laundromat next door.

A little old woman waddled in, the repetitive tap-tap of her cane keeping time with the clock on the wall. She slid into a dark yellow booth across the room, and laid her bright pink sun hat on the table, the fluorescent color of the hat contrasting with the dark gray day outside. Wait, a sun hat in the middle of September? She leaned her cane against the booth and started to take off her white gloves. Burt hadn't heard the bells, so the old woman sat in silence on the other side of the room, twiddling her short fingers.

I returned to my Mocha after checking the time. Yup, I was now 32 minutes late for work. Maybe I shouldn't even show up, just to not give them the satisfaction of firing me. No, even though Grandma is gone, her dream for me still lives. She only wanted what was best for me. I will go to the office and I will fight for this job.

I just started to pack up my stuff when I realized I was being watched. The elderly lady across the room had been staring at me that whole time. I gave an awkward wave and grabbed my coat, ready to get out of there.

“You seem like you have a lot on your mind.” Her small, soft voice barely making it to my ears.

“Uhh, yeah, I do.” I left the money on the table and started to put on my gloves.

“The best way to get things off your mind is to share them with others.” she said as she picked up her cane and motioned the seat across from her expectantly with it.

“I should be getting to work,” my voice muffled as I wrapped my scarf around my neck, “It was nice of you to offer though.” I gave her a quick smile and crossed the room to the door. “Thanks Burt!” I shouted, hoping he could hear me in the back. I grabbed the door handle and was ready to return to work to fight for my future as the business woman I was always meant to be, but something stopped me. “The best way to get things off your mind is to share them with others.” My grandma used to say that to me as she held me on her lap on the rocking chair whenever I looked troubled, or sad, and I would unleash all my doubts and fears to her knowing ears.

“I think I will take you up on that offer.” I took my hand off the door, and turned to smile at the woman. I slid into the booth across from her as she gave me a small, sweet smile that let out a warmth in my heart. Her hair was a shiny gray with tiny hints of blonde, and her deep blue eyes seemed young, but at the same time seemed to hold infinite amounts of wisdom. We sat there for what felt like ten minutes. I looked around, “So...” I said, trying to get the conversation underway.

“Are you ready to talk now? I was waiting for you.” she said as she smiled. She never seemed to stop smiling.

“Oh, well, um...” I had no idea where to start. Do I start at the beginning? Why would I share so much with a complete stranger? If not the beginning, then when? I finally decided to go with the first thing that came to mind, “I’m about to get fired.”

“Mhhmmm, and how does that make you feel?” her thumbs continuing to circle each other. Not

the oldest psychiatrist question in the book! Everyone knows that question doesn't work, it's just a way for psychiatrists to keep you sitting on their "confession" couch so they can charge you for the full hour, but I decided to humor the old woman.

"It makes me feel...well, I guess it makes me feel like it would anyone else." I shrugged my shoulders, taking a long sip of my mocha, letting the warm, sweet, liquid run down my throat and warm me from the inside out.

"Wrong," she said as she poked me in the rib with her cane, "You, my dear, are actually happy, you just don't know why." She smirked mischievously, like she knew by the look on my face that she was right, "You don't like your job, am I right? You lived your life for someone else, and now that they're gone, you're not sure how to live it for yourself." She finally stopped twiddling her fingers and folded her hands together in triumph. "You are finally free from expectations, you are your own person, and you are ready to stand up and do what YOU want." with the last words I felt more jabs in my ribs, but they weren't from her cane.

"How, how did...how do you know that?" I asked, searching for words.

"Oh, just a knack I have." she slid out of the bench and stood with surprising strength for a woman her age, "Goodbye and good luck." she said as she situated her hat on her head and struggled into her gloves. She grabbed her cane and headed towards the door. She opened the door and with one hand on her hat and another on the door handle, she took a step outside.

"Wait!" I called after her, "What should I do next?"

She popped her head back in the door, "How am I supposed to know? I'm just an old lady, you decide for yourself." she winked and disappeared, the swaying bells on the door the only proof that she had ever been there.

"Who was it?" Burt's gruff, accented voice came from behind the counter as he stepped through the back doors.

"I'm not quite sure." I said, feeling dazed. What had just happened?

“Well, what did they want?” he said curiously as he wiped down the unused tables yet again.

“They left before they could tell me,” I said, snapping back into focus, “I think they said something about the color scheme making them lose their appetite.” I smirked as I threw away my cup and headed for the door.

“What? Oh!” he chuckled loudly, “Maybe if you don't like it so much you should change it!” he yelled, his voice following me out into the street. I had decided what I needed to do.

It's been a week since I quit my job at the office. I had walked into my bosses office, said, “I quit.” picked up my stuff and left. I guess I'll never know if they were actually going to fire me, but after I realized I wasn't happy, I knew I wouldn't be able to stand working there another day. I spent the rest of the day at Burt's, and almost before I told him I was out of a job, he had an apron around my waist and a coffee pot in my hand. He had given me the biggest gap-filled smile I had ever seen from him and started training me right away.

I smiled at the memory as I walked towards the front door. The sun flowed through the windows filling the room with bright yellow warmth, livening the drab walls and chairs. I reached out my hand and traced the letters on the blue and white sign, the OPEN side facing me.

“I will make a difference Grandma,” I whispered to the air, “But I will do it my way.” I flipped the sign.