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Dear Tony, (I have been debating on whether to put Tony or Mr. Bellizzi, because it took me nearly eight years to call my best friends mom by her first name, so it seems very odd to call an adult by their first name. But I know that you always introduced yourself as Tony at retreats, so I hope that's alright.)

My name is Caitlin, I used to go to John S. Burke Catholic, a school you have retreats at every year. I no longer go there, but I found one of the one things I actually don't mind remembering about the school was those retreats. It might sound silly, but at my first one freshman year I was so scared it was going to be another thing that made me wish I was in a public school, and instead I found myself actually listening. I really, really hope you don't mind this email. I know it might seem like an angst filled teenager ranting at first, but I promise it has a purpose. I also have a friend that wrote to you not long ago, and honestly I wouldn't have thought of writing if she hadn't mentioned it. But it seemed to help her, and I hope it can also help me.

I grew up among a very rocky relationship with my parents, they were only nineteen when they had me, and to put it lightly my father has never been the greatest person. I didn't understand this until I was older, fortunately, but when I did I couldn't help but blame myself. Even now, nearly two (or maybe three, time has never been my strong suit) I can still hear their screams back and forth at each other and remember just how terrifying it was. I would get myself worked up, and since most of these happened when I was twelve and thirteen it affected me in ways I don't even know yet. I hope this doesn't sound entirely dramatic, I know everyone's parents fight at one point, no relationship is perfect and in this day and age divorce seems to be much more common. However, what made all these fights all the more worse was my dad was quite prone to having issues with anger management- and still does at times.

I don't want to go into much of it- as it would be a really, really long rant- but he certainly showed this while I was growing. When I was younger, I didn't understand it would be best to stay out of there fights and let them blow over. While he was yelling at my mother, I would try to interfere and ask him to stop- at points I was begging him because I hated seeing them like that. I still can't think on it without getting upset, my father would turn his yelling to me when I tried to stop it and threaten me. At one point my sister and I stayed home sick from school scared for my mother, they fought, and I sat on the stair landing begging them to stop as he threatened to throw the ladder at both myself and my mother if we didn't stop with the theatrics. That's always been something he's told me, that I'm dramatic and have an attitude problem, that I'm a horrible person, that I'm ungrateful. And it seems no matter how many friends now tell me it's not true, hearing it from my own parent has never left me.

Fights were so common, but towards the end of all this they became worse. With his anger he would bang on things, break things, often throw things. If me and my sister stepped out of line or made the mistake of saying the wrong thing, he might chase us into our room and yell in our faces. I know not all hitting is bad, but I have always felt being slapped across the face is not the way to discipline a child. Yet he would do it, he would throw things, and he still seems to not seem anything wrong with it. The breaking point for this all was when he put my mother in the hospital. It wasn't something life threatening (he had whipped her in the eye with a towel, it was swollen for days) but it was enough that she took him to court for a divorce. For reasons I still cannot understand, she never went through with it. I know she loves my father, but I can never understand how they went through so much and are still together. My father is a better person today, not perfect, but better- yet I can't seem to get over my fear of this.

After explaining all that, I will finally get to the point of this entire email, I have two actually, and I am asking for your20help. I am finding that the one thing preventing me from letting myself feel safe around my home is that I can't forgive my father, even after all these years. Sometimes I think I have, and then he does something that reminds of all the terrifying and hurtful moments he put me through. Not only myself, but my younger brother and sister. But I want to, because I know it's in the past and that people change, would you have any advice on how I might be able to go about forgiving him? Does it make sense that I'm asking that at all? If not, I apologize, I just didn't know how else to phrase.

Secondly, I am trying to become more comfortable with myself, because as of right now, after everything I watched and experienced, I hate myself. I think I caused it all, and despite again being told all this, I can't help but think it. I have been cutting myself for over a year trying to get rid of this feeling, trying to get rid of some of the pain. No matter how much good now happens, I can't seem to ever truly be happy. And the hardest thing is that I know I had it far from the worst, and it feels like I am being ungrateful for everything I now have. Thinking of it logically, at the moment I have the most amazing friends who have listened to me and been with me every step of the way, I actually took a step and moved out of my childhood home into my

grandparents in an attempt to get away from it all, and I have managed not to stop entirely hurting myself, but at least not as often. Yet it seems no matter what I try to do, or how happy I try to act, I can't be happy.

I guess my entire point of this was mostly to rant, because honestly it really felt like you listened and cared. I admit I'm scared you might laugh at me, or even tell me I'm right, that I can't be happy. Honestly, I have the biggest fear of men but for some reason I feel like this is something I should do. Because in all the truth, I want to be happy, I want to laugh, and I want to smile like I actually mean it. I suppose you could say I want to feel comfortable with myself enough that I don't feel the need to punish myself. I have always felt best when trying to help other people, or even listening to their problems and trying to help them puzzle them out, or at least feel better. I am trying to find a way to do this, but I don't know how, and I was wondering if you knew of any way I could do this? I just want to feel better about myself, and I feel I can do this by making others feel better about themselves.

One last point (as at the moment, it is about 2:30 AM. Apparently my muse doesn't know how to tell time, but the letter came to me now, so I wrote it). I actually asked a friend of mine about the retreat this year, and they mentioned something about the young girls who felt the need to kill themselves this year. As a girl who has tried herself, I want to try to shed a bit of light on that. Forgive me if it isn't my place, but I wanted to try and help you perhaps understand that. The thing is, and I'm sure you know this already, when one is feeling that low and feels the need to do that, there is nothing that can be said or done that might help them choose differently. It is a feeling of being so alone in a world that's treated you badly, wanting to scream, cry and be sick at the same time. It starts to become hard to see the future as anything but bleak, and it becomes a struggle to handle even one day at a time. I think what makes them end it is when they feel no one will understand, so why stick around to deal with that? It is absolutely horrifying to think someone that young felt so terribly, and I honestly can't understand it. It is something that no one except those who have gone through with it will ever understand, the only thing people effected by this can do is try to prevent any more from happening.

But what you do, what you say and how you act has saved countless lives already, and though those aren't any less important than others, I think the best thing to do is to focus on those you have saved and remember those you haven't. Maybe they can be an inspiration for a work, or their own tragic endings can be the beginning of a turn around for another person. But I want to thank you, especially for reading this entire rant in the first place. Honestly, in my sophomore year your words inspired me to keep on living, because they gave me hope and showed me there was something so much better if I stuck around for it. You saved my life, and I have the greatest respect for you. You get up in front of teenagers probably knowing half the time they listen with one ear and let it all go out the rest. Yet you still do it, you must have the patience of a saint, and it is the most amazing gift of all.

Thank you for your time, and have a good holidays,

Caitlin

p.s. => <- a smiley face, because I think after everything I said, something in this letter needed to smile.