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Opening extract from
We are All Made of Molecules

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Published by
Andersen Press Ltd

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First published in Great Britain in 2015 by
Andersen Press Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
London SW1V 2SA
www.andersenpress.co.uk

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978 1 78344 232 4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Limited, Bungay, Suffolk, NR35 1ED



STEWART

I have always wanted a sister.

A brother, not so much. I like symmetry, and I always felt that a sister would create the perfect quadrangle or ‘family square’, with the X chromosomes forming two sides and the Ys forming the rest.

When I bugged my parents, they would say, ‘Stewart, we already have the perfect child! How could we do any better than you?’ It was hard to argue with their logic.

Then one day, when I had just turned ten, I overheard a private conversation between them. I was in my room building my birthday present, an enormous Lego spaceship, without using instructions, because I have very good spatial abilities. My mom and dad were

downstairs, but I could hear their voices clearly through the heating vent.

‘Leonard,’ I heard my mom say, ‘Stewart might finally get his wish.’ I put down my Lego pieces and moved closer to the vent. ‘I haven’t had my period in two months. I’m chubbing up round the middle. I’m tired all the time . . .’

‘You think you’re pregnant?’ I heard my dad say.

‘I do.’

I couldn’t help myself. ‘FINALLY!’ I yelled through the vent. ‘BEST BIRTHDAY PRESENT EVER!’

The next day, Mom made an appointment with her doctor.

But it wasn’t a baby growing inside her. It was cancer. It had started in her ovaries, and by the time they caught it, it had spread.

She died a year and three months later.

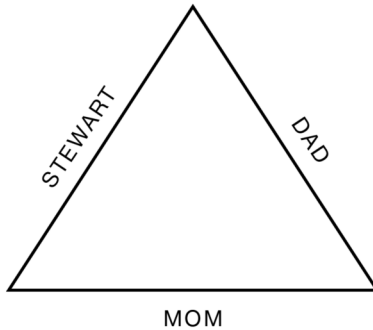
Now I’m thirteen, and I still miss her like crazy, because she was a quality human being. When I was seven, my dad and I bought her a mug for her birthday that read WORLD’S BEST MOM, and I actually believed there was only one mug like it on the planet, and that it had been made just for her.

I don’t like to talk a lot about the year she was sick. Or the year after she died. My dad is also quality and he did his best, and I like to think that I am quality and so I did my

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best, too. But it was really hard because we were missing one-third of our family.

We had been like an equilateral triangle.



Mom was the base that held up the whole structure. When we lost her, the other two sides just collapsed in on each other.

We were very, very sad. My therapist, Dr Elizabeth Moscovich, told me early on in our sessions that a part of us will always be sad, and that we will have to learn to live with it. At first I thought she wasn't a very good therapist, because if she was good she should be able to cure me. But after a while I realised that the opposite was true: she's an excellent therapist, because she tells it like it is.

Dr Elizabeth Moscovich also says that just because you feel sad sometimes, it doesn't mean you can't also be

happy, which at first might sound like a serious contradiction. But it's true. For instance, I can still be happy when Dad and I see a ball game at Nat Bailey Stadium. I can still be happy when I am kicking my best friend Alistair's butt at Stratego. And when Dad and I adopted Schrödinger the cat from the SPCA last year, I wasn't just happy; I was over the moon.

Of course, Schrödinger's not even close to a replacement for my mom. He can't have good conversations; he can't cook my favourite from-scratch chicken fingers; he can't give me back tickles or kiss my forehead at night. But he needs me, and I need him. He needs me to feed him and cuddle him and scoop his poops. I need him to talk to, even though he never talks back. And I need him to sleep by my head at night, because then I don't feel alone.

So when Dad started to date Caroline Anderson a year after Mom died, I mostly understood. Caroline is Dad's Schrödinger. He needs her and she needs him. It doesn't mean he isn't still sad sometimes, because he is. But it means he can put the sad on hold for bigger periods of time, and this is a good thing. For a long time he was Sad Dad twenty-four-seven, and I was Sad Stewart twenty-four-seven, and together we were Sad Squared, and it was just a big black hole of sadness.

Caroline and my dad have worked together in the newsroom for almost ten years. They'd always got along, but it wasn't until they were both single that they started to notice each other *in that way*. Caroline's husband left around the time my mom died. She is a *divorcée*. I'd met her a few times when Mom was still alive, at Dad's work parties. And of course I see her on TV all the time. I like her, and she likes me. Even better, she liked my mom, and I know the feeling was mutual.

But most important of all, she loves my dad. I can see it in the way she looks at him all googly-eyed, and he looks at her the same way. Sometimes it makes my stomach hurt when I think about my mom, and how, if things had been different, *she* would be getting Dad's googly-eyes, but as Dr Elizabeth Moscovich has pointed out, I can't live in the past. Caroline makes my dad happy, and this is a good thing.

Best of all, she has a daughter. Her name is Ashley, and she is one year older than me. I have only met Ashley a few times. She is very pretty, but I think she is also possibly hard of hearing, because when I try to talk to her, she either walks away or turns up the volume on the TV really loud.

Maybe she's just shy.

And now we are moving in with them. Dad and Caroline broke the news last month. Dad and I and

Schrödinger are leaving our house in North Vancouver and moving into Caroline and Ashley's house in Vancouver, on Twenty-Second between Cambie and Main. They told Ashley and me separately, so I don't know her reaction, but I am 89.9 per cent happy with the news.

'Eighty-nine point nine?' Dr Elizabeth Moscovich asked me at our final session last week. 'What about the other ten point one per cent?'

I confessed to her that that part is made up of less positive emotions. We made a list, and on the list were words like *anxiety* and *guilt*. Dr Elizabeth Moscovich told me this was perfectly normal. After all, we're leaving the house I spent my entire life in, the one Mom and Dad bought together a year before I was born. Now Dad has sold the house to a young couple with a baby, which means there is no turning back. We're bringing a lot of stuff with us, but we can't bring the mosaic stepping-stones my mom made that line the path in the back yard, or the flowers she planted, or her molecules, which I know still float through the air, because why else can I feel her presence *all the time*? It is what less scientifically minded people would call a 'vibe', and our house, even this long after her death, is still full to bursting with Mom's vibe.

I worry a little bit about that. Where will her vibe go when we are gone? Will it find its way to our new home, like those animals that walked hundreds of miles to find their owners in *The Incredible Journey*? Or will it get lost on the way?

And also I am anxious because I don't know how Ashley feels about this merger of our family and hers. I don't expect her to be 89.9 per cent excited. I just hope she's at least 65 per cent excited. I can work with 65 per cent.

This is not how I wanted my wish to come true. This is not how I would have chosen to become a quadrangle. I would far, far rather still be a triangle if it meant that my mom was alive. But since that is a scientific impossibility, I am trying to look on the bright side.

I have always wanted a sister.

And I'm about to get one.

