

Better Off

By: Nubia Terry

“You won’t ever know the answer if you don’t ask the question.” Ellen’s grandmother’s words rang in her head in unison to her alarm as she awoke. She reached out across the plush sheets for Baxter’s hand, to find it wasn’t there...just as it hadn’t been for the past two weeks and counting. She struck the alarm with force to put it on snooze and laid limply on the bed. She just needed five more minutes before she began another lonely day.

In his study, Baxter scribbled in a leather journal, sleep deprived from his endless insomnia. *“I know she feels it. The distance, our bond loosening like a worn rubber band. I don’t know how to tell her, how to talk to her at all, really. How does anyone fix their lips to utter such life shattering words? I hate myself for it, she doesn’t deserve this. Why must I be like this? I thought if I depressed the thoughts, distanced myself, something, I would be okay...I was wrong. My time is running out and I don’t know what to do.”* He sat the pen and journal down and sighed as tears ran down his face. He could hear Ellen upstairs. She had just woken Emmy up and was running her water for a bath. There was bacon popping in a pan and the toaster ticked as it browned some bread. With all that he had in him he trudged up the stairs almost as if he was in slow motion and got dressed for work.

With Emmy settled and yet another full breakfast plate of Baxter’s discarded into the trash, Ellen made a cup of coffee and turned to where she had left off in her book. “Tell me what you can’t forget and I’ll tell you who you are.” Thinking about this, Ellen dug deep into her mind to find what’s always been there. She remembered nothing of her parents, or her childhood really. Her mom and dad had died when she was just a toddler, so she stayed with her grandmother and lived a humble life that consisted of empty Christmases and caregiving. Her time just passed by, with nothing near spectacular happening until she met Baxter. Instead of devoting her life to her grandma, she had a clean-cut, polished infatuation that she would devote her life to never messing up. He was the source of any joy she experienced. Their child whom she adored dearly, the nice house she wondered around in all day, the expensive cars that sat outside, they all came from him. Without his presence in her life, she would be nothing, and the thought of him not being with her, or even worse, being with someone else made every inch of her skin crawl. He hadn’t really spoken to her in weeks and everything about their relationship was distant. As she sipped her coffee mug she realized how peculiar Baxter had become. Not sleeping in the bed, not eating any of the food she cooked, he wouldn’t even take care of Emmy! This was getting ridiculous, she had to find out what was going on. Peering at the oven clock that glowed 10:57 am, she figured he was out of his morning meeting. Maybe she could call him to take an early lunch so they could talk this out.

When Baxter’s phone rang he wasn’t in a meeting, or anywhere near the office at all. He was on the third floor of Heritage Medical, waiting for his daily treatment. When he answered the phone

to his choked up wife begging for him to come home and talk, he knew the time he had been dreading for months had come. "Honey where are you? Are you busy right now?" Baxter backed out of the waiting room into the hallway just in front of the elevator. "No I'm not in a meeting. What's wrong Ellen?" Short breaths shot through the phone as Ellen began to grow impatient. "Who are you with Baxter?" Ellen's voice sounded as if she was trapped in a steaming hot oven, rushed, raspy and desperate. "Wha- What? Is something wrong? What did you need me for?" Emmy could be heard in the background making noises as a signal for Ellen's attention. "Baxter, just come home. We need to talk." Baxter listened to his wife's directions, he assured her he would be home, and went to see his doctor.

The banging and screaming is what made Ellen run, and a toy is what made her fall. "Emmy, are you alright?" Ellen called up the stairs as she regained her composure. "Hungweeee" is the only thing Emmy said in return and her message was loud and clear. Ellen picked her up and took her to the kitchen for a snack. As she handed the toddler cereal pieces one by one, Ellen glanced at her wrist. A "J". Both of them had it on their wrist. Jamie would have been her name. She was the couple's first child, who came with many complications. Her passing brought a strong divide between the two. Ellen felt like a failure and Baxter felt like a failure for not being able to keep Ellen for seeing herself as one. For the first time since the two had met they didn't talk, and that went on for a whole week-- which was full of sorrow, guilt, anger and grievance. But they pushed forward and made everything right. The tattoos came on the 1 year anniversary of her, and that was one of the most freeing days of their lives--so when Baxter stumbled through the door and sat down his briefcase and rolled up his sleeves and the tattoo was nowhere to be seen, that made everything worse.

Ellen sat Emmy in her Bounce-N-Walk chair and gave her headphones so she couldn't hear the argument that was about to ensue. "Where's the J? Where are YOU Baxter?!" Ellen bursted into tears and huffed breath in and out, and all her sorrow and pity metamorphosed into pure anger. Baxter teetered over to the coffee machine and made himself a cup. "Really?! You're just going to ignore me? Sit down, I'll fix it." Ellen pushed past her husband as he made his way to a stool. "Ellen, we need to talk. There's something wrong and I've been trying to get help but nothings going to work at this point." As he slowly spoke Ellen diligently mixed up his coffee concoction, loudly whirring the spoon around. "I'm going to die".

Immediately the stirring stopped and Ellen spun around to see her husband's face. "What now?" Disbelief crept across her face as her husband began to tell her his truth. "Everyday I've been going to Heritage for treatment but it's not helping. I tried to distance myself so when I was gone it wouldn't hurt you as much, but I was wrong. They said it's cancer, but they caught it too late to really help me at all. Ellen, I'm sorry." Taking the mug over to him, Ellen took a deep breath and caressed his arm. "Honey, slow down. Just take a sip, just slow down." Tears trickled down her face as she watched the man gulp down the liquid. "And the tattoo, it was just too much. I...I...I couldn't bear to think that I would be the same place as Jamie, d..dead somewhere." Ellen gazed over at their child and back to Baxter, who was scratching at his throat and coughing fiercely. Softly banging on the table he pleaded, "W..Water! Water!" But instead of Ellen rushing

to the sink to fetch him some she strode across the floor, reached just beneath the sink and produced pesticides, bleach, and a great assortment of other cleaning items.

“Wha..Wha..What?” Baxter’s eyes grew large as he realized what his wife had done. Ellen smiled at him as his eyes rolled back and he let out a groan. Like she was going to believe he was sick! Yeah right! Did he take her as a fool? Did he think she was stupid? She knew he probably had found someone else, and that definitely couldn’t be the case. Grabbing Emmy’s cereal she marched across over to the little girl, just as gleeful as could be. Ellen sat down beside Emmy to continue feeding her and once again she was reminded of the famous words of her grandmother. “Better off gone, better off dead, as long as he isn’t in someone else’s bed.”