

Half Sandwich

A half of a sandwich.

I stared at it in the back of the refrigerator; then shook my head and reached in to grab it. After pulling the sandwich out I examine it: sure enough, only half. It didn't make sense. It had been a whole when I bought it the previous evening. Yet now the second half was gone and I was baffled by its disappearance. I walked to the kitchenette and proceeded to search through the sink until finding a wet butter knife under a soggy bowl of cereal. I examined the edge of the knife and saw that it indeed had bread crumbs along it.

So Jen ate my sandwich? Jen, my only roommate, had dropped by during lunch, so the only possible answer was that she had cut the sandwich and eaten the other half. I dropped the knife back in the sink and pulled a cup from the counter before returning to the fridge. When opening the fridge I pulled out my milk and unscrewed the lid only to notice that it, too, had been used. In all honesty, I didn't mind if Jen needed a little milk; but the sandwich was an entirely different matter. It was my meal.

While filling my cup with milk I tried to think of who else had access to the fridge. Occasionally, Jen's friends dropped in but it seemed unlikely they would even open the fridge. For now the only possible answers were Jen or her friends—or maybe I was losing my mind.

While enjoying the remaining half of my sandwich--heaven knows now how grateful I was for it now--I recalled the last two months with Jen as my roommate; to do something like this was completely out of character. It just didn't add up. But it had been a long day and I didn't want to deal with the drama now; I didn't want to think about it. I'd let it pass, water under the bridge, and things would go back to normal. Maybe she was just starving and it was the only thing to eat? I'd understand that, and if it was the case then

I'd be completely fine; I just wish she would have asked me, or at least apologized.

I had to admit that all this social drama and interacting with strangers was new to me. I had arrived at Ohio State University two months earlier, having enrolled during the summer after finally making the decision to attend. After graduating from high school I had been offered a scholarship with partial tuition, but it had taken some time before I decided to enroll. I was born in a little town called Circleville and had lived there all my life. It was rare that I ever ventured beyond the town; it was my home and most all I knew for the first eighteen years of my life. The population was fairly small; it was a tight-knit community where most of us went to the same church, elementary, middle and high school. I knew all of the kids my age, and most everyone of all other ages. It was a comfortable, safe place and the thought of leaving almost terrified me. But I knew there was more to the wide world beyond Circleville and despite my fears decided to accept the scholarship and enroll at Ohio State. With my Bible in hand and a prayer on my lips, we loaded my battered, oversized luggage into the bed of Dad's truck and prepared to drive the half hour to Columbus. My mother sobbed at the door and squeezed me tight, reminding me to read my Bible every day and say my prayers. She warned me about college kids and all the dangers there, and to not forget Jesus would watch over if I made the right choices. We drove away in a cloud of dust and off we went to Columbus, Dad's old pickup coughing and sputtering the entire way.

When we arrived at my dorm, Dad carried my luggage up the steps and to my room. And there he kissed me on the head and reminded me I was his little girl and all those others things about making the right choices and doing what Jesus would do. I noticed a little wetness in his eyes as he gave me one last squeeze and headed back out to his truck. I gathered my luggage next to my bed and spent the next three

hours crying into my pillow. The leap of faith hadn't been easy but in the long run I knew it was best; I couldn't be daddy's little guarded girl forever.

The next few weeks were difficult but I made it through. Once a week I drove back to Circleville with a couple of boys who were attending the university, too, so that helped. After a month of being away, I found myself growing accustomed to university life and soon lost in my studies. Because I still wasn't sure what I wanted to major in I had filled my schedule with generals, your typical maths, English, sciences and a few electives. To my surprise, the course load was easier than I had expected and I found renewed self confidence in living apart from my family and friends.

Because none of my friends from Circleville enrolled the same semester, I was assigned a roommate in the dorm. Jen was from a small town like me, but less inclined to church-behavior and Bible reading. Her parents were wealthy and paid for her tuition and most of the time I wondered if she even cared. In any event, she had been a good roommate, friendly, neat, and happy to try and include me in her circle of friends. With this in mind, I was baffled by her new sandwich-sneaking behavior and resolved to let it pass, water under the bridge, that's what Mother always said.

Finishing off the sandwich and milk, I changed into my pajamas and brushed my teeth, then plopped down onto the bed where my Bible lay. After reading a short chapter in the New Testament I fumbled through my backpack until finding the new novel I had picked up at the library. Resting my back against a pillow, I cracked the paperback just as Jen came walking through the door.

"Hi, Amy," she said before tossing her bag on her bed.

"Hi," I said, only looking up briefly from my novel. I was in my pajamas, engrossed in the first chapter, and it was Friday--and I wasn't going to let the sandwich ruin my

weekend. With that, Jen went about her business and I returned to my reading.

Despite the missing sandwich half, the rest of the weekend went relatively well. Saturday I spent some time cleaning our room and studying, then dressed and gathered my laundry before walking down to the dorm's courtyard and toward the laundry mat. In the courtyard I ran into Maggie, a girl from Circleville who had enrolled a year earlier. She was flanked by two friends from the university.

"Hi, Amy!" Maggie said, motioning for her friends to go on.

"Oh, hi!" I said from behind the basket of dirty laundry.

"Heard anything from Circleville lately? Any new gossip?"

Ah, the small town was good for that. "Yes, as a matter of fact," I replied. "Rick Stephens just got engaged to Jamie Lynn Sullivan. And Wes Tredeau won the annual pie-eating contest."

"Rick and Jamie Lynn," Maggie said with a smile. "Well, isn't that exciting news." She paused for a moment. "Are you doing anything this evening?"

I tried to invent something but an appointment with comfy pajamas and newest novel didn't sound like an appropriate answer. "Ah, no," I said. "What's going on?"

Maggie adjusted her pack on her shoulder. "My friends and I are going to a party just outside of town, if you'd like to come?"

Stepping outside my comfort zone always terrified me and everything in me wanted to say no; then I promptly reminded myself that one reason I was here was to meet new people and overcome my social fears. My emotions said 'no' but my head said 'yes!'. "Yes," I said with a short smile.

"Great," Maggie said. "Then we'll pick you up at eight."

"Great," I lied. "Thanks." And then Maggie hurried away to join her friends and I proceeded to the laundry mat, trying to decide what to wear that evening.

To make a long story short, the party was a disaster. Maggie and her friends arrived a few minutes after eight, and I crammed into the back of her old Ford Taurus, later to be sandwiched by two Juniors who didn't seem to mind sitting on top of me. The party started out okay; I met some of Maggie's friends from the university and a guy from the swim team who asked for my number; I found out a girl in my statistics class was related to some of my friends back home.

All in all, it was going well until the football team arrived with their big trucks and beer. I heard the glasses clinking as they piled out of the bed, and heard them laughing and knocking each other around, half of them already drunk. I remembered what Mother had said and Dad's warnings and knew this wasn't the right place to be. I tried to find Maggie but she was already flirting and drinking with the football team around the campfire. Her friends were scattered about and I didn't know anyone else there so I decided to make my way home. I'd recognized the roads on the way and figured it was only a fifteen minute walk. Dad wouldn't approve of me walking alone in the darkness, but I figured it was safer than hanging around the alcohol, so I headed out.

When arriving back at the dorm, I found my room empty as Jen was still out and changed into my pajamas, then picked up my novel and cuddled in the corner of my bed. This is how I wanted my evening anyway, so maybe it was all for the best. Diving in my novel, I found where I had left off and began to read.

After reading for some time I must've fallen asleep because later I woke to Jen's keys rattling at the door and the turn of the lock. Coming to my senses, I realized I was lying on my belly with my nose planted straight into the seam of my book, so I sat up and pulled at my hair and was smiling by the time Jen opened the door and walked through.

"Hey," she said briefly and smiled. "Anything exciting this evening?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," I said, pulling my legs up under me. "I went with Maggie and a few of her friends to a party outside of town."

Jen laughed and turned to look at me. "Seriously?"

I nodded. I may have been socially awkward but I felt slightly offended she was surprised to hear I'd gone out. "Why?"

"Oh, you must've left early then," Jen said, grabbing a t-shirt from her dresser.

"What happened?"

"Apparently, someone called it in and sheriff deputies broke it up," Jen said. "I guess a few of the frat boys are spending the night in jail."

Serves them right, I thought.

"I wish I'd been invited," Jen said walking into the bathroom to change. She closed the door behind her and I crawled under the covers of my bed.

After changing and brushing her teeth, she walked out of the bathroom and sat on her bed.

"Did you do anything fun?" I asked.

Jen sighed. "I planned on going out with some friends then Maria called and I spent the evening with her." She lay back looking up at the ceiling. "Apparently, her boyfriend decided to dump her today so she needed some emotional support. I brought her a chick-flick and half-gallon of Rocky Road but even that wouldn't do."

"That's too bad," I said. Maria was Jen's closest friend and often spent time in their dorm room.

"She'll be alright," Jen said turning out the lamp beside her bed. "He was a jerk anyway."

A few minutes later we were both asleep.

I awoke a few hours later to someone coughing. I sat up in my bed, as it sounded very close. Looking around, I noticed the bathroom light was on and someone was stirring about inside. Jen often got up in the evening to use the restroom so I figured it was her. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness I looked in the opposite corner of the room and saw Jen sleeping in her bed. My heart skipped a beat and I felt a strange sickness inside. Who was in the bathroom? I watched the door for a moment and could hear someone moving about. Suddenly, the bathroom faucet turned on and I heard water splashing in the sink. I froze and at first determined to stay in my bed; and then thought maybe Jen had left the water on. But I had definitely heard someone moving around and now could see a shadow moving under the door. Noticing the door slightly open, I climbed out of bed and walked slowly toward it. The faucet turned off and I paused for a moment before continuing on. Three more steps and I was at the door. I touched the knob and turned it slightly. Slowly, I pulled it back to reveal someone crouched over the sink, splashing water on their face. I recognized the long, dark brown hair and saw Maria's face in the mirror as she looked up to see me. Upon seeing me, her eyes went wide and she splashed some more water on her face before grabbing a towel and dabbing at her cheeks and eyes.

"Is everything alright?" I asked hoping words might diffuse the awkwardness.

Maria bobbed her head, placing the towel back on the rack. She sniffed and turned to face me; her eyes were red and swollen and her lip quivering.

"Jen told me what happened," I said.

Maria sat against the sink and looked down. "Jen said I could stay for the night. I guess Jason broke up with me because he's been seeing one of my roommates." She took a deep breath. "So that doesn't make for a good situation there."

"You're always welcome here," I said taking a step back. With the door open and the bathroom light pouring out into our room, I noticed she had made a bed on the couch with a blanket and pillow. Maria walked over to the couch and lay down; I returned to my bed.

"Sorry to frighten you," Maria said, turning into her pillow.

"No problem," I said. "Goodnight."

Monday morning I woke to the usual squeal of my alarm; oh, how I'd been conditioned to loathe that noise. Dragging myself out from the depths of sleep, I turned off the alarm on my cell phone and managed to roll out of bed. Stumbling to my dresser, I saw that Jen and Maria were still sleeping and remembered their classes were later that day; more than likely they'd be sleeping in. Grabbing the first clothes that found my hands, I tottered into the bathroom and showered before changing and quickly doing my hair. After loading the day's books into my backpack and buttering a piece of toast, I made my way out the door and into the hallway.

All in all, the morning went well; they usually did *after* I was out of bed. It usually took a shower to get me going so once I was fully awake I was one-hundred percent. I started the morning with Anatomy 101 and then to Renaissance Art. Between Renaissance Art and English Literature I usually stopped in the common area or cafeteria to eat lunch, but today decided to go back to the dorm. One of the other students in my dorm had seen me in the hallway earlier and said a package had arrived, so I was anxious to get back and see what it was.

The package was waiting at the front desk of the dorm's front office and instantly I knew it was my family, as it was an over-sized cardboard box decorated with Sharpie-scribbled hearts of varying sizes. Picking up the package, I hurried to my room where I dropped the box on my bed and quickly ripped it open. Inside were two cards made of construction paper--most likely from my younger siblings--and a large, freezer bag of snickerdoodles. Mother knew they were my favorites and had promised to send me some last time I visited.

Opening the bag, I pulled out a cookie and took a bite before going to the fridge and pouring a cup of milk.

While eating the snickerdoodle I rested back on my bed and let out a deep breath, thankful for a few moments of rest before my next class. Finishing the cookie, I closed up the box and slid it under my bed, and then made my way to the bathroom to freshen up before heading out. Stopping at the mirror I happened to look into the shower and noticed something strange; there was a puddle of water on the tile floor and my bottle of shampoo had been moved to the opposite shelf. It may seem strange that I'd remembered its exact location, but from the first day we arrived Jen and I used the two shelves to differentiate our hygiene products.

Pulling the curtain aside, I knelt down and examined the standing water. It would have been hours since Jen and Maria showered; plus, I knew they wouldn't have returned because Jen said they would be off campus for the rest of the day completing a project for their biology class. Would Jen have lent someone the key to stop in and take a shower? The proposition seemed too strange. I shook my head and put my shampoo bottle back in its place before leaving the bathroom and walking back to my bed. I decided I'd wait a few more days and if strange things continued to happen I'd make a point to talk to Jen and see if she knew what was going on.

After eating some leftovers from a Sunday evening mix-and-mingle with a university Christian club, I picked up my backpack and headed to class.

I was prepared to let it all pass: water under the bridge, avoid the drama and let it all go. But the odd occurrences didn't stop at the sandwich, milk or shower water. Tuesday I returned from class to find my peanut butter jar empty along with half a carton of orange juice. Wednesday it was a few carrots, more milk, and Thursday my new novel was lying on my bed with some water spilled on the open pages! When I thought it couldn't get any worse, Friday I noticed half of my snickerdoodles had disappeared. Someone--most likely Jen--had pulled the box out from under my bed, opened it, opened the zip-lock bag, and proceeded to eat most of my cookies! This thievery had gone way too far and my Christian patience had long since run out. Jesus had said something about forgiving your enemies seventy times seven times--approximately four-hundred and ninety--but if I had let that happen I'd be out of a meal budget before the end of the month. And heaven knows my father wouldn't like the idea of footing out more money to feed an ungrateful and shifty roommate.

With all this in mind, I resolved to confront Jen that evening. It would be difficult for me but it had to be done. I had to be firm and had to stick up for myself. Just because I was a nice little, small town Christian girl didn't mean someone could walk all over me and steal my food.

Throughout the day, I thought about how I would approach Jen and what I would say. I prayed for courage and mustered what little I had as I headed up the steps of the dorm and to our room. When I walked in I was surprised to see her sitting against the kitchen sink, the fridge flung wide open.

"Amy," she said; I could hear the anger in her voice. "I've had enough of this."

"What?" I said, caught completely off guard. They were the same words I had prepared to say; actually, they were the meaner version of what I wanted to say but had considered it nonetheless.

Jen turned to the fridge and pulled out a six pack of Pepsi with half of the cans missing. "If you wanted my Pepsi all you had to do was ask?"

"What?" I said, more incredulous now.

"Or my leftover pizza, Doritos, frozen burritos, SlimFast or Pecan Sandies," she growled, her face flushed with anger.

"What do you mean?" I rarely shouted, and if it was meant to be a shout she probably didn't recognize it.

Jen slammed the fridge shut. "I come home for lunch or dinner and it seems like every time something new is missing. The leftovers and everything is fine, but my Pecan Sandies! That crosses the line. I mean, if your parents aren't giving you enough money for food and you're really hungry just tell me and you can have whatever. Just don't try and sneak it. You don't think I notice when an entire slice of pepperoni goes missing?"

I searched for words but there were none. I had thought of what to say all day but found myself caught off guard; unprepared for what Jen was saying now. She sat staring at me for several seconds as I looked at my shoes, then at the ceiling. When I had nowhere else to look I responded.

"I can't believe this," I said. "When you've been the one stealing *my* food! First my ham sandwich, then the milk. Tuesday my leftovers and Friday my snickerdoodles!"

Her face dropped. "I don't even like snickerdoodles. They're so...dry."

"And I haven't drunk a Pepsi in my life!" I said back. "Carbonation kills people, doesn't it?"

What followed was several seconds of complete silence until we both made sense of what had happened.

"So you didn't eat my cookies?" Jen asked, looking into the empty bag on the counter.

"No," I said, almost laughing now. "Well what about the other things: my novel on the bed, the water in the shower?"

"What?"

"I came in for lunch the other day and there was water in the shower," I said. "Monday."

Jen thought back, her eyebrows coming together. "Maria and I didn't even shower that morning. It was the day of our biology project. I remember we slept in, so we didn't even have time to get ready. Just threw on some clothes and ran out the door."

"Well who else could get in here?" I said. "I mean, we're the only ones with keys."

Jen paused for a moment, thinking.

"We're the only ones, right?" I said, watching her ponder her shoes.

"Well..." she began. "Two weeks ago I was running late for a class and let my friend, Stephen, take the key so he could pick up a group research paper to turn in for another class. He returned it to me the next day but joked about having access to our room. I thought he was just kidding...but I've heard of students making duplicates and playing pranks and things like that..." She paused again and shook her head. "That punk, I'll bet it's been him all along."

"But everyday?" I said. "Really?"

"It's gotta be," Jen said, biting her lip. "When I find him and get that key back, I'm gonna kick his butt."

"And be sure he bakes me another batch of cookies," I said incredulously. "A prank is one thing, but this is just stupid. I'd be happy to turn him in. And shower? That's just creepy."

"I don't know," Jen said. "I'm tired now but will confront him tomorrow. We're in the same study group and I'll be seeing him then. What a jerk."

We weren't sure if we should laugh or be angry; I was definitely angry and felt a little violated. To think he had been roaming around our room, eating our food, in our bathroom--for a college girl that was sacred space! After taking inventory of all our food, we shared the remaining slices of Jen's pepperoni pizza and went to bed early.

In the middle of the night I woke again to coughing, and after opening my eyes noticed the bathroom light on. Most likely it was Jen using the restroom and I buried my head deeper into my pillow and shut my eyes. Yet something instinctive nagged at me to open my eyes and check again. I couldn't ignore it. Following this feeling, I opened my eyes and looked across the room to Jen's bed. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I saw the familiar lump which was Jen sleeping in her bed. I looked back to the bathroom and the sliver of light showing through the bottom of the door. And suddenly a terrifying thought entered my mind and flowed down to my heart; and I held my breath. A paralyzing fear took hold of my arms and legs and chest and I couldn't move. I lay frozen in bed, unable to even turn my head to check on Jen again. I was left to my thoughts now and every inner instinct told me to close my eyes, ignore the stranger, and go back to sleep. Someone had been there--and that someone was in the bathroom. A few moments later the light in the bathroom snapped off, engulfing our dorm room in complete darkness. My body went tense; rigid I lay in bed, afraid to move a single muscle. Someone moved in the darkness and I could hear the slow shuffling of feet. I held my breath, closed my eyes and felt myself crying inside until the footfalls disappeared.

When I woke the next morning Jen was already gone. She was determined to confront Stephen at their study group, and

I was anxious to hear if he had been the one in our room. If it was him, I had already told myself I was going to turn him in to campus security. That he would enter our bedroom in the middle of the night was way beyond the innocence of a practical joke. In fact, it was criminal, and I told myself I wouldn't sleep in that room another night until the culprit was taken into custody and punished for what he'd done.

I hurried out the door with an apple in hand and the freezer bag of remaining snickerdoodles in my backpack, and headed to my first class. On the way to my second morning class, I ran into Maggie who looked embarrassed to see me, but went out of her way to stop me in the hall.

"Amy, I'm so sorry about last weekend," she said, her lips tight and cheeks flushed. "I shouldn't have invited you when I knew it might turn out that way. I was proud of you for leaving early; really, that was the right thing to do. It all went bad after you left anyway."

"I heard."

"Next time I'll try and be more sensitive. I just got caught up in a guy there and forgot about you. I apologize. I hope you'll forgive me."

For some reason it had always been easy for me to forgive. "Of course," I said with a short smile. "I forgive you."

Maggie seemed relieved and smiled back. "Oh," she said as if remembering something. "I didn't realize your dad was visiting?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your dad," Maggie said. "Isn't he visiting? Before leaving this morning I looked across the courtyard and saw him in your room. Come to think of it...maybe it wasn't your dad...he was older, I assumed it was him."

A strange sickness swam through my stomach and I felt a spidery chill run along my back and down my arms. Maggie must have been surprised by my response, because I suddenly broke away, hurrying down the hall and out a pair

of double doors and along the universities main thoroughfare. Running now at full speed I must have looked like a complete idiot but I didn't care. At the final stretch to the administrative building, I passed Jen who was surprised to see me running.

"Hey, Amy," she said; I slowed for a second. "I talked to Stephen. He swears it wasn't him. And I know it wasn't because he was gone at his grandpa's funeral for a few days." I nodded and then began running again; running until I reached campus security where I burst through the doors and approached the first officer waiting at a desk.

"What's going on?" Jen asked as she came pacing along the sidewalk leading up to our dorm.

I was standing beside a squad car and police officer with clipboard in hand.

"Give us a minute," the officer said, holding out his hand to Jen.

"It's okay," I said. One arm was folded across my chest and the other was at my head. On the trunk of the squad car was a bottled water the officer had handed me before asking questions and scribbling the answers onto his clipboard. "She is my roommate."

"Ah," the officer said, turning to face her. "I guess I have some questions for you, too, then."

The officer radio squelched and he grabbed it. "We're coming down," another officer said through the radio. "Get the car ready." The officer responded by asking us to step aside and opening the back door of his car. We looked up to see the doors of our dorm opening and two campus security guards and a police officer walking down the steps with an old man between them. The hunched man's face was pointed downward and his hands were cuffed behind his back. He was wearing a tattered windbreaker and soiled jeans; his hair was long and unkempt and his grizzled face battered and old.

He shuffled along as the officers mostly pulled him down the steps and across the sidewalk to the open door of the squad car.

"Who is that?" Jen exclaimed.

"Your third roommate," the officer said, slamming the door after the old man was securely in his seat. "He's a transient we've apprehended on university grounds before. Funny thing is, he thought that was *his* room. He's been in and out of mental institutions and half-way homes most of his life."

"*He* was the one breaking into our room and taking our food?" I asked incredulously. The thought itself was frightening.

"He *broke* into your room," the officer said. "*Once*."

"What do you mean, 'once'?" I asked as the officer moved around his car and to the driver's side.

"I mean that he never left," the officer said. "Whenever you came home he would hide; whenever you were gone he came out."

I simply couldn't believe what he was saying. "Where did he hide?"

"From the trash we found," the officer paused before ducking into the car. "Most likely under your bed."

Fortunate for my physical health, Jen caught me before I hit the cement.

