

CAROLINE HYDE

# Fake Tales of San Francisco

*Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep*

I rolled over, peering through slit eyes at my raucous alarm clock. In glowing dashes read the dreaded, ungodly numbers of 7:30 AM, hazy in my half-conscious vision. I sighed and slapped the snooze button, rolling onto my back to relish my last few moments of peace. The lumpy mattress moaned in protest with my every move as I weighed the consequences of getting up at a more reasonable time. *Do I really need to get up now?* Above me, the ceiling was adorned with the half-light of dawn, orange and dim as it snuck between the slits of my blinds.

Involuntarily, the voice of my mother crept its way into my ear: *Get up, lazy bones.* I shook it away.

Class wouldn't start until 10. It would give me time to

work on my final. Stubbornly, I swung my feet over the side of the bed and planted my heels on the freezing hardwood floor, rubbing my eyes fervently before standing and shuffling over to the closet door. I traded my pajamas for a pair of denim overalls and a bright yellow t-shirt, pausing for a moment to gaze at my reflection in the mirror. Staring back at me was a disheveled freckle-faced girl, with hair the color of dead grass and piercingly dark brown eyes. Growing up I had been told I looked like the spitting image of my father, save the brown eyes and lanky composure. I had nothing to say to this; I had never met the man. I ran my fingers through my messy hair, trying to make sense of its indecisive curls and cropped waves before giving up with a resigned huff and tottering into the kitchen.

I made myself a cup of tea and entered the main living room. As I waited for the drink to cool, I held it between my hands and sat at the tiny two-person table situated in front of the bay window. Despite the space being drafty and cramped, the rent for this place had been a steal. No roommates, boring neighbors and decent view of the world outside—perfect for an art major living on the outskirts of San Francisco. My eyes swept the apartment.

A huge sheet lined the wall alongside the kitchen door to the floor, draping across several feet of hardwood. This was my work station. Above sat a mounted bookshelf where I kept my bigger paint cans and more expensive supplies. In the center of it all was my final—an empty canvas—in all its unfinished glory. Paint cans and tubes of acrylic were haphazardly thrown around the sheet, waiting ever so patiently for my steady hand to breathe new life into the blank medium.

*I need to get started.* 15 minutes had already passed. Abandoning my tea on the table, I stood up and walked over

to the huge sheet, laying the large canvas on the floor and organizing the supplies I had laid out. I grabbed the apron hanging on the door handle and wrapped it around my waist, then produced a hairband from my wrist and tied my hair back into the largest ponytail it could muster. I had a short, curly mess of a bob that was long enough to pull into a pitiful stub of a hairstyle. My mother would say I looked like an oversized preschooler, especially with the paint-smeared apron I was wearing.

My mom—good old Savannah Garver—was a bank clerk from Inverness, Illinois, who now lived in La Honda, California, a much more rural and quiet atmosphere than San Fran. She had me when she was a law student in her early 20s way back in the 80s, with a man a few years older than her. She used to tell me he had nothing going for him, except for the fact that he was the proud owner of a John Deere backhoe. Why this impressed her so much is beyond my comprehension. Did he have a great personality? Did she have a fascination with the rural life? Was it post-teenage rebellion? Nonetheless, she ran away with him, and they soon got married... quickly followed by a speedy divorce. He didn't stick around long enough to meet me, but I don't have any bitter feelings about it; Savannah and I got by just fine without him.

At the moment, however, I didn't want to think about her. My mom was the type of person who would call about the necessities—Was I eating OK? Is it safe in my neighborhood? Never once, though, did she ask me about my projects. She was interested in how I was doing, sure, but not as an artist. I felt like she was only supporting me solely for the fact that I was her blood. Was she even *proud* of me?

Almost as if on cue, my phone began to buzz. I took it out to see none other than the woman herself, her still contact

photo looking up at me with a vacant smile. I took a deep breath, staring down at the screen before hitting the 'Decline Call' button and stashing the phone back into my pocket. This wasn't the first time I hadn't answered her calls; it had started to become quite a common trend. I just didn't feel like having the same strained discussion again, making small talk about anything that drew attention away from my major. Funneling my train of thought into a more positive state of mind, I readied myself for the two long hours in front of me. But before I could even reach for my pencils and brushes, I felt the earth beneath me wobble. I stumbled onto my knees, confused by my sudden lack of balance. *Had* I been eating alright? It wasn't until I heard the shatter of my abandoned tea mug bouncing off the table that I truly realized what was happening.

Oh *hell* no.

I literally had zero time for this shit.

I watched as another dirty ceramic cup tremored closer and closer to the edge of the table. I staggered forward and tried to save the other mug, but I was too late. It smashed onto the floor, shards of it careening left and right as the whole building shook. Being distracted by this, I turned and saw to my extreme horror that the paint cans sitting on the floor had toppled over as well... all over the canvas. A string of profanities escaped my mouth as I bumbled back over to my final, grabbing it just before my only full-sized can of crimson red paint sitting on the high bookshelf tumbled to earth, splattering over my entire body. I stood there for a moment in shock, my mouth and eyes closed tightly to prevent the paint from dripping inside. Once I had wiped most of the paint away from my face, I squinted, glaring at my beautiful, horrible, ridiculously expensive, splattered mess of what *would* 've been my final. *I'm going to fail art school.* Terror

rose like bile in my throat.

*Really? Art school?* My mother's voice echoed in my mind.

I was suddenly back in La Honda, three years ago. Sunshine poured through the lacy curtains that rested against the back of the couch. I was holding an envelope out to my disgruntled mother, light glinting off the laminated window and adorning the sealed letter. In my memory of her, I imagined her hair in curlers and a cigarette poised near her mouth—but maybe all those indie films and their caricatures of tragic parents had gotten to me. She didn't even smoke.

*You'll be starving on the streets!* She took the envelope and held it to her nose, kissing her teeth as she scrutinized the bold letters that read "San Francisco Art Institute". Her dark brown eyes darted across the front of the letter—the same dark brown as mine.

*Don't you want to do something useful? Like medicine? Or accounting?*

Her arms were crossed. My mouth felt dry. I tried to speak—

*Honestly, Dana, I get it. You're talented.* My mom was rubbing the bridge of her nose as I looked at her expectantly. She wasn't wearing curlers in my daydream anymore; instead, her mousy brown hair was down and hung around her neck. She was wearing her work uniform: a dark blue blazer over an ironed button-down blouse. She wore a name badge below her collar, SAVANNAH glinting in bold black letters across the front. I could tell she was exhausted.

*I just don't think you're talented enough to survive out*

*there.*

I felt small. Meek. Her eyes had met mine. I looked away.

*Look at me, Dana.* She had set the envelope on the table now. Her voice had a hitch to it, like she knew she had said something wrong but didn't want to admit it.

A massive cracking sound materialized over my head and I jumped back to reality, suddenly comprehending the direness of the situation. My survival instincts and inner monologue were screaming at me: *Think, asshole! You've lived in California your whole life. You know how to handle earthquakes.* Slowly, I lowered myself to the floor and began to crawl toward the far corner, keeping clear of any objects that might topple over. I didn't have any time to panic. The canvas was still dragging alongside me in one hand, and as I looked behind me I noticed I had left a trail of scarlet in my wake from the red clinging to my body.

*Paint,* I reminded myself. *It's only paint.*

Once I had reached my destination, I pulled the canvas over my crouched body and made a nest within the old art projects that had already fallen to the floor. With one hand hanging onto my final and the other covering the back of my neck, I sat, waiting for the hellish frenzy to end.

I could hear more cracking above me, and I heard my windows begin to shatter from the unnatural swaying of the building. Crumbs of plaster—or what I assumed to be plaster—bounded off the top of my canvas like a trampoline. I put my head between my legs. I wanted to shrink into myself, so I could just dissipate away from time and tragedy itself.

*Are you listening to me?*

I started thinking about La Honda, not back then, but now; whether or not she was safe. Was she feeling the same earthquake? Quickly my mind darted between the present and the past, the crash of falling plaster pulling me into reality before I retreated back into my mind's eye, back to La Honda, then back to the earthquake again. I thought about all the recent missed calls, the unanswered texts from her that I never bothered to open. Would I ever be able to answer any of them again?

*Dana.*

I had wanted to vomit. My vision began to blur.

Then came a new thought; I imagined her, not as the mother I knew, but the girl that existed before my time. The bright-eyed law student from suburban Illinois, far away from home, getting her degree in San Francisco with hopeful eyes for the future. She had a dream and wanted to achieve it, and she had the smarts and drive to do so with flying colors. I imagined her with a man with freckles and straw-colored hair, laughing and enjoying her company in the driver's seat of a green backhoe. I imagined her being screamed at by an older woman with her same features—my grandmother, I presumed—for her negligence and foolish actions. She left the screen door swinging wide when she left, making tire tracks in the dirt in front of our house that would never be filled by that vehicle again. I imagined Savannah pregnant, alone, freshly divorced from a short-lived marriage and taking jobs where she could get them. After I was born my mom never went back to college, and she never left sleepy little La Honda since. But I could tell, deep down, that she had remorse.

I knew she always wanted me to do something more,

but nothing could steer me from the path I had taken; not science, not math, and certainly not a man with a backhoe. Maybe that's why she never put her foot down when I entered the middle school art fair, or didn't tear up that acceptance letter. She was begrudging, but at least she never stopped me.

Another vivid memory entered my mind. I was a child, and my mom was helping me get ready for school. She was zooming around the house, grabbing the essentials and my book bag with a piece of toast in her mouth, trying to get everything organized before the bus arrived—which had been patiently sitting outside our house for the past two minutes, the bus driver gazing forlornly at her watch. I was practically pushed out the door, but not before my mom lovingly ruffled my hair and kissed me behind the ear as she murmured, “Knock ‘em dead, kiddo.”

And then I was back in the same scene as before, the same living room, but this time she was holding me. Stroking my head.

*Shhhh*, she soothed. I had been crying. She held me to her chest, her strokes smooth and light. After a while she held me at arm's length and smiled, brushing a piece of hair away from my face. *You look so much like me.*

That was when I realized she had always cared.

I was back in San Francisco now. I looked up from my knees, my forehead bumping against the canvas. The earth had stopped moving. Shakily I rose to my feet, holding my ruined final at my side like a child holding their beloved ragdoll by the arm. The paint on my body still hadn't dried, and everything I touched was smudged with crimson. My apartment looked like a crime scene, with the trail of red streaming from one end of the room to the other; and that didn't even include the wreckage of broken plates and plaster



from the ceiling.

Without a second thought or warning, my flight response kicked in. I needed to get out of this building as soon as possible. Grabbing my keys, I sprinted toward the door and zigzagged into the hallway, following the flow of panicked traffic to the emergency exit. My head felt like air. The earthquake had been replaced with a spinning motion caught behind my eyelids. I staggered to keep my footing, stumbling into the wall and steadying myself with my stained hand as I felt my way down the corridor. The shock of the earthquake had finally caught up to me. As I slammed my hand into the exit door and my eyes were flooded with sunlight, I noticed the heaps of rubble that had fallen from the apartment complex. The overbearing sun blazed overhead, unaware of the chaos happening down here.

I suddenly understood the magnitude of the situation and realized, all at once, that due to the damage to the building, I'd have to move back in with my mother.

At that exact moment, my phone buzzed. And for the first time in ages, I answered.

“Hi, Mom.”