

# I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO I-HOP – a short story

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## THE UMBILICAL KNOT

Jacqueline's preoccupation on this day is her concern she not miss her exit. She has driven this roadway hundreds of times since she moved to Fort Worth but has missed her exit half the times she has travelled her well-worn path. Jacqueline references the approaching exchange as "my umbilical knot". It is her belief the convergence of the twenty-four lanes, all emanating from different directions, represents both her salvation and ultimate demise. Her preoccupation is not so unusual for her; however, her umbilical worry is so persistent it has caused her to both miss and make the exit at various times. Jacqueline has come to resolve that her making the exit at least fifty percent of the time means she is winning.

Jacqueline is nearing her fifth decade and views Mother's Nature's assault on her beauty her second job. Outside of her struggle with her ever persistent anxieties, Jacqueline physically is in great shape. Her physical health notwithstanding, Jacqueline's anxieties are comforted by her doctors whom she believes allow her to retain some sense of self. Her first surgery was her lips, her second was her breast – she is now contemplating doing something with her eyes.

Jacqueline's first husband left her because of her persistent worries and self-doubts; she left her second because he was not satisfied with her face or body and wanted to reshape her to his image of the ideal woman. He pressured her so much that when she finally walked out of the house she realized she never used his real name anymore - she referred to him as an abusive sick bastard. She never went back home, never wrote, called, or texted; she didn't care whether he was still alive. Jacqueline also never mentions the man's name and when pressed she has no idea

whether she is still married to him. She and her second husband lived in Midland-Odessa at the time she walked out the door with no intentions of ever going back.

Jacqueline's personality is outsized. She has worked in every job imaginable and in each she excelled. She went to school in Oklahoma City and while in college she worked as a dominatrix. When Jacqueline shares this part of her life with others she accompanies her explanation with a laugh. I have never been able to tell whether the laugh was a happy or sad laugh. "I have no college debt, and I learned I don't like the smell of rubber". She doesn't tell anyone she met her second husband while working as a dominatrix. After they married, she learned he actually wanted to dominate women, and not vice versa.

There was the job in the pension industry – she was good at numbers, but it bored her to death. She owned a bar. She owned a small restaurant. She worked as a stripper – made more money from men hidden in the shadows than she cared to remember. And there was the time she worked as an accountant. Her hips, her lips, her eyes caused her first husband, Roger, to fall in love with her the first day she walked into the firm. Roger headed the banking section. Roger never understood his bride was so uncomfortable with herself. He didn't possess her worries and actually convinced himself his protruding and rotund stomach complimented his upper torso. While Jacqueline argued with Roger as his stomach grew, his frustrations had nothing to do with her insistence he lessen is growing girt – he grew tired of trying to convince Jacqueline of her beauty.

Out of all her jobs, her current job with Neiman Marcus plays to Jacqueline's personality the best. Jacqueline applied for a job as far away from the business office as possible, she knew better. Her love of people is actually her second love; this love was met by working in sales. .

Neiman's health benefits allows to her take care of first love – herself. Her ability to sale and her first love allowed her to finance her third love - clothes.

Jacqueline is rapidly approaching her umbilical knot on this day because she was one her way back to Neiman's. She left the doctor's office ten minutes ago – not her doctor, but her passenger's doctor. Her passenger, Gwendolyn, is half her age; a shy, private women possessive of auburn hair with a spotless complexion. Gwendolyn also works at Neiman's. Jacqueline works in Women's Apparel, Gwendolyn in the restaurant.

Jacqueline is nearing her six year anniversary at Neiman's; Gwendolyn has been there a little less than four years. They both love their job and both have long grown accustomed to the vulgar display of wealth flaunted by those who visit the store. And even though the Fort Worth store does not have the panache of the original Dallas store, its customers were just as loyal, just as constant. Maybe the difference in the stores is because of the difference in the character of the two cities. Dallas, the larger city, is known around the world for its boldness in manner and conservative arrogance; the other, Fort Worth is smaller, just as conservative, but more comfortable in its historical contribution to the settlement of the West. Fort Worth imbues all - school children, inhabitants and visitors - with its reflective view of its history - *The City of Cowboys and Culture*.

Over the years Jacqueline and Gwendolyn had spoken politely to each other, but have not engaged in any meaningful conversations. This changed two weeks ago, while Jacqueline was in the restaurant on her break. Jacqueline saw a flaw in Gwendolyn's spotless complexion, "You look worried my dear, what is wrong"? Gwendolyn bowed her head as quickly as she responded, "Oh nothing".

For one who has used both her brains and beauty in surviving, Jacqueline understood the response to be a bold lie hidden under a layer of shyness. She knew not to call Gwendolyn's response a lie – to do so would cause her to withdraw deeper behind her much practiced level of avoidance. Jacqueline said nothing to her “oh nothing” response; she smiled, remained silent for mere seconds and searched Gwendolyn's soul by looking into her eyes. She had learned about the truths and lies our eyes tell when she owned a bar. Remaining silent was the other lesson she learned. Jacqueline's trampling around in her pupils and her silence caused Gwendolyn to involuntarily tell the truth, “I am worried whether I have breast cancer. I have a small lump in my right breast and I don't want to go to doctor by myself”.

While others have used a multitude of terms to describe their breast, Jacqueline refers to her breast as the twins. Over the years, she has whispered in her lover's ear, “They're identical”. In fact, her twins are as much a part of her personality and sense of self as her pride in obtaining her accounting and M.B.A. degrees. She had never had children, her breast are her children and watching this younger woman's anxieties caused her to reach for her hand and offer to take her to the doctor.

Although inches separated their physical existence as they neared the knot, their place in life was separated by much more. Prior to reaching the exchange, Jacqueline suggested as to their having time to get something to eat – “breakfast”? Gwendolyn replied in a meek refrain – “okay”. “Are you sure; if you would rather not, I'm okay either way”. In the brief moment of her attempt to watch Gwendolyn's body language, Jacqueline missed her exit.

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The coldness of the cityscape now seemed colder. The concrete wall slide passed Gwendolyn's window in slow motion and became part of her world. The cool breeze which

emitted from the car's air conditioner played against her window. Her face involuntarily leaned against the glass. The juxtaposition between manufactured air, glass, concrete, and steel all complimented Gwendolyn's reaction to Jacqueline inquiry. Her arms held each other; her legs did likewise. Jacqueline noticed all of this even before missing her exit; in the brief moment she observed Gwendolyn, she knew something was wrong.

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“Oh shoot! That's okay, I'll take the next exit, not like I haven't done this before, and we can get something to eat at the I-Hop on South University”.

“Are you okay”?

“Yes, ma'am, I'm okay. I'm okay”.

But it really wasn't okay. Although she wanted to go she didn't want to go. Gwendolyn didn't go out much. Sure she went to work, but her world was restricted to a twenty block area southeast of downtown. Even though she was born after legal segregation, she lived in undefined segregation others could never imagine.

Gwendolyn continued to shift her body in the seat. It simply was impossible to turn her face completely away from Jacqueline's sight line; Jacqueline made any such attempt impossible. She sought to reassure Jacqueline again, “Yes, ma'am. I just never been to I-Hop”. The landscape's color grew more pallid; man's air felt as if it was poking fun at Gwendolyn's lie “I'm okay lie.”

“Oh honey, that's alright, I have never been to Paris – Texas”? Jacqueline chuckled when she said Texas. Gwendolyn did likewise.

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Gwendolyn is the youngest of five children. Her oldest brother, Donald, was seventeen years her senior. She was born after his death; he was shot in the eighties when it seemed there were two or three deaths every weekend in her confined space. In her early teen years, she remembers defacing Donald's year book. Seven out of ten boys in the book were either dead or in prison. Her mother was mad at her for marking up her memories, but when her mother saw what Gwendolyn saw, she could not chastise her child. With regards to the remaining three - she didn't bother with trying to determine how many of the remaining three had been visited by mental illness, drugs, physical maladies or the loss of hope. From her view of the world, she felt her generation's plight was no different.

The second oldest child was also male. Gwendolyn was a small child when Thomas left; her parents told her he left in the early nineties. After Donald's death, Thomas just wasn't the same. He withdrew emotionally, then he quit school – he gave up on life. Gwendolyn doesn't know whether he is alive or not. Her mother told her his weapon of choice was alcohol. Two weeks after Thomas left home, her mother awoke screaming in English, Spanish and in words Gwendolyn did not understand. Her mother prayed, and cried the entire morning about the death of her second child. No one had called to tell her mother this – she knew of his demise.

Her sister, Lori left immediately after graduating from high school. She was ten when Donald was shot; and fifteen when Thomas left. Lori has never visited since she left. She never calls. When Gwendolyn last saw her, Lori was in Neiman's with some friends. Gwendolyn hid when she saw Lori; she doesn't know why she hid – she just hid.

Gwendolyn is the fourth child. She is her daddy's, Lloyd Fredericks, favorite; her mother's, Rosa Leticia Salomòn, constant worry. Her parents have been married for forty-five years. Both Lloyd and Rosa have been together so long when one has a pimple, the other gets

the same pimple a couple days later. A cold possessed by one begets a cold for the other. They have told each other the same stories so many times their children roll their eyes and giggle at the historical rhyme and rhythm born out their long-term union. They both possess a full head of black hair, although Lloyd now has one or two white hairs gracing his left temple; others would die for their natural curls.

The Fredericks are the working poor. Lloyd and Rosa work two and sometimes three jobs at time. Rosa worked in the school cafeteria for twenty years until the school board decided to out-source the cafeteria workers jobs to a large corporation. Only two of the twenty cafeteria workers were able to keep their jobs. Rosa now works as a part-time worker at Home Depot and as a helper at a nursing home. Even with both jobs, she had no benefits and makes less than she did working for the school as a head cook. Lloyd works as a self-employed junk man. He collects old refrigerators, metals of all kinds, and for as long as Gwendolyn remembers he has worked as a laborer. Both of her parents are savers – unfortunately their habit of saving extended past money and Gwendolyn long ago gave up attempting to determine the difference between the junk, which was part of her father’s work, and what was personal to Lloyd and Rosa. *“Child that is a good dress, that’s not junk.”*

Lloyd was born at a time Blacks were not accepted in the unions, and when he was finally able to get a union job, he lost out again in the eighties due to the recession. Gwendolyn often times hears him complain how it is difficult it was for Black men to get hired in the labor pools anymore, “We have been replaced by illegals” – the same as his wife once was. In context of the cultural diaspora, Rosa too is Black but identified more with her Honduran heritage than she does with the color of her skin, an enriched coffee bean.

Gwendolyn's baby brother, Raphael, is still in high school. Her mother named him after Raphael Saadiq. Rosa plays Toni! Toni! Toni!'s songs over and over and over again. Gwendolyn grew to hate the group, although when pressed she would admit loving Saadiq's voice, but she loves her Raphael more. When Gwendolyn defaced her older brother's year book she did so worrying about her Raphael; she wondered whether Raphael knew what awaited him. Even though she foresaw what awaited Raphael, somehow she ignored her isolation and what it foretold.

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## **TONI! - TONI! - TONI!**

When they took their seat, Jacqueline staked her position, “It’s my invite and it’s my bill”. When exiting the freeway Jacquelyn wondered whether the “I never been to I-Hop” meant *I’ve never been to I-Hop* or whether it simply was a statement of fact - *I just happened never to have gone to I-Hop*.

During breakfast they talked. Jacquelyn noticed Gwendolyn’s shyness hid her intelligence. Jacquelyn wondered why Gwendolyn had remained in the restaurant for so long. Gwendolyn has an associate’s degree, but has not applied for any other positions because she fears being laid off if she took a higher position. “My job as a helper/waitress is actually job security”. Jacquelyn didn’t understand any of this; she stopped counting years ago the different jobs she has worked. She has been blue collar, white collar and no collar – it didn’t make a difference to her. She loves people, challenges, and money.

Even though Gwendolyn is two generations younger than she, she reminded Jacqueline of the girls in her school who just happen to go dumb in high school. Jacquelyn never did. Jacqueline knew her mother would never understand her working as a stripper, and she never told her. She learned more secrets and made more money working as a dominatrix than she would ever care to admit to a Revenue Agent; she knew she had to quit when “sick bastard” became her most used words. She spent ten years working in accounting and at one time left the firm to work as a comptroller for one of the clients.

“Boyfriend”?

“No, ma’am”.

When Gwendolyn answered Jacqueline laughed internally. No, she did not and she was not laughing at Gwendolyn, she was laughing at herself. There was no part of her DNA ever

would consider herself a ma'am. She also laughed at Gwendolyn's reserve – there was no part of Jacqueline persona would allow her to possess an ass like Gwendolyn and not use it. *Look at her, she is gorgeous, black eyes, flawless complexion and a butt that money can't buy- that's my next surgery.* They sat and enjoyed each other's company for at least an hour. Both had taken off the morning and were not required to report to work until after lunch.

“So you have never been to I-Hop. What is your favorite restaurant”?

Gwendolyn had finished her meal and was drinking her water at the time the new question was asked of her. One arm immediately placed the water on the table and searched out the other arm; they held each other again. The companionship of air, glass, concrete and steel was no more. Gwendolyn adjusted her position in her seat and tried her best to think of a restaurant. Sure, she had gone to the fast food restaurants in her neighborhood, but she didn't know of any restaurants like this in her twenty blocks area, which contained schools, churches, and funeral homes. The first restaurant Gwendolyn ever visited was her job at Neiman's; she still remained intimidated by the people, of the building. Of course, only a few who visited the restaurant ever viewed her as a person, but Gwendolyn's internal fears, and societal status helped to enhance her invisibility. Gwendolyn never answered Jacqueline's question; she moved quietly back into her shell, said no more. She listened to the wait staff question out-loud her nationality or race. They spoke in Spanish; they didn't know her mother shared her language with her children. *Es tú Honduran también.* Jacqueline didn't ask a lot more. Jacqueline also didn't press Gwendolyn to answer. When Jacqueline had her bar she let people not answer if they wanted not to answer. When they moved to the car, she thanked her new friend for allowing her to go the doctor with her.

Gwendolyn's next doctor's appointment was scheduled in three weeks. Jacqueline has already put the new appointment in her phone and has arranged with the job to be off on the new date. "I don't care if the schedule is only made a week at a time, I'm telling you I'm going to be off on the 25<sup>th</sup> and if I have to take off without pay, sick leave, family medical leave, I'll do it. Okay, dear, talk to you later". Gwendolyn wouldn't dare talk to anyone the way Jacqueline talked to whoever was on the phone.

On the way back, Gwendolyn counted street signs, the blocks, and the number of blue houses they passed. She then categorized the numbers in her head and told herself to stop counting when all three columns reached twenty five hundred. It was a mind game she played as a child – math was never a problem for her. Gwendolyn even played her mind game when others talked to her. She could calculate with Toni! Toni! Toni! singing - *feels good* - and would normally finish at the same time Rosa exhorted how they, Toni! Toni! Toni! loved her and only her.

## IN A MOMENT OF REFLECTION

It is April and Neiman's is holding its Last Call sale. Each department has been preparing for two weeks identifying items to be part of the sale. Employees, who have had their eyes on certain items, pretend to pay attention to the management's reminder not to hide their desired purchases. Gwendolyn caught the 6:30 a.m. bus to make it to the restaurant at 8:00 a.m. The Chef asked her to come in early to help fold, stack, and prepare for the anticipated rush.

When the store opened, she thought she recognized a face, or at least one of the fashionably dressed women who entered from the east entry looked familiar. None of the women were paying attention to their surroundings; they were engrossed in their conversation – it seemed they were all talking at once. Gwendolyn only got a glimpse of them from the side; her fleeting glimpse was interrupted by a new stack of napkins and utensils awaiting her attention.

The same women entered the restaurant again about ten-thirty. Their spirits remained high; their conversation was just as intense; each continued to talk over the other. They were now encumbered with their bounty. They did not see Gwendolyn looking at them. Lori was the one in the middle. Gwendolyn's heart raced; she immediately backed out of view.

Lori possesses the same physical beauty as Gwendolyn, but her beauty is accompanied by an incredible self-centeredness, bordering on pathological. When Lori was making her exit from her family, she didn't just leave. She left laying seeds of hatred; the only person who was not driven away was Rosa. Rosa repeatedly said - "She will come back; she will come back". Gwendolyn didn't know whether her mother was praying for Lori's return or whether she knew some secret. When Lori was in her senior year, Gwendolyn was either ten or eleven. While Lori had the ability of screaming, crying, yelling on cue, Gwendolyn did not – she watched her

sister's behavior and withdrew, talked less and promised herself never to act in such a manner. Lori screamed and yelled at the top of her lungs. Gwendolyn never understood her sister's pathology. Lori, in turn, simply ignored Gwendolyn and Raphael but played Rosa against Lloyd. Gwendolyn also noticed her sister never mentioned the death of Donald or the absence of Thomas.

Rosa reflected on her daughter's behavior by praying she would get through her self-hate, "I pray for my child. I pray the self-hate does not destroy her. I pray to God she works through this by the time she turns thirty-five; if she doesn't her ugliness will turn on her and visit her in face and body". Gwendolyn has heard this speech about a thousand times. And no, Rosa was not wishing "bad" on her child, as in the evil-eye (Rosa's words were actually, *mal de ojo*), but expressing her elders' wisdom, a mother's prayer. Lloyd response was more direct, "our child is crazy".

In the brief moment of seeing her sister, Gwendolyn remembered how Lori's tears and anger tore at Lloyd and Rosa's fabric. Lori would scream for two hours and then flip the switch and go about her business like nothing ever happened; all a mystery to Gwendolyn. Lori was kind and tender to her friends, but struck her parents repeatedly with words of hate, more Lloyd, less Rosa. Gwendolyn never understood any of Lori's aberrant behavior.

As she watched from her perch, Gwendolyn possessed no memory of being a talkative child before Lori's behavior poisoned the home she knew as a small child – she was, she is not now. She had not been born when her oldest brother died, although she felt his soul still resided in the house. By the time Lori graduated and had left home, Gwendolyn was repulsed by her and was having none of her anymore – Lori never noticed this change in her little sister, her self-centered personality prevented any such understanding of what others saw or felt.

The morning sun continued its blessing of the dining room; the sun allowed Gwendolyn to see Lori still had her beauty; her complexion was also her mother's complexion. Gwendolyn had not seen her sister for ten years, and she had no desire to approach her table. *She looks like a Neiman customer.* She didn't feel hatred for her sister, nor did she feel love. As Gwendolyn observed her sister from her location, part of her wished this chance of luck visit would have occurred when Lori was celebrating her thirty-fifth birthday. Gwendolyn's repulsion was accompanied by seeing nothing but poison. She thought of her as the three-eyed monster who resided on the railroad tracks – Rosa had told her children there was a three-eye monster on the railroad tracks to keep them from exploring the tracks and all that was on the other side. Gwendolyn observed her sister for only a short time; she left her perch and moved to the rear of the restaurant. Julio smiled at her when she moved around him in the kitchen; she smiled back for the first time in four years and approached the Chef. She told the Chef she was feeling faint, and asked to take her morning break; she excused herself and went to Women's Apparel.

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When they entered Neiman's, Jacqueline knew her question had not been answered. She knew little of her new friend, but she was determined to learn more. She made it her goal to get her in a more responsible position. After they left I-Hop, Jacqueline saw her observing and counting. She too did the same thing; she wondered how many columns Gwendolyn was capable of doing at one time. Jacqueline learned later Gwendolyn excelled in college and brought this to management's attention. Her buddy in management said he would look forward to seeing Gwendolyn's application; Jacqueline smiled when he said as much and whispered her appreciation - "I hope it is not the same way you look at my ass". He smiled back. Jacqueline felt she had a chance of broadening Gwendolyn's world.

By the time they made the second doctor's appointment, Jacqueline learned "I've never been to I-Hop" meant just that – her world was limited. Gwendolyn world was confined to a twenty block area. She had never flown in a plane. She had never travelled to Dallas, and couldn't tell Jacqueline the last time she gone to downtown Fort Worth, to a movie, to dinner. Prior to getting the job at Neiman's, there was never reason for her even to go to Neiman's, even if Neiman's advertised it was giving away everything free. All of this was foreign to Jacqueline. She also learned the world outside those twenty blocks was all so foreign to Gwendolyn.

No, there is no storybook ending to our tale – Gwendolyn did submit an application for a previously unfilled position to her management; to date she has not heard a word from management with regard to her request for a transfer and promotion. Jacqueline's friend in management still looks at her ass, and every part of her body, when she approaches him. On one occasion he converted his promise to her, "if you want the position, it's yours. I may be able to find something for your friend in receiving, but it will be a lateral move". Jacqueline turned immediately when the word lateral came slowly from his mouth - in a North Texas sort of way - she said nothing, but mumbled as she turned. She had not used those words since she left her second husband.

When Jacqueline told Gwendolyn of the manager's words, she also said nothing; this time her arms did not reach for each other. Gwendolyn shared Jacqueline's information with her parents later in the evening; Lloyd began his lack of opportunity speech, he substituted the word "woman" for "man" – he, however, took out the word "illegals." Gwendolyn had heard this version of her father's frustrations before. She never did tell her parents about seeing Lori.

Gwendolyn continues to worry about Raphael and his survival; the only difference however is she now worries about her own. She is still just as shy, and just as private.

Jacqueline still remains the same outsized personality, and is still debating whether to improve her eyes. And if your inquiry mind is wondering - the twins are doing just fine. When they pulled in the I-Hop's parking lot, Gwendolyn's hands remained in her lap; her feet remained in the forward position; her arms did not bother to reassure each other. Jacqueline did not miss her exit this time.

Jacqueline smiled at Gwendolyn when exiting the vehicle; Gwendolyn reciprocated. The air seemingly moved unhindered off the North Texas plains and intermingled with its man enhanced brethren. Gwendolyn entered first and a vacuum was created by the confluence of air - – Mother Nature's servants then grabbed Gwendolyn's skirt, swishing and tightening in all the right places. Gwendolyn didn't notice the playful conspiracy of nature; Jacqueline did. She made her mind up in her brief but deep moment of reflection – *to hell with my eyes, I've got to do something with my ass.*