

# The Plan

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I have never felt more purpose than at this moment, and it is intoxicating to think I have a goal and a plan and I am driven like never before. As I cling to the handfuls of dirt like they are chunks of gold, I glance to the heavens and the rain begins to fall. I cannot stop the hearty laugh that erupts from deep inside me as I am reminded that my mom knew I would never stick to a plan, so I shout, "Go ahead, rain on my plan, nothing has changed!"

It started like any other mundane, run of the mill day and no one would ever expect it to be any different. Alarm, snooze, "Get up or you'll be late", shower, dress, breakfast, teeth, hair, change clothes, find shoes, change shoes, change clothes again, car keys, out the door. Lucky for me, my favorite shoes were safely tucked in the floorboard of the car. They feel reminiscent of an old friend as I fling the brown pumps in the backseat and slide my carefully polished toes into the soft red leather slides. A quick check confirms that red will match the otherwise non-red outfit I have chosen today. I would wear the red shoes every day and practically do, although my closet boasts over thirty pairs of heels, sandals, slides, athletics, boots and the occasional slipper. There is just something about the red slides that makes every day a perfect holiday!

Red slides firmly in place, I am now able to get started. I dig in my purse fervently for the one accessory I truly need to get going, car keys. Why did I choose such an enormous handbag, who even says handbag anymore? I am sounding more and more like my mother every day...ugh. No keys! I begin to frantically tear things out of the cosmic black hole I am carrying today. Still no keys, typical! I turn the gigantic bag upside down and dump the contents into the passenger seat. Still, no keys. Now what? I cannot be late; today I will not be late! I begin throwing things from the passenger seat into the back seat, floorboards, anywhere they can land. No keys. What now? Oh no, I remember. Alarm, snooze, "Get up or you'll be late", shower, dress, breakfast, teeth, hair, change clothes, find shoes, change shoes, change clothes again, car keys, out the door. I move my hand slowly and cautiously to the pocket of my trousers as if I am trying not to awaken a napping serpent. Who even says trousers anymore? Thanks, Mom! Ah, yes, there they are, the keys are tucked safely in my pocket where I placed them so I wouldn't be late. I have a plan. Unfortunately, God created some people who can clearly work with a plan and others who are only hindered by such trivial, ordinary things as plans. I am the latter, really too effervescent for a plan. I like that description, effervescent, it reminds me of the seltzer tablets my grandmother used to keep tucked in the medicine cabinet of her bathroom. My cousin and I would sneak them out and enjoy a glass of bubbly or two on the veranda or back porch. After all, who really says veranda anymore? Grammy never noticed our afternoons of bubbly as she had enjoyed a few glasses of her own bubbly by this time and had no need to hear from us. Anyway...the keys. Ahhh, yes, finally!

I slide the cold metal key into the switch and briefly ponder how anyone decided a cold metal object could connect to the hulking, groaning engine to make this

car run. Oh, well, only a brief contemplation as I need to get to work, and not be late! Today I will not be late. Today, I have a plan. Today I will not only have a plan, but I will utilize it to get things accomplished. Yes, Mother, I know.

As I turn the key, I timidly look at the digital display on the radio. I don't know who is groaning louder as the image of 7:15 pops into view, me or Nellie, my car. Now I will have to push Nellie to the breaking point to stay with the plan. I voice a fast apology to Nellie, put the car in reverse and back out of the driveway, carefully avoiding Sunny, the enormous pile of black fur that used to belong to Mom. Sunny is never sunny and I often wonder if Sunny is ever in motion. Sunny is always in exactly the same spot, day, night, rain, or shine. Since I moved back in the house, Sunny has had the same tortured look on her small cat face. Oh well, Sunny should be thankful I am not running over her, which I remind her as I surreptitiously back around her. "No, don't worry about moving and have a Sunny day you overgrown pile of fur!" After all, she is just a cat. Sorry Mom, but it's true! You always loved that cat, and she has always been the most ungrateful thing. At least I tried to be grateful, sometimes.

I put the car in drive and push Nellie down the road sending gravel flying. I look back to see if the pelting of tiny rocks will elicit a movement from Sunny. I am disappointed to see she is still in the same spot. What will it take for that stupid cat to realize Mom is never coming back? Sunny can wait there until doomsday and her precious mother is not ever coming back. I can now speed my way through the tiny town and onto the interstate to work. I will not be late, and not even Sunny can destroy my plan. Stupid cat anyway.

As I lurch onto the entrance ramp of the interstate and push the gas to the floor, I turn the radio on as loud as it will go. I know this will destroy my hearing, after all, my mom has been telling me this my whole life. Just like taking a suntan will cause skin cancer and calling boys will make you seem easy. Who even takes a suntan? No one talks like that, no one! Maybe I will plan a trip to the beach, and then I can listen to loud rock music, lie in the sun and bake my skin and call boys. After all, there is no one to tell me not to. Yes, that is what I will do. How do you like that, Mom? I am exhilarated at the thought, another plan! Who says I can't have a plan and use it?

I am scarcely able to contain my excitement as I drive the next 45 miles to the office. I have a plan! And I am not late! Not today! As I pull into the parking space #222, my own parking space that no one else can ever park in, I notice the clock. It is 8:03. Nellie and I again groan in harmony as I turn off the ignition. "No, not today! I Was not going to be late!" I begin cramming everything that had been spewed around the car in the search for the keys back into my purse. I have a meeting in two minutes. How could this happen? Mom, you always know exactly how to ruin everything! Oh yes, you think I don't know this is precisely what you wanted to happen so you could prove, again, that I am not good at this.

I don't have time to argue with a ghost now anyway. I have to prove you wrong! I jump out of the car and throw the door shut at the same time. I bid Nellie a snippy, "Have a nice day!" and head into the building. If I run....oh, who am I kidding? I am already late. I jog down the corridor to the office and notice the message light is already blinking furiously. You have got to be joking! I am one and a half minutes (90 seconds) late, and I already missed a call. Of course I know who it is before I even check the message; this is a regular routine for me by now. But I will listen anyway,

just to prove I am right. I lift the receiver and take a deep breath. I slowly release all of the air from my lungs in a painful sigh that seems to never end. By the time I have punched in my code, my lungs are begging for air and I feel an all too familiar burn starting. I will not breathe until I hear the voice on the other end of the line. Who even says punched for entering numbers on a telephone? Thanks again, Mom.

As the familiar tone starts, I inhale the first burst of air back into my lungs like the first slow, methodical, glorious taste of alcohol for the addict. The euphoria is unexplainable! As I sink into the large leather chair with all its dignity, I hear her voice, just like every other morning. "Hello, Honey. I know you're not there yet because you are running late, as usual. I just wanted to tell you to have a good day. I will talk to you later. Love, Mom." I push myself deep into the crevices of the leather chair and breathe, just breathe. That's what I remember them telling me that day, "Just breathe. You will be fine." How could it have happened? It wasn't supposed to happen the way it did. I had a plan that included normal stuff like college, job, husband, kids, trips, and retirement. None of it was supposed to happen without her. This proves once again that it is her fault that I cannot have a plan and use it; she always messes it up. As I am sinking deeper into my reverie, I methodically press eight to save the message yet again; we will play this game once more tomorrow, Mom! After all, it's been this way my whole life. Just because she is gone, doesn't mean I am ready to lose her voice, her essence. So I will save the message every day, as I have since she died. I will relive her mothering every morning until I am ready to erase the message she left that final morning. No one, no not even you, Mother, can take this morning ritual away from me. So she will be there waiting for me every morning to remind me who I am. I am ready to hang up the receiver. What am I hanging up, nothing! No one says hanging up the phone, no one! I am ready to return the receiver to its proper place when I hear an unfamiliar voice. "Hello?" It is the automated voice announcing a second message. This never happens! I press one to hear the new message. The calm, velvet voice I heard even before I was born flows across the line into my consciousness. It is my dad. "Hi, Honey, it's Dad. I want to remind you to be at the church early so Reverend Johnson can go over some things with us before the funeral. I will see you soon, please, don't be late."