A Journey to Happiness

“What do you mean we lost all of the money? How could we lose all the money?” The sound of Katrina’s dad’s voice echoed off the walls of the medium-sized, blue tiled kitchen. Katrina’s mother paced in front of him, looking over at her young daughter every few seconds to see her reaction. It was half past twelve o’clock on a Friday evening, Katrina’s sixth birthday. The party guest had gone home hours ago, not long after the folks from FDIC, or the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. had come to crash the party. All of the hired clowns, bands, fortune tellers and magicians complained about it, but left when they realized they weren’t getting paid. Katrina sat at the kitchen table dressed in a custom made, red princess dress with a crown made with real crystals and worth at least 200 dollars. Her wide, brown eyes went from her frantic mother to her pissed off dad, only partly understanding what was going on.

Mrs. Franklin came to sit in the seat next to her, finally tiring of her pacing. She smoothed back her daughter’s curly, brown hair and then took her daughter’s hands into hers. “Everything will be just fine. How about you go up and get ready for bed, it’s past midnight,” her mother suggested. Katrina nodded and hopped down from her seat. Mrs. Franklin affectionately kissed the top of her daughter’s forehead. Katrina ran off towards
the living room, but instead of going up the staircase next to her, she hid behind the adjoining wall.

In the kitchen, Mr. Franklin had gotten off the phone and had now slammed it on the counter. Mrs. Franklin rushed over to him and tried to grab hold of his hands to no avail.

“What did they say? What is going to happen to us, Marcus,” Katrina could hear her mother say. Mr. Franklin rubbed the back of his head. “They said we can figure out how to get the money back or shut down, either way, we might be losing our income.” They stared at each other in silence for a few minutes. “I have to go into the office,” Mr. Franklin eventually said.

Mrs. Franklin’s dark blue eyes widened. “It’s past midnight. Can’t it wait until tomorrow,” she asked. Mr. Franklin took hold of his wife’s hands and kissed the both of them. “I have to see if there is anything I can do to get that money back and save our expenses. I’ll only be gone for a couple of hours.” With that, Mr. Franklin placed a kiss on his wife’s lips and then rushed out through the kitchen door and towards his luxury car.

Mrs. Franklin weakly fell back into a leather-bound seat. Katrina ran back in and tugged at her mother’s Gucci brand, leather pants. Mrs. Franklin took her hands away from her face and looked down at her. “Will we be okay,” Katrina asked in that childish innocence kids have at that age. Mrs. Franklin reached down and scooped Katrina into her
lap. “Everything will be just fine. Daddy just has to go take care of things.” Katrina rested her head on her mother’s shoulder as Mrs. Franklin ran her hands through her hair.

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“You said you’d take care of us, what happened to that promise!” Mrs. Franklin yelled as Mr. Franklin gathered his thing and headed for the door. Katrina cowered in the kitchen, silently spooning cereal in her mouth.

The fifth argument her parents had had in the last 2 or 3 days. Each getting worse with every word they spewed at each other. It had been eight years since that fateful day that the family bank had closed. Her father spent most of the first few years trying to get the money back. Going to several powerful friends and begging them to help to no avail.

Now, it seemed as if her father had basically given up. “I said that years ago, i couldn’t do it then what makes you think i can do it now,” her father had yelled.

“So what, you’re just going to leave us? Is that how little we mean to you? Is that your big plan?” Katrina choked on her cereal as she could hear the desperation in her mother’s voice.

She looked up at the clock. It was almost time for school. Katrina rinsed her bowl in the sink, but refused to leave the comfort of the kitchen for the battlefield of the living room.
“I told you, this was the best thing I can do for you. If we are ever going to get our money back, I can’t be worried about you guys, This is for the best.” Katrina looked around the wall to the front door. Her dad opened the door and walked out with what she saw were suitcases.

Her mother followed her out, angrily yelling at him as she tried to get him to turn around. Katrina finally moved into the living room and picked up her bag. Mrs. Franklin walked back through the door, her face unreadable.

Katrina took a tentative step towards her mother. Mrs. Franklin retreated. “You should...um...get to school...I’ll see you when you get back. The school bus should almost be here.”

“I can’t believe he just left like that. He left us,” Katrina said partially whispering. Mrs. Franklin finally looked up from the floor to address her. “I said go to school, we can talk about this later. Right now, just focus on you.”

Katrina hesitated before finally going out the front door. Tears began forming in her eyes. She wiped her eyes, trying to remind herself that everything was going to be fine. She and her mom would be fine without her dad...for however long he was planning to be away.

He wa coming back...wasn’t he, she thought. He had to come back. He wouldn’t just leave his family behind. But what if that was exactly what he was planning on doing all
along. He planned to leave when things got hard. Katrina pushed those thoughts aside, intent on thinking something less depressing.

The bus stop was at the end of the subdivision, only a couple feet away from where she lived. She walked the distance thinking about something she could have control over.

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Dozens of moving trucks littered the streets. Men sweaty from the afternoon sun and dressed in plain overalls, carried large items out of the house located on 4902 Roland Avenue. Katrina swerved her way through the crowd that was trucks. She ran through the front door of her four story house and discarded her bag at the base of the stairs. “Mom? Dad? I’m home,” she called out.

She moved towards the left of the staircase and into the main kitchen area. Her mother was seated at the mahogany kitchen table, cordless phone to ear. “Okay thank you for calling. No that won’t be necessary. Bye.”

Mrs. Franklin sat the phone down on the table and buried her head into her hands. There was no signs of her father. Katrina sat opposite of her mother. “Mom, what’s going on? Where is dad? Why are all these people taking our things,” she asked.

Her mother looked up at her in a daze. “You’re father has done some very bad things and is paying the price,” was all she said.
“What do you mean paying the price? I thought you say dad had taken care of everything. You said, after the banks had gone bankrupt, dad had found a way to keep our money. What went wrong,” Katrina pleaded. Mrs. Franklin took hold of her daughter’s hands and did her best to look her in the eye.

“Your father was convicted of fraud. These people are here to collect any possession that was paid for using fraudulent credit cards and checks,” Mrs. Franklin answered.

Katrina slowly let go of her mother’s hands and sat back, shocked. Her father. The one who always seemed like a person that would do the right thing. He cheated people out of money? That was so unlike him. “What happens to us,” she whispered.

Mrs. Franklin sat back in her seat, her head towards the ceiling. “I found an apartment near Lexington Market in Baltimore with the little money your father left us. We will live there until we can get on our feet again.”

They sat there in silence, neither one of them knowing what to say. As they sat there, the lights of the house slowly started to go out. Someone had cut the electricity off. “Go pack a duffel bag and meet me back down here in five. I think they’re telling us it’s time to leave,” Mrs. Franklin ordered. Katrina slowly rose from her seat and exited the kitchen area.

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A dingy, grey building stood out in front of Katrina. The bricks covered in mold and the door rusting. This was her reality now. Out in front, a few yards away, a group of guys stood around in a circle exchanging unseen items; must have been a drug deal. Katrina clutched the only purse she had been allowed to keep during the move from Roland Park to Lexington Market. This was her second month here and she still hesitated every time she wanted to enter into the building. She looked to the left of her. A guy, about five foot six and covered in grime walked towards her, heading straight for her.

From what she could tell from the distance, he looked like he was high, or wanting money to get drugs. Katrina sucked in air and then rushed into the comfort of the building, unsure of this man’s intention.

The inside of the apartment building mirrored that of the outside. The front desk, where the clerk was now napping with their head against the computer keys, was cracked and broken, possibly worn down from years of usage. The paint on the walls around her were peeling. The floors looked like they hadn't been cleaned in a few years, with black gunk coming out of the grout that held them in.

Katrina walked past the front desk and to the only staircase in the entire building. She made her way up six flights of stairs before arriving at the landing. Katrina took out her key and opened the door to her apartment. The lights were on. Katrina discarded her bag
on the coat rack next to the door and walked into the living room. The TV was on. There were empty bottles laying everywhere around the couch. Katrina picked one up and read what it said, *Corona*. She sighed. Her mother had definitely been home. This was the fifth time she had come home to the couch being covered in beer bottles.

It wasn’t as if her mother had a problem; she could function easily without alcohol, she thought. It was just the strain of her job and providing for Katrina that had put her mother over the edge. Once they were all settled in a comfortable lifestyle, her mother promised her that she wouldn’t drink as much.

Katrina discarded of the bottle and then moved over into the kitchen. She found her mother sitting at the kitchen table, holding a piece of paper in her hand. Mrs. Franklin picked up the bottle of *Corona* sitting next to her and took a sip.

“What are you doing home in the middle of the afternoon?” Katrina asked. Mrs. Franklin jumped, startled. She turned to face her daughter. “They let me go home early... by a couple of hours,” was all she said.

Katrina stood in the doorway, unsure of what she wanted to do. “They’ve never done that before. Why today?”
Mrs. Franklin looked at Katrina, those beautiful, brown eyes staring at her. She knew whatever she did, she couldn’t lie to Katrina. That was the one thing she promised herself she wouldn’t do. “I quit,” she finally said.

Katrina’s eyes widened. “You quit? But you need that job, Mom! What could have possibly persuaded you to quit?” Mrs. Franklin turned back to her drink and took a long gulp. Katrina could tell her mother was holding something back. She wouldn’t have just quit like that, especially when she knew they were overdue on their rent for the month.

“It’s nothing, they accused me of being drunk while at work, which I was. I got to them before they got to me,” her mother answered.

Katrina crossed the kitchen until she reached where her mother had been sitting, and rested her hands on her hips. “So, you were fired.” Mrs. Franklin refused to look her in the eye. Katrina could smell the booze on her mother, the months of booze that she would have to force her mother to wash off.

“This is the only job you actually went out and got in the last month, how are we supposed to pay-,” she stopped mid sentence, her mother no longer listening to her. Mrs. Franklin stared at the letter in her hands.
“What is that?” Katrina asked. Mrs. Franklin snickered and then set the letter back onto the table. “Proof that your father royally screwed us over,” was all she said. Katrina picked up the letter. Her eyes scanned it, it was a note from their local bank.

“They are threatening to close our account by the end of the month because of unpaid bills,” Katrina struggled to say. Mrs. Franklin went back to her beer, downing the rest of it. Frustrated, Katrina snatched the bottle away from her and slammed it on the ground. Pieces of glass went flying everywhere; the mess she was going to have to clean up later. Mrs. Franklin’s eyes widened.

“I’ll tell you like I told the people at the bank, I will pay them when I get the money, not sooner and not later.” Katherine took a seat next to her mother, exhausted from the same old argument. “And how are you expecting to do that when you don’t have a job? I keep telling you, I can pick up a job after school, take some of this weight off you.”

Katrina reached for her mother’s hands and held them, comforting her. Mrs. Franklin vigorously shook her head. “No, you need to focus on school and the rest of high school. I can take care of it...I’ll get a job."

Katrina wanted to believe her mother, she really did. She could see in her mother’s eyes that there was a determination to provide for her. “I can focus on school and work at
the same time. You need help, especially if you are going to continue drinking like you’ve been.”

Mrs. Franklin looked around her. The sink was overflowing with dishes because she was too busy drinking to put them up. She smelled like she had been bathed in alcohol. This could not be her life.

“I’ll lay off the alcohol for good this time. I’ll do better, I promise.” Katrina squeezed her mother’s hands. “I know you will.”

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“Ms. Franklin, please pay attention. These people have been here for over an hour,” yells Katrina’s boss. Katrina jerked her head up to find people dressed in torn jeans and tops, with broken sandals and mud on their faces. “I am so sorry,” she said as she quickly ladled soup into a young woman’s bowl. “Next time you do that, I am going to have to let you go,” her boss announced.

She watched as person after person came up to her for their daily rations. She couldn’t help wondering what had happened to all these people to make them so dependent on a soup kitchen for food. A young girl of about six placed her bowl on the counter in front of her. Her hair was a faded color of red, with spots of mud clung to it. She had wide, piercing green eyes full of innocence. Somehow, Katrina couldn’t help seeing herself in this young girl. Was this what she would have become if her mother hadn’t been
able to find a job? Did these people know what her father had done to several different people? Were some of these people victims of her father’s actions?

“I am so sorry,” she whispered to the young girl as she handed her back her bowl of soup. The young girl walked away from her, smiling.

“It’s sad isn’t it,” came a charmingly male voice from behind her. Katrina dropped her ladle and turned to the source of the sound. It was a guy about her age that was dressed in khakis and a polo. “To think these people are living on the streets with their young children, unable to properly care for them,” he continued.

Katrina played with the bottom of the t-shirt she had purchased from Goodwill.

“Yea. What happened to these people to get them to this stage in their lives,” she asked.

The guy shrugged. “Some of them are victims of circumstance. Some lost their jobs and were unable to pay for their housing. Some have a mental problem that makes it hard for them to find jobs and they end up on the streets. Some of them suffer from addiction.”

“Why doesn’t someone step up and help them? They could go and find that one person to let them into their lives and get them out of their misery,” Katrina asked.

The guy chuckled. “Most people wish that would happen. Life doesn’t work like that. That’s why there are organizations dedicated to helping these people, not that they can
help them all. But they can try. You should check out the one I work for if you want to
continue this line of work.”

He passes her a card with the words “StandUp For Kids” written in bold letters at
the top. “We dedicate our lives to helping homeless kids get a better start at life. At the
bottom of the card is our website, check it out.” Katrina continued to stare down at the
card, twirling it over in between her fingers.

“Thank you. What’s your name? Just for the purpose of telling them who
recommended me to them,” she asked.

The guy stuck out his hand. “Adam Scott.”

Katrina took a hold of his hand and shook it. “Katrina Franklin, it’s very nice to meet
you,” she said. Adam smirked before releasing her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you too. I
was wondering if you wanted to get a bite with me after your shift? Just as a
welcoming...lunch.”

Was he asking her out in front of all these people. She couldn’t help thinking. She
guessed it couldn’t be so bad. It would definitely keep her from having to go home and find
her mom possibly passed out on the couch...for the fifth time this month.

“Yeah, sure, I can do lunch,” she said, nonchalantly. Adam’s eyes lit up at the idea.
“Great, it’s a date.” Before Katrina had had a chance to respond, he had walked to the other
side of the serving station. Katrina, somewhat disheveled, turned back to the long line of
people in front of her.
Katrina sat in a bench at the back of the local cafe, playing with the spoon in her tea, letting it go cold. Across from her sat the guy from the soup kitchen; the one who just wouldn’t leave her alone.

“So, what is your name again,” she asked. He took a gulp of his diet Pepsi, which appeared to be his favorite beverage, if five refills in the last 10 minutes was any indication.

“Adam Scott,” was all he said. Katrina nodded, avoiding eye contact.

Why did he invite her to lunch if he wasn’t even going to say anything? Was this all a ruse? Did he know what had happened to her family that made her want to volunteer at a soup kitchen? Well, not really want...more like strongly encouraged.

“So, what’s your story.” The question knocked Katrina out of her daydreaming and back into reality. Adam was now staring at her with those green eyes of his.

“Isn’t that too personal for a first date? Usually people want to know what the other person’s hobbies are, making sure they are compatible,” she answered eventually.

Adam leaned closer to her, his arms now almost touching her’s. “Everyone has a story, whether they like it or not. Anyone can make up a hobby, but their life story is the center of the person.”
Katrina slowly sat back, uneasiness starting to set in. Not that she had been on any dates prior to this, but this was the most unusual way to “get to know” a person. “My story? It’s not that interesting. But I am curious about yours.”

Adam nodded, finishing off the last of his soda. “I’m the oldest of five, I have two younger siblings, two half siblings and one younger sibling my parents adopted a while ago. My mom and stepdad have been raising us since I can remember, I don’t really know what happened to my dad, my mom doesn’t really talk about it.”

Katrina finally took a sip of her lukewarm tea. “So what got you interested in doing volunteer work at the kitchen? You sure don’t seem like the rest of us who are there to just get service hours.” Adam shrugged.

“My parents used to tell me and my siblings that God gave us life to serve others. When I was younger, they would take me with them to different volunteer projects to show us that we could give back. I guess I sort of carried that into…teenagehood.”

So, he was *that* kind of person. Her parents had always mentioned religion and church, but they hadn’t put much of a stress on it. After her father had went to jail, people would tell her that if she needed someone to talk to, she should seek out a priest. She never took them up on that offer. And now, she was sitting here with a man that seemed to be dead set on his religion. This would never work.
“So, you’re religious? You know, I never would have pegged you for the guy that put faith before anything else,” she said.

“It’s not that I put it before everything else, it’s just that I do take the idea of giving back serious. My whole family does. So, we’ve talked about me, I want to know about you, I’m sure your story is a lot more interesting than you think.”

Katrina took another sip of her tea to get her thoughts in order. The whole thing with her father and the investment and taxes fraud and everything that came about this, that wasn’t something a person shares on the first date. An alcoholic mother, or at least a “recovering” one, still that didn’t seem like something a person wanted to share.

“I’m the only child, my parents didn’t really want a big family and never got around to making another,” she decided to say.

Adam’s right eyebrow rose. At this angle, Katrina couldn’t help but think of how attractive he was...for someone who seemingly had a better life than her’s. “Truly, that’s all I’ve got. Nothing spectacular has happened to me.”

“I doubt that’s true. What about your parents? What are they like? What led you to find volunteer work at a soup kitchen? Out of everything you could have picked?”
She hadn’t really thought about that before. Her advisors had given her plenty of ideas for volunteer work that she could have done. And yet she still chose the last one on the list. She had told them it was because it was closer to her home, but was that true?

“My mom is an alcoholic, attempting at recovery, I never met my dad. And I chose it because I thought it would be an easy job, I didn’t know I would have to make connections with people,” she chose to say.

Adam passed his empty cup to a passing waiter, asking for a refill, before returning his attention to their conversation. “Wow, that must suck. If you ever need help with getting your mom treatment, I can connect you with my mom, she’s a therapist, she can find a good program for her,” he offered.

Katrina scoffed. Of course, he thought he could help with something like this. As if she couldn’t handle it herself. That was so like a person like that. “No, she’s fine. I’m taking care of it. As soon as she finds a job, she said she’ll get better.”

Before Adam could respond, Katrina’s phone started to buzz. “I’m so sorry,” she said as she dug around for her phone. The caller ID read “Mom”. She decided to let it go to voicemail. It was probably just her mom reminding her to empty the dishwasher when she got back home.
“So, do you usually ask out the people that you work with? Or is this a new thing,” she asked, trying to stir the conversation away from personal life.

“Not really, most of them aren’t really my type,” Adam responded. Katrina’s eyes widened. What exactly was his type and why did she fit the bill out of everyone that came in? She had to ask that as if she wasn’t fully panicking. What was the best way?

“So, why chose me? It was my second day at the job and I was horrible.” Adam placed his straw into another full cup of diet Pepsi. “I don’t know, you fascinate me I guess. Most people come into the center just trying to get it over with. You... take it to another level.”

Katrina practically spit out her tea when he suggested that she wasn’t just trying to get the job over with. “What do you mean?”

Adam shrugged. “I saw you when you were talking to that little girl from the lunch line. She wouldn’t talk to anyone else...but she talked to you. You guys connected like no one had ever been able to before. It was impressive.”

Katrina had never really thought about that. She was just talking to the little girl because she had looked lonely, in need of a friend. Her phone rang again. This time, it was her mom’s job. “I’m sorry, I have to take this,” she said as she proceeded to walk away from the table.
A few minutes later, she had come back to the table but didn’t sit down. "That was my mom’s new job, they found her asleep in the closet. I have to go pick her up. I’m so sorry I have to cut it short,” she said apologetically as she gathered her belongings.

Adam rose from his seat to attempt to help. “It’s fine, do you need some help wrangling your mom,” he asked. Katrina slipped her purse over her shoulder. “No, I’ve gotten pretty good at this point. Thanks for the lunch, see you soon.” With that, she pecked Adam’s cheek before running off towards the exit.

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“Can you tell us why we should consider you for a volunteer position in the Peace Corps, Ms. Franklin," a guy in a navy blue suit and sitting behind a mahogany desk asked.

Katrina swiveled in the couch she had been sitting in for the past hour, her skirt slightly riding up. Wear the skirt, her mother had told her. It would be nice, she said. It might’ve been nice had the skirt actually fit her like it did four years ago.

She looked to the side of the office where there was only a small bookcase. Mostly about obscure subjects like subjects on cliches or popular songs. The man in front of her cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to the interview. “I’m sorry, what was the question again?”
The interviewer looked down at his notepad and scribbled something down. “Why should we consider you for a job,” he asked again.

Katrina cleared her throat. “Over these past couple of years, I’ve seen what living in poverty or without parents present can do to a kid. The kid becomes broken, they start to think that they aren’t worthy of ever being thought of as anything but a kid that comes from a broken home—”

The interviewer interrupts her. “I assume you have been through something like that before then?”

Katrina nodded. “When I was around 15 or 16, my father was sent to prison for cashing fraudulent claims or checks. A few months after, my mother developed a drinking habit. She started to care more about booze than where her next job could be. Long story short, I want to be able to help these poor kids.”

The interviewer jotted something else down on his notepad. “What did you study in school? I see you went to 2 years at the community college and then...University of Maryland.”

“I majored in Psychology with a minor in Family Studies. If I get hired, I would have the ability to be a therapist for those who need help getting on their feet. I want to help,” she pleaded.
This was her last chance to do some good in this world, before being bogged down by a nine to four job. Maybe these people would actually listen to her, unlike her mother, who had developed a much worse drug problem since she went away to school.

“Last question: is there anything in your life at this moment that would make you want to back out of a two year commitment like this one?”

Katrina guessed he would ask something like that. The night before, Adam had drilled her on the types of questions that might be asked during the interview. This one he said was the top priority. “I have a boyfriend, Adam Scott, that I’ve been seeing for about 4 or 5 years and a drug addicted-alcoholic mother that needs me,” she answered honestly.

The guy lowered his notepad and pen. “Are you sure you want to leave those people behind for a whole two years? A lot can change during that time.”

Katrina nodded. “I’ve already discussed it with Adam and my mother. Adam turned in an application to do volunteer work for the Peace Corps as well. We’re hoping that if we get picked, we will be placed in the same location. And, my mother, we looked into some homes she could go to that cater to helping her kick the addiction. That way she won’t be alone and have all the help she needs.”
The guy closed up his notebook and stood as if to leave. Katrina stood up with him, a sweat beginning to break. Was he about to tell her that she didn’t get the position? What would she do if that happened? There wasn’t really a back up plan.

“Well, from what I can see here, your resume does look very impressive. I’ll have to talk this over with the others. We’ll give you our final decision in a few weeks,” he said.

“Oh, well, thank you so much for seeing me today. It meant that world,” she said nervously as she shook the older gentleman’s hand. With that, she strutted out of the office, making sure not to twist an ankle in her new heels.

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It was time. She had to go. There was no other reason to stay. Katrina stood on the bottom step, looking up at her future with uncertainty. In front of her stood a metal death trap, with wings expanded like a bird and a metal exterior filled to the brim with leather bound seats fit for three. This was the device that was going to take her to the next step of her life. She turned around one last time. Her mother stood not five feet away, dressed in an ugly reindeer sweater over light-washed jeans, dabbing her eyes with a Kleenex. This was the last time she would ever see her in this state for another two to three years.

Standing next to her mother was a tall young man with closely cropped brown hair, wearing a plaid shirt over white washed jeans and wearing chucks. Adam’s smirk forever
resting on his face. Even though this might not be the last time she sees him, she will always
miss the way he makes everything feel like it’s going to be okay.

A women dressed in a flight attendant outfit tapped her on the shoulder. “Ma’am we
are taking off soon, can you please take your seat,” she asked. Katrina nodded. This was her
time. She turned as if to get on the plane, but, at the last minute, she races back down off the
plane and ran straight into the arms of her mother.

“I love you so much and I really hope you do make it out of this addiction. You are
strong and you can do it. I’ll miss you,” she whispered to her mom. She let go of her mom,
tears now staining her cheeks. Her mother pushed her hair back behind her ear. “I’ll miss
you too. Now go make a difference,” her mother said.

Katrina wiped away her tears and then moved onto Adam. She wrapped her arms
around him. “I will see you in a couple of weeks or months. I will miss you until then,
though,” she said into his chest. Adam kissed the top of her head before letting go. “I’ll miss
you too but we will pick this up when I actually get there. It’ll be fine.”

With that, Katrina raced back onto the steps of the plane. She turned around one last
time and waved. Then she finally ascended the stairs as the door of the plane came to a
close. The next step of her journey was just beginning.