

1



Molly and I sit outside the principal's office, my eyes staring at my hands in my lap like a defendant awaiting a verdict. Molly's pudgy legs stick off the plastic seat, her pink Crocs bouncing up and down in rhythm with the beat of the class singing in the auditorium beside the office.

The rubber of the soles are too short for her feet, her heels extending a quarter inch beyond the edges. She needs new shoes. *Why haven't I bought her new shoes?* Suddenly embarrassed, I want her to stop bouncing her legs and drawing attention to the evidence of my maternal failing. My eyes shoot to the school secretary. Mercifully, the woman types on her computer, completely oblivious to Molly's too-small shoes and my parental incompetence.

The door on the other side of the room opens, and Tom walks through, his eyes on the ground as he shuffles shamefully forward. The school counselor walks two feet

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behind, her face turned up haughtily. She's the one who called an hour ago to tell me Tom had gone missing after lunch, which in turn sent the entire campus into lockdown. Half an hour later he was found in an empty classroom, sitting on the floor reading, entirely unaware of the commotion he had caused.

I pull Tom to me, and he buries his face against my hip. Smoothing his honey hair, I open my mouth to make excuses, but already the counselor has turned and is walking back toward the door.

I lift Tom's face so he is looking at me, his blue eyes so sorry that it makes my heart hurt. "Darn cat," I say, our secret code for the anxiety that wraps around his vocal chords like a serpent whenever he's confronted with a new or difficult social situation, an expression coined from the saying, *Cat got your tongue?*

He nods and again buries his face against my jeans, his desire to disappear so palpable that I wish I were a magician and could make the wish come true, zap him onto the couch at home and put a mug of steaming hot cocoa in his hands.

The social anxiety disorder Tom suffers from is called Selective Mutism, an insipid label suggesting he chooses to be silent. Which is ridiculous. No eight-year old would choose to be a freak other kids make fun of, an outcast unable to voice his opinions or defend himself when he is called stupid, crazy, or a scaredy cat. Tom is none of those

things, and he certainly doesn't choose to be silent so he can be thought of that way. It should be called something more like verbal abandonment, his voice literally deserting him as soon as he steps from our van as if his tongue has been cut from his throat, his ability to speak ripped away, and no matter how desperately he wants to, he is suddenly, inexplicably rendered mute and unable to utter a word.

"Mrs. Martin?"

I turn to see the school secretary beside us.

"Dr. Keller will see you now."

"Tom, take Molly and wait for me in the van," I say, dropping a kiss on his head and handing him my keys.

Like a prisoner being released from a stockade, I feel his sigh of relief as he takes Molly by the hand and leads her toward freedom.

"I get to choose the music," Molly says, immune to the worry around her.

I follow the secretary to the principal's office and am surprised when I walk in and find another woman already seated in one of the two chairs across from Dr. Keller's desk.

The woman stands, and I need to crane my neck to greet her. Tall as a man and thin as Gandhi, it's amazing she can stay upright on her two spindly legs, her height exaggerated by the two-inch pumps she wears, which are perfectly matched to her navy suit.

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I give her extended hand a weak shake, feeling short and disheveled in my t-shirt, jeans, and worn-out Jack Purcells.

“Elizabeth Glenn,” she says as if it explains her presence.

I look at Dr. Keller in confusion.

“Ms. Glenn is from Children and Family Services,” the principal explains.

My heart thumps in my chest then leaps into my throat, where it lodges behind my tonsils, making it impossible for me to respond.

“I called her because we are concerned about Tom.”

“Where is Tom?” Ms. Glenn interrupts, looking around me as if I might be concealing him.

“I sent him to wait in the car,” I manage. “With my daughter.”

“Your older daughter?”

“No, my younger one.”

Ms. Glenn opens the manila folder in her hand and scans it. “Your daughter Molly?”

I nod.

“Your four-year old?”

I nod again, causing the woman’s eyes to bulge. “You sent your eight-year old with your four-year old to the car by themselves?”

Heat rises in my face, and the pounding in my chest intensifies until it ricochets like cannon fire in my ears.

Dr. Keller stands from behind her desk and brushes past me. “Candice, please go to the parking lot and bring Tom and his sister back into the office. Then please keep an eye on them until we’re finished.”

I want to defend myself. The van is parked right outside, in the spot beside the sidewalk. The windows are open; the school is not a dangerous place. Tom and Molly will be more comfortable in the van listening to the radio than sitting in the office doing nothing, with Tom staring at the door aware that we are discussing him. His problems stem from social anxiety associated with the school, and he’s phobic about attention being focused on him. I was being a *good* mom.

Of course I say none of these things. The thoughts remain in my head as most of my thoughts do, where I bury them behind the regret that comes from not speaking up when I should. It’s not difficult to trace the roots of Tom’s shyness. Though I don’t have an anxiety disorder, I certainly have anxiety, and at the slightest provocation, my tongue grows thick, and at the first sign of conflict, my brain shuts down. And at this moment, I am suffering an acute attack of both afflictions, my pride buried deep beneath my cowardice.

Dr. Keller returns to her seat, and Ms. Glenn smoothes her skirt, both women puffing with superiority.

“Faye, please sit,” Dr. Keller says.

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I don't want to sit. I want to flee. Already I've failed whatever test I needed to pass in order to avoid Family Services infiltrating my life, and I desperately want to avoid whatever repercussions are to follow. I feel like I've been ambushed. The counselor led me to believe I was in for the same lecture I've been given the last three times I was called in to discuss Tom's issues—*Tom is not improving as much as we would like...His issues cannot be ignored...Have you been taking him to therapy as we suggested?...blah, blah, blah. You need to do this, you need to do that...This is all your fault.*

Dr. Keller sighs through her nose, and I manage to stagger into the remaining chair.

"First, I want to say, we're on your side."

Deadly beginning.

"All of us have Tom's best interests in mind."

"May I ask where Mr. Martin is?" Ms. Glenn interrupts again with the annoying habit she has of stopping the flow of conversation to look for missing members of my family. "I had hoped both of you would be here. This is important."

As if I don't know this is important. My son doesn't talk, and he locked himself in a room so he wouldn't have to go chorus where he would be asked to sing out loud.

"Faye?" Dr. Keller says, making me realize I haven't responded.

"He's on the road," I answer in the voice I call my waitressing voice because it's the voice I use when I work.

The voice is strangely flat and staccato, but it's the only voice I can manage when I'm stressed. Sean thinks it's sexy because it's low and sultry; the kids think it's weird, which it is. "He's a truck driver."

This is almost the truth except for the omission about Sean leaving five months ago for a one-week trip and not returning since.

Ms. Glenn frowns, her mouth tight and her nose pinched. "Mrs. Martin, Tom needs help, professional help."

Professional help that costs \$120 an hour, and that he needs to go to three times a week to be effective.

I look back at my hands in my lap, my heart pounding with guilt and defeat as I mumble, "I'll get him into therapy." It's a promise I've made from this very spot three times before, and it sounds false even to my own ears.

And Ms. Glenn's response is so quick that I know her answer would have been the same regardless of what I said. "While I'm sure your intentions are sincere, it's my job to ensure Tom's welfare. So unfortunately, at this point, we're going to need more than your word. I've opened a case file, and from this point on, I will personally be monitoring the situation. Dr. Keller will keep me apprised of Tom's progress in school, and I'll need to visit your home to get a better understanding of his life outside the classroom."

"That's not necessary," I blurt, my voice spilling out with my panic. "Selective mutism isn't caused by abuse or neglect. It's like stuttering; it can happen to anyone. Tom's

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problem has nothing to do with his home life.” I’m quite aware of how I sound, like I’m completely freaked out at the idea of her visit. Which I am. But it’s also the truth. I may not have the money for therapy, but I’ve read every book on selective mutism there is. Tom’s issue wasn’t triggered by anything we did. It’s simply who he is, like a child being born with bad eyesight, except the cure isn’t as easy or straightforward as buying him glasses.

Dr. Keller speaks up, her voice sympathetic. “Faye, we know you’re a good mom, and we’re not saying Tom’s issues stem from you or Sean. It’s just standard procedure. When a case is opened, the home environment needs to be investigated.”

Investigated! The word causes temporary heart stoppage, and I wish she’d go back to using the word “visit.” Molly’s too-small Crocs irrationally flutter through my brain, blinding me with the thought of how many other deficiencies might be discovered if this woman comes into my home. I don’t think we have anything to hide, no more than any other family, but like cramming your mess into a closet, even if you’re pretty sure everyone does it, you still don’t want anyone opening the door.

“I’d like Mr. Martin to be there as well so I can meet him,” Ms. Glenn says. “When will he be returning?”

My mouth skews sideways as I shrug and give a non-committal answer. “Hard to say. Sometimes he picks up new jobs on the road.”

Looking up through my brow, I see Dr. Keller studying me, her mouth in a tight line, her radar for deceit finely tuned from dealing with adolescent delinquents every day.

Ms. Glenn stands and holds out a business card. “Call me when he gets back.” Halfway to the door, she stops. “One more thing, an eight-year old and a four-year old should never be left in a car alone.”

She continues on her way, her condescension trailing behind her like a bad odor.

“Faye,” Dr. Keller says, when the door clicks closed, “I know you’re doing your best, but three kids is a lot to deal with on your own, especially when one has special needs.”

The words *special needs* stick like a burr in my chest. Tom is perfect, *was* perfect. Until he started school, he was my perfect little boy—shy and perhaps a bit reticent, but sweet, loving, and happy, blissfully oblivious to the world beyond his own and how difficult and cruel it could be.

“Sean seems to be gone a lot. Maybe you need some help. Is there family nearby who can give you a hand?”

I give a thin smile and nod. Another lie, but who’s counting?

2



“Family Services, whooee,” Bo says, looking up from the awl he’s using to make a new hole in the harness on his lap, his hands impressively deft and strong for a man so old. “Ain’t those the people they call on *Law and Order* when they find kids chained to their beds and eating cat food?”

“You’re not helping.”

“Sure I am. I’m telling you that going to live with your mom to avoid Family Services is a good idea. Your mom is good people.”

Bo, otherwise known as Mr. Bojangles, owner of Bojangles Stables, is my unlikely best friend. Five-foot-six on a tall day, a day when his arthritis isn’t acting up and crimping him at the waist, he’s black and wrinkled as an overripe raisin, has an opinion about everything, and isn’t afraid to share it. He was the first person I met when Sean

and I moved to Yucaipa twelve years ago and has been a part of my life every day since.

“My mom and I can’t survive five minutes together. How am I going to live with her?”

“Because there ain’t no other choice. Sean ain’t coming back, and you in a pickle. That’s life, full of more pickles than cucumbers, but that’s the way it is.”

“He called last night.”

Bo’s hairless brows rise, his black eyes looking straight into the back of my brain. “You talk to him?”

I shake my head. “I hung up.”

Bo nods his approval and returns to his work.

I smooth the muzzle of the horse in the stall beside me and bite back the tears that have threatened every other second since Sean’s call.

Hey, beautiful, he said when I answered, the greeting slow and gravelly, thick with drink and emotion. In the background, there was traffic, and instinctively I wondered where he was. It had been a favorite game of ours, me guessing where he was calling from. Before he would leave for a trip, I would memorize his route, tracing it with my finger in our old atlas and reciting the names of the towns he’d be driving through so, when he called, my guess would be close.

Last night I didn’t guess. I said nothing, the whoosh of cars and trucks behind him filling the silence.

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How are they? he said finally, and that's when I hung up.

"You tell him you was leaving?" Bo asks, working another hole through the tough leather.

"I told you, I hung up," I snap.

A smile plays on his thick lips. "Finally getting some fire in your belly. That's good."

I sneer at him, and his smile grows.

"Mom, wlook," Molly says, waddling into the barn, the bib of her overalls stuffed with apricots, grinning like she just scored a touchdown in the Super Bowl. Gus, our mangy mutt, stands beside her, his tail wagging as if he had something to do with the accomplishment.

"Theyw're for Mischief," she says proudly, sticking out her lumpy belly.

Mischief is a horse that doesn't belong to Emily, my oldest, but who Emily thinks of as hers.

"Awre Em and Tom awlmost home?" Molly asks, toddling forward awkwardly, her arms wrapped around her stash.

I look at my watch. "A few more minutes. Should we wait for them by the road?"

"Okey dokey, jokey smokey," she says, spinning around to change direction, the extra weight throwing off her center of gravity and pulling her around quicker than she expects, causing her to topple over and lose her load.

She busts up laughing as Gus leaps around, barking with delight. Bo and I laugh with her. The kid is downright hilarious.

Molly frowns when she puts the last apricot back in her bib and it causes another to pop out. She does it again with the same result, then again and again, making herself smile with the game. I swear the kid can make fun out of anything.

“How about we give this one to Mitsy?” I say, snatching the one that just plopped on the ground.

“Sounds wlike a pwan, Stan.”

I hold the apricot out to the mare beside me, and the horse gobbles it up, and again I need to pinch my nose to stop the emotions. In two days we will be gone, no more apricots, no more horses, no more Bo.

“It’s not forever,” Bo says, reading my thoughts.

“What’s not fowrevewr?” Molly asks.

“Nothing, baby,” I say quickly, painting on a smile. “Let’s go wait for Em and Tom.”

I have yet to tell the kids we’re leaving. I thought about breaking the news last night but decided to give it one more day. Today is Friday, our favorite day, the day Emily gets to ride Mischief and the day the neighbors come to the stables when the sun goes down for a weekly cookout. Tomorrow is soon enough to tell them we’re leaving the only life they’ve ever known.

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We get to the corner as the bus wheezes to a stop. The door opens and Tom ambles down first, his head bent so his gold hair drapes across his face, his backpack dangling from his narrow shoulder, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

“Hey, buddy,” I say.

He lifts his head and smiles but doesn’t answer. I don’t expect him to. His voice won’t return until the bus is out of sight.

“Wlook, Tom,” Molly says. “I got apwricots for Mischief.”

He gives her a thumbs-up.

Emily bounds down behind him, her colt legs and amber hair flying. A boy taunts her from an open window, and she sticks her tongue out at him. Then one of her best girlfriends yells, “Love you.”

“Love you more,” Emily says back, the two of them declaring their BFF status openly in the way only eleven-year-old girls can do.

The bus rolls away, and Emily skips to where we are. “Hey, Itch. What you got there?”

Itch is Emily’s nickname for Molly. On account of Molly’s oversized eyes, Molly has been called Bug since she was born. I call her Love Bug or Herbie. Tom has stuck with Bug. And Emily alternates between Itch or Pest depending on her mood.

“I got these fowr Mischief,” Molly announces proudly.

“Good job,” Emily says, patting Molly’s apricot belly. “How about we put them in my backpack?”

“Good idea,” Molly says, undoing her bib so the apricots tumble to the ground.

As the three of us squat on the dirt putting the apricots in Emily’s backpack, Tom throws a stick for Gus. He laughs as Gus, uncertain of his target, attempts to retrieve the root of a tree instead of the stick, tugging at it with all his might.

“Mom, look,” Tom says, pointing to the comedy, his first words since he got home, totally unaware he said them.

Like a switch, his voice has returned, and relief floods my heart as it does every day when those first blessed words escape, so worried that one day his ability to talk will dry up all together, not only at school but at home as well.

Beside me, Emily fills me in on her day. I call her the queen of Ridgeview Elementary School, little miss popular, a kazillion friends, captain of every team, class president. Today they dissected worms in science. None of the girls in her group would touch it, so she got to do the cutting. She tells me about the small stomach called a gizzard, and how the intestine was filled with dirt because that’s what earthworms eat, and how Willy Jones tried to freak her out by wiping worm guts on her arm, but that she got him back by putting her dissected worm in his lunch.

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In the distance, a big rig rumbles toward the freeway, causing Emily to stop her monologue and to snap her head toward the sound. She squints down the road and I squint as well, both of us straining to see if the cab is yellow with black stripes.

It's not, and my heart resumes its pulse, my jaw sliding forward as I pretend I'm glad it was someone else's truck, that I didn't want it to be Sean.

Emily looks at the dirt, not concealing her disappointment at all.

I put my arm around her and kiss the top of her head, the air heavier as the reality of our life slogs back into focus. He's gone, and unless a miracle occurs, in two days, we'll be gone as well.

3



Molly clambers onto Bo's lap and rests her hand on his shoulder. Bo doesn't look up, simply adjusts his position to accommodate her weight and threads his right arm around her so he can continue his work.

Tom shifts foot to foot like he needs to go potty, but I know his restlessness has nothing to do with his bladder.

"What you got?" Bo says, when he finishes punching the last hole in the harness.

Tom puffs out his chest and says with great theatrics, "*I challenge you...*" He points from himself to Bo for added effect. "To a throwdown."

"Motown thwrowdown," Molly squeals, leaping off Bo's knee and clapping her hands.

Bo's left eyebrow lifts. "You sure?" he says. "If I remember right, last time you challenge me to a throwdown, you and your sister got your lily white heinies

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whooped, and the two of you ended up mucking out stalls for the rest of the day.”

Molly’s brow furrows as she listens. Bo’s thick-tongued words and ghetto accent make him difficult to understand even if you’re older than four and have mastered the English language.

I feel Tom’s heart pick up its pace. A Motown throwdown is a dance challenge. Loser pays. If Bo loses, which isn’t often, he shells out five bucks each to Tom and Molly. If Tom and Molly lose, they need to clean five stalls. To even the playing field, only one of the two kids needs to beat Bo, and they each get three mess ups before they’re out.

Tom nods. He’s ready. He’s been practicing every day for a week. I know his motivation. The Croon just released a new album, and he’s hoping to earn enough money to buy their new songs for his iPod shuffle. Molly’s motivation is always the same, money for chocolate ice cream from the Baskin Robbins downtown.

Bo stands and stretches his arms over his head, his body creaking as he forces his ancient bones to unfurl.

“Time for a hoe down, Motown, ththrowdown, showdown,” Molly says.

Bo is the one who turned Molly onto rhyming, and since she could string two words together, she’s been Dr. Seussing her comments. Each time they’re together, he gives her new rhyming phrases to add to her repertoire.

Like now, he answers her with, “Slow down, Motown, old Bo need to go down for a few low downs, before he’s ready for a throwdown.”

Molly grins ear to ear, her eyes flicking back and forth as she catalogues the new rhymes for later use. Bo bends over to touch his toes, straightens, then whirls his hips around a few times.

Before Bo went into the horse boarding business, he had been a dancer, and when he got too old to dance, a choreographer. He’s too bent to do any professional boogying these days, but whenever he and Tom are together, he teaches Tom what he knows. And like Molly does with everything, she just joins right in.

“Okay, honkers, let’s get this on,” he says.

He starts off easy, a simple shuffle-hop-step that Molly easily imitates then tops with a toe-heel scuffle. Tom goes next, adding a three-beat tap.

On and on they go, round after round, each adding a step or two until they’re tapping and kicking and twirling a routine worthy of Fred Astaire. Molly messes up way more than three times, but Bo generously only notices every third one, causing Molly to nearly squeak each time she gets away with her blunder unnoticed.

Bo finally calls Molly on her third miss right after Tom gets his second. “Awe,” she says, really believing she had a shot at it. She shuffles over to where I sit on a bucket and plops to the dirt beside me.

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“Could still call it off,” Bo offers Tom.

“You scared?” Tom taunts.

“Whoeee, boy. Fine, have it your way. Them stalls calling your name. Your turn.”

Tom nails the routine that Molly just missed then tacks on a move I’ve never seen before, a bizarre hip thrust that makes it look like his legs have left their sockets.

Because Bo is a fossil, ground flopping, head spinning, and gymnastics are off limits. But this isn’t any of those things. It’s just a bizarre move that seems to require the suspension of gravity and the liquefaction of muscle and bones.

Tom grins like a Cheshire cat. He planned this as his kill move.

Bo cracks up, a cackling laugh that shakes his whole body. “You think you gonna beat me with that?” he says. “I taught Michael that move.”

And sure enough, Bo not only matches the routine and Tom’s kill move, he performs the move better than Tom did, his chicken legs literally rubberizing as he thrusts out first the left then the right.

Tom’s face deflates, his features melting with his disappointment.

“Shoot,” Bo says, scratching his bald head. “Dang it, I lose.”

Tom's brow furrows, then his eyes bulge open and he shouts, "You lose. You didn't add a move. You lose. I win."

"I win too," Molly says, leaping to her feet.

"Mmm, mmm," Bo says, shaking his head. "Must be losin' my touch."

From his front pocket, he fishes out a money clip and peels off a five for each of them.

"Now let me show you how to do that move right, shake out them wigger genes and pour in a little smokin' hot chocolate."

Molly giggles. I don't think she understood a word he said, but the way he said it was worth a laugh.

4



It's an emotional goodbye, Emily taking it the hardest. She's the oldest and therefore leaving the most behind. Since I told her we were leaving, she hasn't spoken a word to me, her hateful glare telling me all she cares to say. *How could you let this happen to us? To me?*

I'm trying, I want to scream. I'm doing the best I can.

Molly's most upset about leaving Gus behind. She doesn't fully grasp the concept of us living somewhere else and for that I'm thankful.

Tom pretends to be sad, but a glimmer of hope radiates from his feigned malaise, an anxiousness to get on the road, driven by a thin optimism that things might be different for him in LA, better for him there.

"What about Dad?" Molly asks just before we set off.

"Don't worry, baby, he'll find us," I say as I pray like hell that Sean shows up and doesn't have a clue where we

went, getting a healthy dose of his own medicine and feeling firsthand the decimating hurt of being abandoned and left behind.

I look in the rearview mirror to find Molly's saucer eyes filled with concern, and my hate softens, my daughter's love for her father reducing the vengeful spite to a longing for the truth to be different than it is, for Sean to be a different man than he is, for life to not be so hard, for him to have stayed, and for none of this to have happened in the first place.

We merge onto the ten freeway, a direct artery from our old life to our new, seventy-five miles of asphalt that might as well be a thousand for how different the world we're going to is from the one we're leaving behind.

"Wiwl Mr. Bo tewll him whewre we went?"

"Yes, baby," I answer, adding to the long list of lies I've told the kids since Sean left, protective instinct or cowardice stopping me from telling them the truth.

The kids know we are on our own, recognize that I've been working more, understand that money has grown more precious, but there was no blowout fight or emotional family gathering where Sean and I sat the kids down and told them we were separating or getting a divorce, and so we have gone about our lives as if nothing has changed. Their dad left for a trip, but instead of returning a week or two later like he usually does, he hasn't come back. To their questions about when he's coming home, I've given

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noncommittal answers like, *He's on a really long trip this time* or *I'm not sure*. I've considered telling them a big lie, like he joined the military and is fighting in some faraway land, or even telling them he's dead. But that would only simplify things until the day he shows up very much alive.

And he will show up. I know Sean. It's only a matter of time before he comes back looking for us, either to beg forgiveness and return to the fold or to check in on his progeny while passing through.

I should probably tell the kids the truth, but the truth seems impossible to explain: *Your dad wasn't cut out for this life, he never wanted to get married or have kids—he never wanted you. I tricked him into it by getting pregnant, and he ended up loving you, so he tried, but then it got too hard—you got too hard—so he left.*

I hit the brakes to slow down for traffic, and the van sputters and coughs like it has a chronic case of bronchitis. The mechanic explained the problem is a cracked head, which made me imagine him wrapping gauze around the engine and giving it some Advil. Unfortunately the fix is not that simple, and the cost to repair it is more than the van is worth. So each day, I top off the radiator and pray it lives another day, knowing we're living on borrowed time, and that at some point, the head is going to split open, and its brain matter will explode all over the road.

“Wlook,” Molly says, causing me to turn where she is pointing.

On the other side of the freeway, a mother duck waddles across the road, four ducklings waddling behind her as cars swerve and blare their horns to avoid them. Bravely the mother does not take flight—her feathers ruffle with fear and she honks—but valiantly she continues on, leading her tiny family through the gauntlet. And I wonder if, when she chose her path, she realized the danger or if, like me, she was oblivious, but now she's in it, halfway across the road, with no choice but to trudge on, to lead them as best she can, hoping and praying they make it to the other side.

5



My mom and I are in the hallway outside her condo. She's been going at me nonstop for the past twenty minutes.

"...so you stick your head in the sand and pretend it's all okay?" she says.

I haven't seen her in a year, but the woman doesn't age—not a thread of silver in her blonde hair, her light skin lineless. At some point, I'm certain I will catch up to her, and we will look more like sisters than mother-daughter—her, the older, stronger, more competent, better-endowed sister—me, the younger, less capable sister whose body and life never filled out the way everyone thought it would.

"Did you even try to track him down, get him to give you some money, garnish his wages? You know there are groups that do that, track down deadbeat dads..."

The kids are inside catatonically plugged into the television. No dog, no orchard, no yard, nothing to do. We've been here half an hour, and already they're bored out of their minds.

I focus on my breathing, in and out, reminding myself of the sacrifice my mom is making by taking us in. And when that no longer works, I remind myself that this is for my kids and that I would walk over red-hot coals for my kids, that I can do this.

"Have you even filed for divorce? Or what, Faye, are you still pining away for him, waiting for him to come back and take care of you? What were you going to do if he showed up, welcome him back with open arms?"

No. No. No. No.

No, I did not try to track Sean down because I know exactly where he is. He's shackled up with Regina, a woman he met in Albuquerque. No, I did not try to get him to give me money. I didn't feel like wasting my breath. No, I did not have his wages garnished. He owns his own rig, good luck with that. No, I have not filed for divorce. Divorce is for people who can afford a lawyer.

Yes and yes.

Pathetic as it is, yes, for months after he left, I prayed he would come back, and, yes, I would have welcomed him home.

My mom can't understand this. She never had to go it alone, went straight from husband one to husband two to

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husband three, then she had me and the marriage to my dad stuck. She has no idea how overwhelming and scary it is to be on your own with three kids to support.

At first you think your anger will sustain you, but it doesn't. It wears out quick, and you get tired, the kind of tired that makes your bones hurt and your mind numb until you feel like you're a hundred instead of only thirty-two—so done in that you can't imagine continuing the way you're going. And that's when the fear sets in: *What happens if I don't hang in there or if something goes wrong? I'm all they've got, just me, and there's no way I can do this. I'm going to fail. Then what?*

So, yes, you start to miss him...*him*, the one who caused this, but also the one who created this. The one who made promises you believed, words you staked your life on, vows to love and cherish—a dream faint but remembered. The one who looked at you adoringly when you delivered his first child, his lips grazing your forehead as he whispered, *Well done, we'll name her Emily because the name is as beautiful as her mother.*

My mom continues on with no sign of slowing, the rant saved up since I confessed to her two months ago that Sean had been gone three months. “For whose sake?” she says. “The sake of appearances? Who are you trying to impress—your neighbors, the school, me? You think we're all sitting around judging you? Or is it because you still want to be right, too stubborn to admit that Sean turned out

to be exactly the loser I knew he was? I knew it the moment I met him, spineless, worthless. How you ended up with him...”

Perhaps walking over red hot coals would be preferable to standing here like a five-year old being scolded by my mother. At least it would be quicker. I return to counting my breaths, silently congratulating myself after each one I manage without detonation, wondering what sin I committed in some past life that condemned me to such a harsh penance, because being forced to live with my mom is certainly too severe a punishment for anything I’ve done in this life.

“Or maybe that’s not it at all, and instead it’s exactly what it’s always been with you, you’re just muddling your way through the way you always do. No plan, just bebopping along whichever way the wind takes you, things always happening to you instead of you making things happen. It’s not like how you end up pregnant is a mystery, yet you’re surprised every time...”

I nod. I married Sean at nineteen because of Emily. Three years later, life already hard, I got pregnant with Tom. Then four years after that—Sean already taking more trips and staying away longer each time—he came home vowing to make things right and be more responsible, a promise that fell apart almost immediately but long enough for me to end up pregnant again.

She’s right, I’m an idiot.

6



We survived the night, and this morning I'm determined to take control of my life. And to do that, I need money.

"Come on, kids," I say after a quick breakfast of Cheerios, the only breakfast food in the house. Food has never been high on my mom's priority list, and if I don't get a job quick, I'm a little concerned we might starve.

"Whewre we going?" Molly says, sliding off her chair and pulling on her Crocs, clearly excited to be leaving the confines of the condo.

Tom stands as well but looks less than enthused. New experiences don't suit him well, and meeting new people doesn't suit him at all. Bo taught him to think of it like a throwdown, one move at a time, don't get too ahead of yourself. I see him doing that now. Stand up. That's all. One move.

Emily remains in her chair, her arms crossed.

“Coming?” I ask, challenging her, my sympathy used up. My fault or not, she’s being a little skunk, and for all I care, she can stay home and brood.

“Come on,” Molly says, yanking on Emily’s crossed arms.

Emily allows her sister to pull her from the chair. The truth is, she’s as antsy to get out of the condo as the rest of us, and Molly just gave her the excuse to give in.

#

Like releasing the strings of a corset, the moment we’re back in the van, I exhale. I think I’ve been holding my breath since we arrived. If I keep this up, I’ll die of asphyxiation before the first week is through.

The van is like a haven, the closest thing to a home we still have. If I could afford the gas, I’d simply drive around, enjoying the reprieve. But the tank hovers near empty, and if I don’t get a job, it’s going to stay that way.

My prospects for employment are limited. I have no degree and no experience outside waitressing. The problem with this occupation in LA is that every out-of-work actor is a server or bartender, making restaurant jobs as rare as openings for a bugle player at the racetrack.

I drive to the place where I have the most chance of success, the Third Street Promenade in Santa Monica, the highest density of restaurants per square foot in the city.

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Plus, it's an outside mall that doesn't allow cars, so the kids can wait safely outside while I apply for work.

"Great," Emily says when I tell her where we're going, "we're going to a mall where we have no money to buy anything."

"Would you rather we turn around and stare at the television all day? I promise this is going to be fun. There are street performers—singers, dancers, clowns, magicians—usually a band or two."

"A freak show," she scowls. "That's what grandma says."

"Your grandmother doesn't know everything."

Neither Molly or Tom participate, already wisely choosing the stance of Switzerland, both remaining silent as Emily launches barbs and I bat them away.

Parking is a nightmare and costs a small fortune. The parking structure is full, so we park in a metered spot on the street that costs \$2 an hour. I deposit \$4 and check my watch. We have until 12:02.

Despite Emily's determination to be a crab, her sour mood lightens the moment our feet hit the cobblestones of the promenade. Like visiting the circus or an amusement park, there's a carnival atmosphere and a sense of adventure, the unexpected lurking in front of us—music, voices, chimes—cotton candy, churros, ice cream—all of it floating in the air, all of it only moments away.

We've just started when Tom tugs at my shirt and points. My heart clenches knowing his voice has disappeared, but I brush away the feeling, determined not to let the "cat" interfere with our day.

I follow his finger. A man sits on a box in front of a trashcan holding two bushy branches in front of him. He blends into the background and is so still that, had Tom not pointed him out, I would have missed him completely.

It doesn't surprise me that Tom saw him. Tom notices details the way a blind man compensates for lack of sight with highly-attuned hearing. The rest of us are so busy talking or thinking about what we're going to say we miss things, but Tom sees and hears it all.

I hold the kids back, allowing two girls in their twenties to walk ahead of us. One texts as the other window shops, each of them carrying a shopping bag swinging at their side.

When they're a foot away, the man extends the branch in his left arm into their path. Cell-phone girl screeches, and her phone flies from her hand. Window-shopping girl jumps nearly a foot, and her hand flies to her heart, causing her shopping bag to fly up and smack her in the face.

Both bust-up laughing when they realize they were ambushed by the famous Third Street Promenade bushman, and window-shopping girl fishes into her purse and hands the man a dollar.

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Molly claps with delight and says, “I want to be scawred.”

Tom grins ear to ear, and Emily’s face is lit up. It’s the first happy moment of our new life, and I savor it. *We can make happy out of anything*, it’s a phrase my dad used to say.

I give Tom a high five for spotting the stalker. Not only would I have hated being scared, but I would have hated giving up a dollar for the privilege.

#

We’ve canvassed nearly two-thirds of the promenade, and I’m starting to feel desperate. There are no jobs. Things may improve in a few weeks when it’s closer to summer and the busy season, but right now is slow and no one is hiring.

I check my watch. Twenty-two minutes remain before our meter runs out. We need ten minutes to walk back, leaving twelve minutes, enough time for one more rejection.

“Last one,” I say. The kids don’t even acknowledge my departure. Emily is looking at bracelets on a jewelry cart, Tom stands beside her watching the people, Molly is doing little he-man dance squats to the beat of a band playing nearby.

I walk through the door of a restaurant called Natrij, Exotic Cuisine.

As soon as I walk in, I know this isn't the place for me—cumin and curry—the overwhelming smell of the Indian spices making me want to gag.

Growing up, I ate all kinds of food. My dad loved to cook. We didn't have money to go to fancy restaurants, so he made fancy food at home. I liked all of it except for Indian food.

I pivot to leave when a voice stops me. "Welcome," it says in a nasally tone that makes me want to run instead of walk out the door. Painting on a smile, I turn back.

The man is dark and little and wears a false smile too big for his face.

"I was wondering if you have any job openings?" I say, hoping for a quick rejection so I can squeeze in one more restaurant before our meter runs out.

"You experience?" It isn't said with so much an accent as an abruptness, as if he doesn't have the patience for verbs.

I nod.

He runs me over with his eyes. "Fine. Table nine." With the back of his hand, he gestures toward the patio where two lone customers sit with closed menus in front of them and looks of impatience on their faces.

I blink several times, unsure I heard him. "You're hiring me?"

He squints like now he's not so sure.

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“I mean, I’m glad you’re hiring me,” I say quickly, “but I can’t start right now. Can I start tomorrow?”

He harrumphs, and I swallow at the thought of having just lost the one job I was offered. “Eleven,” he says, then walks past me, his over-sized smile beaming as he greets a family of four that has just walked through the door.

“It smells wonderful in here,” the woman says, and her husband dutifully nods.

My new boss walks the family to the patio to join the hungry couple and I return outside, relieved but unenthused. I do not like Indian food, and I do not like the man who hired me, but it’s a job and I start tomorrow. I check my watch. We have two minutes before we need to start walking.

Emily and Tom are still beside the cart where I left them, absorbed in some sort of puzzle cube, each of them holding one and trying to unravel it.

“Where’s Molly?” I ask, when I walk up and realize she’s not beside them.

Emily looks up from her concentration, her eyes scanning side to side before swelling in panic. “She was right here.”

Emily and Tom drop the toys on the cart and chase after me as I run person-to-person asking if anyone has seen a little girl in overalls, my heart scatter-firing in pure panic, the absolute worst feeling in the world. Thousands of people now crowd the walkway, the foot traffic picking up

with the lunch hour. I weave in and out, my eyes searching wildly.

A crowd is gathered around a street performer, a mime. I burst through the huddle, shoving people aside and mumbling excuse me's. No Molly.

I push my way back out and run toward another group gathered around a band, music thrumming from the center.

A wide black lady with a purse the size of a suitcase shoves me back when I try to push to the front, so I scoot around her to another part of the crowd.

This audience is denser and deeper than the one clustered around the mime, a press of at least sixty people laughing and clapping and making it impossible for me to get through.

"Please," I cry, "I'm looking for my little girl."

My voice is tiny in the din of the music, but one man turns. Perhaps fifty with pink skin and a purple golf shirt stretched over a large belly, he smiles then presses his impressive weight against the crowd to create an opening. "That her?" he says, pointing.

Tears spring to my eyes when I see Molly in the center of the crowd, relief flooding my system and nearly sending me to my knees. The man braces my elbow, keeping me upright.

"She's quite a performer," he draws.

And sure enough, there she is, center stage, dancing with a very tall black man who is playing a guitar and

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singing. Actually she's having a throwdown with the man; he does a simple two step or slide then Molly mimics it.

I have no idea how it started, but the audience is loving it. It's very amusing, a six-and-a-half-foot-tall black dude with beaded dreadlocks laying down smooth dance moves that then a small, pudgy white girl with gold curls imitates. And watching it, it's impossible not to smile. My heart radiates with pride. That's my girl, *my* girl.

Tom and Emily sidle up beside me and are proud as well, all of us beaming as we watch Molly do her Molly thing. Several people in the crowd have their phones out and are taking pictures. I pull out my own antique flip phone and snap a shot as well.

The big man stops playing the guitar and starts clapping his hands over his head, encouraging the audience to join in, and the entire street explodes in unison, to sing the ending. Then he pulls the microphone from its stand, holds it down to Molly, and Molly leads the audience in the finale, "...Jowhnnny B. Goode."

The crowd erupts in applause, and the big man gives Molly a high five. Then Molly skips to the guy playing the drums and they knock knuckles.

She is skipping back when a woman steps forward and hands her something. I rush forward, but the woman disappears into the crowd before I get there.

“What’d she give you?” Emily asks, hugging Molly against her hip, clearly relieved that Molly was found and clearly feeling bad about losing her in the first place.

Molly opens her hand to reveal a twenty-dollar bill.

“Why she give me money?” Molly asks.

“She must have liked the way you danced,” I say, my heart swollen to bursting.

We race back to the car and arrive to another fabulous relief, no ticket. In a splurge of celebration, I drop another two dollars in the meter, and Molly treats us to ice cream with her twenty dollars. We carry our cones to the beach and for the next hour play in the sand.

Today might just be our lucky day.