

Beyond the Bell:
A Collection of Short Stories Through the Eyes of Nine Low Socioeconomic Students

by
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Dedicated to the children of Mitchell-Neilson Schools, and to the people who take the time to learn each of the students' individual stories, recognizing their wonderfully bright potential.

Abstract:

This creative project, comprised of nine short stories, explores the lives of nine elementary-aged students of low socioeconomic status, the adversity they have faced, and how they have handled everything that has been thrown their way.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....iv

Introduction.....1

Stories

Stella.....9

Elijah.....19

Nayla and James.....22

Jonah.....27

Kiera.....35

Jay and Corey.....41

Kaylynn.....46

Carson.....50

Michael.....59

Introduction

Four years ago, I stumbled upon a job opening at Mitchell-Neilson Schools asking for teacher to work at their before-and-after school program, ESP. After spending my prior three years in the restaurant industry, I was desperate for a change, so I applied for the job. Little did I know then just how much this job would change my perspective on everything.

Living in Murfreesboro for a majority of my life, I thought I knew this town and the people who lived in it like the back of my hand. I had been to a variety of schools: Cason Lane Academy, The Discovery School, Blackman Middle and High School. I was involved in many outside curricular activities: dance, soccer, theatre, DECA, etc. I knew a lot of people. But it wasn't until I started my job at ESP that I realized how much I didn't know.

Right away, on my first day of the job, I noticed a difference in the kids I was surrounded by at MNS as opposed to the kids I grew up with. They wore wrinkly shirts and still sported their bed head from the night before. They were rough with each other, with both their actions and their words. They didn't listen. To anyone. Ever.

I remember getting trained my first day. The woman, a little older than I at the time, looked out into the sea of children in the cafeteria eating their after-school snack and said to me, you have no idea what you just got yourself into. And she was right, I really didn't. She then went through and gave me a "cheat sheet" of the *bad* kids, the ones that talked back and didn't listen, and then a list of the *good* kids, the ones I could call on to use as my helper for the day. I remember it being very black and white. There

were no so-so kids, or kids that might be good if you gave them a little extra attention. Only good and bad.

After a couple weeks of training with other teachers, I finally got a class of my own. And it didn't go well. The kids could smell even the tiniest bit of insecurity, and when they did, they didn't shy away from taking full advantage of it. Who could blame them, though? The turn-over rate for ESP teachers at Mitchell-Neilson was around one month. My classroom rocked and rolled that day, and not in a good way. I left crying. Absolutely defeated. But I had never quit a job earlier than a year of being there, so I was determined to find a way to break through to the kids.

The next day, during snack, I decided not to stand around with the other teachers and chat, but instead go talk with some of the students while they ate. I sat down in the middle of a group of the "bad" kids. They looked at me like I was an actual alien, coming to abduct them from their planet. I remember thinking to myself how it felt harder to make friends with second graders than it did with twenty-something-year-olds in college. But I pressed on, asking them about their day, and what their favorite color is. After a couple weeks of me doing this, they eventually started to open up. And to my surprise, they started opening up *a lot*.

They told me stories of their brothers and sisters getting taken away from them. They described the bugs they found in their bed the night before. They lowered their heads as they told me they wet themselves again because they were scared their stepdad might be waiting in the bathroom. They questioned why Santa only visited the rich boys and girls. They asked me if I thought their new foster parents would like them. They looked at me confused as they recalled their parents telling them never to listen to a white

person, because they don't understand. And it was through these questions and comments and observations that I realized there aren't "good" kids and "bad" kids. There are just a whole bunch of kids that aren't understood. It's our job as a community to listen and help these kids and love these kids and encourage these kids. Their potential doesn't decrease because of their homelife, but if they are not consistently told this, they will never know. I realize this creative project might not change the world, but if it can touch the heart of just one person enough to make a connection with a child right here in one's backyard, then I think it's worth it.

It is important to note that each of the characters I have written are based on very real children. All of their stories are a fictionalized version of their true lives, changed only slightly to protect them. So, I challenge you as the reader to image the actual child that this story is about. How can you stand complacent knowing these are only the stories of a small fraction of students of one of the many elementary schools here in Murfreesboro?

We, as a community, must open our eyes to what's going on so close to home.
We, as a community, must open our ears to listen to each other's stories.

Stella

I escaped last night. Kinda like I do in my dreams. But, in my dreams, I am walking along the sidewalk of a big, beautiful city. Maybe New York or Chicago or LA, places my teacher talks about. With buildings taller than my eyes can see. Where the streets shine like it had just rained, but the sky is blue, and the air is crisp. In my dreams, I look at my reflection in every window I walk past, admiring my clean face and the scent of flowers that follows me. My curls bounce, and I swing my hips a little when I walk, so I can see my new pink dress twirl beneath me. When I'm dreaming, I walk so lightly down the street that my feet start to lift off the ground. I dance through the air. Everyone below me cheers and sings out my name: *Stella Stella Stella*. I am a star.

But my escape last night wasn't nearly as perfect as my dreams. Instead, I waited until Sofia had fallen asleep under the covers beside me, her mouth slightly open and her bottom lip moving with every breath she took. I waited until the boys, Julian, Leo, and Alex, stopped fighting with each other over the pillows and were snuggled up underneath their pallet on the floor right next to my bed. I waited until all the lights were off in the house, and I could no longer hear faint baby squeals coming from the living room, so I knew Scotty and Cami were sound asleep in their playpen. And most importantly, I waited until after I could no longer hear my parents' TV blaring through the house, so I knew they had finally turned the lights out for the night as well.

Once I was certain everyone in the house was asleep, I put together some things for my journey. I grabbed only one of the blankets from my bed, leaving the other for Sofia. I took the half-eaten loaf of bread from the cabinet and a cup filled with water. I took off my clothes I had been wearing for the past two days and put on an outfit I had been saving to wear for this particular day—pink leggings and a grey sweatshirt—a brand-new outfit I had gotten as a present from the church. Sometimes they would just randomly give us new clothes. I always like what we get from them, but I never tell my friends at school, because I know their parents buy them their own clothes, and I've never heard anyone talk about getting clothes from the church, so I just keep my mouth shut, and I tell my siblings to do the same. I scrambled through a pile of my stuff in the corner of the room to make sure I wasn't missing anything, and with that I grabbed a toy microphone and an extra pair of socks, and stuffed it all inside of a plastic Wal-Mart bag I found under the sink. The last thing I did was reach under my bed to get my purple pencil box, a secret stash of money that my sister and I keep in case of emergency. Eight dollars. But I left one dollar for Sofia. I couldn't think of anything else that I would need.

Right before I was about to leave, I took one last minute to look around. The air in the house was hot and silent, barely moving except for a small breeze from the fan we had in the living room. The only other movement I saw was from a couple of harmless beetles crawling down the wall beside Scotty and Cami's pen. Inside, Scotty and Cami were unfazed and fast asleep, snuggled up with each other in the bottom of their old, faded playpen that had belonged to each of us at one point. I stood and stared at the bugs for a while, wondering if they lived in our house because they escaped from the outside and they thought our house was better than their old home, or if they got lost and ended

up here and now are trying to find a way to escape from here back to the outside, or if their brains were so tiny they couldn't tell the difference. Either way, I was excited to escape from my own home to venture out into theirs. Right as the clock flashed 1:00 AM, I finally decided it was time, and I slipped through the front door. Outside, the ground was wet from rain and the sidewalk was covered in mud, but the sky, just like my dreams, seemed clear, showing all the stars twinkling above me. That had to be a good sign. Even though I knew I should stay quiet, I couldn't help but remind myself out loud, I am a star.

I took a good look both ways down my street before starting off, because that's what you're supposed to do. Down one side, I saw a long, dark street. Many of the street lights were off, and I saw no activity from any of the houses, not even the house that makes all the drugs with a "Jesus is the answer" sign on the door and a crazy lady who sits on the porch on her rocking chair and yells at kids in the neighborhood warning them that they will go to hell. Down the other street there were a couple lights. I noticed a dog behind wired fencing, sniffing the air and sneezing. Did dogs not have a bedtime? I thought long and hard about my decision, and I eventually decided to go towards the dog because the other way looked scarier, and I figured this road would eventually take me to the big, beautiful city of my dreams, and I knew that wouldn't happen on a trail with drugs and crazy ladies. I took my first steps, and I was on my way.

I quickly realized that I had no way to keep time. I was mad at myself for not taking a couple extra minutes to go through a check-list of things I would need before I left—like a watch. I should have looked through my dad's stuff to see if he had any old ones that I could have used without him knowing. But, since I knew I needed to keep heading forward instead of turning back around to grab a watch, I tried to use what I

remembered about telling time from the sky instead. If the moon was at the top of the sky, that meant it was midnight. The moon was about halfway down from the top, so I figured that meant it was 3:00 AM because when the moon was gone completely, and the sky started to turn pink it would be 6:00 AM. And 3:00 AM that was halfway between midnight and 6:00 AM, so that made sense.

6:00 AM is usually when I would get everyone up for school. I would wake Sofia first, so she could help me get the boys up while I would start to put pieces of bread in the toaster for everyone's breakfast. The boys would always grumble and roll back over, so by the time they were finally out of bed and in the kitchen, their toast would be cold. But they ate it anyways. After that, I would remind everyone to brush their teeth. If we ran out of toothpaste, I would tell them to just use water. That was better than nothing. And nothing is what they would choose without me.

That was something I was looking forward to the most about my new life—never running out of anything. I would always have toothpaste and toilet paper and food and shampoo and blankets. Anything I needed and more. That's what all the celebrities have—everything.

I decided I wanted to be a singer when I was about five years old. I remember it to this day; I was singing to my baby sister when my mom told me I had a lovely voice. A lovely voice. Mom doesn't give us very many compliments, or very much attention. Neither does dad. Sometimes they would even send each of us separately to other people's houses for weeks at a time in the summer, so they didn't have to take care of us. It bothers my brothers some, but Sofia and I are used to it now because we know one day one of us will make it big and save the others. That's why I've learned to take care of

myself and the kids in the meantime. It's just better that way. But anyways, mom said I had a lovely voice, so from then on, I had planned to be a singer. A superstar, specifically. But the problem was, if I stayed at home, I knew I would never be able to become a star. Our town just wasn't as shiny and glamorous as the cities that the celebrities live in, so there's no way I would have ever made it big.

The first couple hours of my escape went really well. There were no people anywhere, and I was making a lot of progress. At about 4:00 AM, I made it to a place that I had never seen before. It definitely wasn't my end destination, but it was nice. There were rows of huge brick houses with green vines that clung on to the corners of the structures, framing them like the perfect pictures they were. Each home had a large backyard bordered with detailed black iron fences that reminded me of castles. Some of the houses even had their own swimming pools. Each house looked like forty people could easily live inside, but I knew it was probably much less than that. I concluded that these houses must belong to superstars, which meant that I was finally out of the state, because I've never heard of anyone famous living near me. I was one step closer to my goal!

There was one house that caught my eye the most. The yard was decorated with bright yellow flowers and big leafy bushes. The front door was as red as a cherry sucker with a wreath the size of a birthday cake right in the center. On the porch, there were two rocking chairs with yellow pillows that matched the flowers and cushions on the seats so white it looked like no one had ever sat there before. But my favorite part of the house was the sidewalk leading up to the door, because it was lined with metallic pinwheels that spun as the wind hit them and sparkled in the moonlight. Once I saw the pinwheels, I

couldn't stop thinking about them. I walked past the house down a couple blocks, but my mind turned with thoughts of the pinwheels. I then realized, if these houses were owned by celebrities, they wouldn't miss a tiny little pinwheel if I took it from their yard. So, I backtracked through the neighborhood, ending right in front of my favorite house. I walked up to the yard, and squatted down in the grass, feeling the green underneath me. I thought about taking a nap, right then and there, but I jumped right back up because I knew I didn't have time for that yet. I continued on to the pinwheels, searching for the best looking one, and plucked it out of the ground once I found it. I should have left then, but I didn't.

I hadn't eaten yet, and the rocking chairs on the porch seemed like too good of a resting place to pass up. I sat down and rocked myself back and forth for a minute, and then I grabbed my Wal-Mart bag and took out a piece of bread. I ate it slowly, pretending it was a triple stacked sandwich filled with meat and cheese and lettuce like they eat in old cartoons. But, as I ate, I couldn't help my mind from wandering to Sofia and Leo and Julian and Alex. I hoped they knew to pack their lunch like I would usually do for them. We didn't have much at home. Mom and Dad would go to the liquor store more than they would go to the grocery, but I always made it work. We would have a can of something—Vienna sausages or Spam—and I would add in some saltine crackers or a piece of bread. I searched my brain, trying to remember if there were any crackers left. I hoped I hadn't taken away the bread and left them with nothing to eat.

Right as I finished my last bite, I heard the doorknob start to twist beside me. I panicked, grabbed my bag, and jumped off the porch into the bushes in front of me, hoping whoever was on the other side hadn't seen me yet. The candy red door swung

open and a small lady with light brown hair tied up in a pony appeared on the porch in a fluffy gray robe. She was holding a screaming baby wrapped up in a little blanket. The lady whispered sweet songs in the baby's ear, encouraging the baby to stop screaming and go back to sleep. That was usually my job for Scotty and Cami. Any time they woke up in the middle of the night, I would rock them, kiss them on their heads, and sing them a lullaby. I wondered what would happen while I was gone. Would Sofia take my spot? Would Cami and Scotty go back to sleep for her? Eventually, the baby stopped crying and the woman went back inside the house. I crawled out from under the bushes and went back on my way.

The next hour was bare, passing nothing but trees and fields, taking loops out of the way if it looked like something interesting was in the horizon. But nothing ever was. The only thing I could do to pass the time was practice my songs, singing quietly, just below the sound of the wind. If I wanted to be a star, I would need to practice. And who better to practice to than Mother Nature herself? The wind tickled my face, and I think that meant she liked me. My first fan. The singing and the wind distracted me so much that I nearly forgot how to walk at one point and tripped on a dip in the road, jolting me onto my hands and knees. My leggings tore on my left knee, and the skin below began to form a strawberry. My hands, not nearly as scraped, burned a little to the touch, but I wiped them off on my leggings because there was nothing else I could do.

My cut was pretty big. The only other time I had seen a strawberry this big on someone's knee is when Sofia and I went to the fall festival one year with a family from the church. My sister was running after me, trying to show me this yo-yo she had won, when she tripped over a root coming up from the ground, jerking her forward. That day,

Sofia's strawberry was about the size of three juicy strawberries combined. She cried, and the nice family who had taken us to the fair rushed us inside to get her a band-aid. She felt better quickly, and we continued to look around the grounds, ending up at the face-painting tent to use our last couple tickets. We both decided that we wanted to get strawberries painted on our face, so her knee wouldn't feel left out.

We didn't wash the strawberries off our faces for the next ten days—no showers, no baths, not even a face wash. But that was normal. What wasn't normal was the red paint that stayed stained on our face that our classmates silently used as a tracker to see how long we'd go without bathing. I found out on the tenth day because, as I walked into the room that morning, one of the boys in my class screamed out, "There we have it ladies and gentlemen! Ten whole days without a bath! We've hit double-digits! No wonder our classroom smells like rotten garbage when she walks in! Next, let's keep track of how many days a week she wears that shirt!" He thought he was so funny, rolling around on the ground as my teacher scolded him and made him pull his card. Never in my life had my face turned so hot before. I imagined that it was the color of the strawberry, blending in with my cheek.

I never told my sister that story. I didn't want her to feel what I did. I just made sure to wash everyone's faces when we got home that day and made them change their clothes into something new. Looking back, there were so many things that I did for them that I forgot to ever explain. I looked down at my strawberry again, little blood drops soaked into my perfectly pink leggings. A tiny bit of sunlight started to peak out from the ground. 6:00 AM. I couldn't let them go to school with strawberries on their face, and with their teeth unbrushed, and with only Spam in their lunch sack. But I knew, at that

point, I was too far gone. I couldn't remember any of the turns or any of the roads I took. I didn't know where I was or how far away from home I was or even how close to the city I was. So, I cried. I cried thinking about how I ruined their lives, because of this crazy idea of mine.

I probably cried for 10 minutes when God answered the prayers in my head. I told Him please let me go back home to my brothers and sisters. I will never try to escape again. Never ever. And God came, in the form of a police officer, speeding down the road. He stopped when he saw me and rolled down his window.

“Whatcha doin’ there, young lady?” He had a southern accent.

“What state am I in?” He laughed a whole entire belly laugh back at me.

“Tennessee, darlin’. Where did you think you were?”

“Well, I don’t know. Maybe New York?” I wiped the tears from my face.

“Fraid not. Closest thing we got here is Nashvegas.”

“I . . . I need to go home.”

“Hop on in. Where is home?”

“Um . . . Tennessee. I live by Middleton Elementary School. If you can get me there, I can get the rest of the way home.” I slid into the back of his car. I felt like I was going to jail, talking to him through the bars.

“Not too far, then. How did you get over here?” Not far?

“Well, I escaped.”

“Escaped, huh? A li'l runaway action? Momma make you mad?” He smiled back at me in the rearview mirror.

“Yes, sort of. She doesn't really take care of us, and I want to be a superstar when I grow up. So, I tried to escape now to become famous, and then I was going to go back to get my siblings out of there too.”

“What's your momma not do? No ice cream for dessert?”

“Well, no. Never ice cream for dessert. But also we never really have di—”

“You'll be alright, kid. We'll get you home just in time for you to get ready for school.”

“Oh, ok. Thank you, officer.”

And he was right, he dropped me off without even going inside. Told me it was his gift to me, so I didn't get in trouble with my parents. Mom and Dad hadn't woken up yet, and neither did the kids because I hadn't gotten them up. I think it's a good thing no one knew what happened. I wasn't made to be a star.

Elijah

Does your uncle have his picture posted in the front office of your school under the do-not-let-into-the-school list? Mine does, and he's a badass. But everyone at my elementary school is absolutely terrified of him. Like you should have seen them this one time he tried to pick me up from school. The SRO and the gym teacher full out barricaded the doors, arms crossed and everything. My uncle could've taken them. I know he had his Glock in his car, but he just sped off instead. But, I mean, really? It's crazy how much these people freak out just thinking about drugs; he wasn't even doing anything wrong. He's a cool guy, my favorite uncle for sure. He has three sports cars and like twenty pairs of Gucci flip-flops. He said I can have a pair when my feet grow some. So that's pretty sick.

But, yeah, my uncle got on that list, along with a bunch of other banned lists in town, because he's the biggest drug dealer around here, and people are scared of him. The police are always trying to bust him for something, but he's a lot smarter than them, so he's never gotten caught. I like to learn from him, because he teaches me real things that matter, unlike the stupid things we learn in school. He's taught me everything I know about drugs and how to make a profit off them and how to figure out if people are narks or not. I think, when I'm older, I'll go into business with my uncle because I'm like a son to him. He said he never wants to have kids of his own. He'd rather just be the fun uncle, which is fine with me.

Last night I stayed with my uncle for a little while after school, and he told me about this crazy chase he got into the night before: the pigs were on his tail, and he had like a pound of drugs in his car. He said he was playing it cool though, because he knew he could shake them. He whipped his car into this side back road that no one knows about, and just like that, the police lost him. I imagine it was kinda like an episode of *Cops*, except the cops lost.

The way my uncle talks about everything makes it seem like it's so easy. So easy that I think I could do it at my elementary school. So right after my uncle finished his story about his chase, and he got up to go to the restroom, I snuck to his drawer where I knew he kept some of his drugs. Inside, I found a snack-sized Ziploc bag full of fuzzy nuggets that kinda looked like green poop, and smelt even worse, and another Ziploc of white powdery stuff that looked like a piece of chalk if I smushed it all up. I only took those two bags, because I had to make sure I had a demand for my product, like my uncle always said, before I took more to school. This seemed like plenty for me to sell in one day.

I already have a plan for it. I'm going to wait all day Monday and not say a word about it until we get to Kids Club after school. Once we get there, we'll have snack time, and all the grades will combine. I'll go over to the cool sixth grade section to see if anyone wants any, because I'm sure they will. They'll probably actually know how to use it and everything. I think I'll charge them two dollars a little nugget or a pinch of the white stuff. If I have any left over after that, I'll go to my grade or younger and I'll up the price to five dollars, because they don't really know anything about drugs, so they'll take

whatever price I give them. That should put me up at least twenty dollars profit. Not too bad for my first time, I'd say.

Then, once I've sold everything, I'll go to my uncle to tell him what I've done. Except this time, instead of borrowing his drugs, I'll be able to buy my own from him with that twenty dollars, and then I'll resell them again at school to make an even bigger profit. It's all about supply and demand. Once I got them with the good prices, I'll just raise it up some until I'm making thousands of dollars like my uncle.

My uncle's gonna be so proud. I wouldn't be surprised if he asks me to start selling for him, like business partners or something. Then, I might be able to buy my own pair of Gucci flip-flops. How cool would that be? Matching with my uncle and selling drugs.

Nayla and James

I could feel her eyes on me, giving me that look, ya know, the look that all teachers perfect. The one that you feel all the way in your insides. The one that makes your stomach turn and your palms sweat.

Only I'd never gotten this look. I'd only seen it given to my peers, my brother. In all my years at this elementary school, six to be exact, I'd stayed out of trouble and kept to myself. I did my homework and almost always said thank you. But now, I found myself in the red chair in Principal Jones's office.

I had always liked her office. I walked past it daily. The gray slate walls covering the entire school seemed a little bit brighter in there. And now that I was inside, looking anywhere but actually at Mrs. Jones, I was able to take everything in. She had navy blue curtains that were covered in pink and yellow polka dots. She had pictures of former students in frames in an assortment of colors and shapes scattered on the walls. Her desk was messy, but the clean sort of messy. She had books stacked on one side, with her laptop on top. Homemade pencil holders that read "#1 Teacher" and "#1 Mom" lined her desk with almost anything but pencils inside—instead pipe cleaner creations, bubble wands, and Popsicle stick puppets found their homes within the dried clay. There was a plastic machine the shape of a Hershey's Kiss with a hole in the top on the table beside me that changed colors every few minutes, from pink to purple to blue to green and so on, that blew out a mist that smelled like peppermints. I wanted to ask her what in the

world that thing was, but that would require me to talk, which is something that I had been refusing to do ever since I entered this room.

"Nayla . . . what you say in here, is between you and me. You know that, right? I can promise you it doesn't have to leave these walls."

The kindness of her words physically hurt a little, and I didn't even know that was possible. I glanced up, but her gaze was the same. My eyes shot back down. I had already told the story three times this morning when I arrived at school. I really didn't want to repeat it again in here, to her, of all people.

My brother, James, is currently in the hospital. In the ICU, to be exact. Dad brought James there on Friday evening, a little while after he was picked up from Kids Club, the extended school program that our elementary school runs. When Dad first brought him into the hospital, he was beaten up pretty badly. I remember looking at the skin underneath his t-shirt, already shades of blue and purple that appeared slightly softer than the rest of his skin. It kind of reminded me of when we would get blueberry muffins for breakfast at school, only I guess the cafeteria ladies never really cooked them all the way, because they were always mushy, and the blue from the berries would seep into the dough around it. Just like the blood under James's skin.

I remember touching his skin and thinking this was something only a mom would be able to fix. Except our parents aren't together anymore. I don't really remember a time when they were. They split up when I was four, so I have a few memories, but they are only in my head, because when Mom left, Dad burnt any traces left of her. That bonfire was something I still remember, but I guess you can't really say that was a memory of

when they were together. Anyways, Dad raised us. He never told us what happened with mom, and I don't dare to mention it anymore. I feel bad for him sometimes. But sometimes I think it was his fault.

"Tell us just one more time about your brother, Nayla. I know it's hard for you, but we need to understand what happened so we can do our best to help the situation." Mrs. Jones got up from her chair and squatted down next to me. She put her hands on my hand. "If you don't feel comfortable in here we can walk around the school a bit while you talk, if you want?" Her eyes searched mine for a response. I shook my head and started to open my mouth. But closed it again. My words instead turned to tears, and I moved my hand from her grip to wipe away the salty, warm stream running down my cheeks. "How about you go get some water and take a few deep breaths. You can come back here if you want, or you can go back to class. Either way, just try to recall if there's any information that you might have forgotten that would help us. Just know, I want the same things you do, Nayla. I want your brother to get better. I want you both to feel safe."

After the tears dried, I left the office and walked towards the water fountain, I tried recalling the details of the conversations I had earlier that day, and the twist in my stomach turned harder. My dad had stormed into the school threatening them all that he would sue when he dropped me off this morning. His outburst was followed by teachers, counselors, the principal all coming to me, asking to clarify.

"Umm yes ma'am," I stammered unsure how to act when confronted. "Well it was one of the kids from school during Kids Club. I don't know who, and I don't know why. I wasn't with him then; I was with my grade." I pulled at the lace at the bottom of my light pink t-shirt, a bad habit of mine that dad always yelled at me about saying that if I wanted to stretch out my clothes, I would have to buy my own. "But my dad is right, one of the teachers should have stopped it I guess. If they had, James wouldn't be in a coma right now."

She looked confused. I knew she was running through the timeline in her head, "So James was conscious when your dad picked him up?"

"Yes, he was fine enough then. I guess it just kind of hit him when we got home; I don't know how things like this work. I don't really want to talk about it anymore." That was the third time I told the story, and I wanted it to be the last. But of course, that's when I was led to Mrs. Jones's office to be questioned again.

The water from the fountain hit my lips, but I didn't drink any. I kept the button pressed and let the chill from the water numb my mouth. I guess it wasn't fair that I wasn't giving them all the information. I guess I could have told them that when Dad picked us up Friday, I could smell whiskey lingering on his breath as he asked me how my day was and asked my brother why he had gotten yet another phone call from the school about his behavior. I guess I could have mentioned that I had been taken to my friend's house for a couple hours—a surprise to both her and me. I guess I could have told them that I didn't remember my brother complaining about getting hurt during Kids

Club that day. I guess I could have told them that the second I sat down in the backseat of my dad's beat-up 2000-something pickup truck, the only thought that ran through my head was to open the door and jump out. I guess I could've told them that my dad had that fire in his eyes that he got sometimes, like a reflection of the flames that held all the clothes, pictures, and memories of my mother. I guess I could have told them that the first thing I noticed when my dad picked me back up from my friend's on the way to the hospital with James were the bruises on James's skin, bruises the size of Dad's fists, bruises that weren't there before, bruises that I maybe could have stopped if I hadn't gotten out of the car when my dad told me to go to my friend's. I guess I could have told them that when my dad saw my reaction to James, he pulled the car over, reached back, grabbed me by the jaw and pushed out the words, "I can't believe they would let something like this happen at school, huh Nayla?" between clinched teeth. I guess I could have told them that that was his way of telling me to never tell a soul. I guess I could have told them a lot of things.

Jonah

In the cafeteria, there are two lines to get your lunch, one for each meal choice we have that day. There are about five teaching assistants monitoring the cafeteria. I say “about” because Ms. Kittrell doesn’t really count . . . She has a crush on the gym teacher. Everyone knows it. He always comes by when she’s on lunch duty, so really fourth grade could get away with whatever they want. Which is annoying. There are seven pieces of gum stuck underneath the bathroom sign. You’re supposed to stick a piece of gum under the sign if you get a girl to go to the bathroom with you and you kiss her in there. Michael has squished his chewed-up gum under there three times already this year. I don’t really believe him. There are five trashcans lining the back wall. There used to be six, but one sixth grader snuck up behind the cans and wrote “FUCK SCHOOL” in big, white letters so I guess they got rid of that one. . . along with the sixth grader, because I haven’t seen him back since. There are nine long rectangular tables, each with twenty seats. In between all the rectangular tables, there are three circle tables, each with ten seats. In the circle table closest to the back wall, in the seat furthest away from anyone, that’s my seat.

I didn’t choose this seat, but at this point I like to pretend I did. So I call it *my* seat and I kinda like it. It’s better than when I had to sit with my actual class. They were loud and always tried to get me to give them my milk. Plus, at the rectangle tables you have to sit so much closer to other people, and I like the elbow space I get at my circle table. So now I look at lunch like it’s a break from my class. The only problem is that it can get kind of boring at the circle tables because no one really sits there unless you’re in trouble

and you have to be quiet, but that's when I go through my list of things to count to help pass the time. I never do anything bad, not like Michael or that sixth grader with the white paint pen. All I did to get this spot at the round table is . . . sleep. And my teacher just really doesn't like that.

I've tried to *not* sleep. I've tried counting things in my classroom to keep me awake and entertained, just like I do in the cafeteria. Before I know it, my mind turns the books on the shelf into sheep jumping over the moon, and there I am dozing off again. I think the problem is that my classroom is too cozy. Ms. Martin has little Christmas lights strung all around the room, and she has air fresheners that let out mists of warm vanilla every twenty minutes or so. She also has a very soothing voice, just like she was right out of one of those lullabies we used to listen to in kindergarten or something. That is why I fall asleep. Well that, and because I don't sleep much at night.

Since my mom and her boyfriend broke up at the beginning of the school year, my mom and I have stayed wherever she could find a pillow, or wadded up t-shirt, to put under our heads. We've stayed at the Red Roof Inn with one of my mom's co-workers, but she kicked us out because she said my mom stole from her. I know that's not true, because my mom has always told me never to steal, so I told that lady she was wrong. But I think that made her even more mad, so then she dumped out all of our bags over the balcony of her room. Mom says she has anger-management issues. After that, we stayed at the Walmart behind the boxes in one of the aisles. That was probably my favorite place to stay, even though it wasn't very comfortable, because it was almost like we were invisible. We could see other people, but they couldn't see us. Mom made it like a fort inside, so it seemed more like a home, with decorations from other aisles. We had a teal

shag carpet in the middle, a plush stuffed dog with “bad to the bone” embroidered on its stomach, and this cool desk light that we couldn’t actually plug in anywhere. Recently, we’ve been staying under the bridge over by McDonald’s, which is convenient because sometimes a nice stranger will give us some nuggets or a burger. I miss our old home, though. In these new places I can always manage to sleep a little, but never enough. When I’m sleeping at night, my dreams get jumbled up with the worries I have about my mom and if she is comfortable and if she is ok. So, that’s why I sleep during the school day, because when I’m sleeping in the classroom, I don’t have to worry about anything. I know my mom’s safe. She’s at her job she tells me about. So, I know she’s safe.

Almost every day I try to explain this all to my teacher, that I’m just tired. But she doesn’t care, because here I am again at my seat in the cafeteria. I sneak my carrots into my pocket for my mom. She loves carrots. The other boy at the round table stares at me shoving them into my pocket. I don’t know who he is. I’ve never shared my table with him before. He’s wondering what I’m doing, and I don’t care. At least he doesn’t try to ask me, so I don’t have to try to explain to another person who wouldn’t get it.

Coming back to the classroom, my teacher pulls me out to the hallway. The normal talk, I assume. *Jonah, you need to try to stay awake in my class. Jonah, you’re missing valuable information. Jonah, we have this conversation every week.* I just always say yes ma’am to really anything she says. Mom told me to always use my manners to get me out of trouble. That’s something the kids in my school forget, I think. But, instead of the talk I was preparing for in my head, Ms. Martin holds my hand. I don’t like the way it feels. It’s damp and cold like a dog’s nose. I’m allergic to dogs. I wiggle my fingers around, and she loosens her grip.

“Mmm... how was lunch sweetie?” She asks me in her first-day-of-school voice, a tone I haven’t heard since the actual first day of school.

“It was good?” I can’t help but make my statement a question.

“Okay, good.” Her eyes look down the long, crowded hallway, and she gives me one of the classroom’s crayon-shaped hall passes, “You, um, have a visitor up front. You can stay up there as long as you need, ok?”

It takes every ounce of me not to roll my eyes into the back of my skull. I already know who it is.

“Ok, thanks.” My feet move slowly underneath me. I want to slow them down even more, but then I wouldn’t be moving at all, and I know she won’t leave until I talk to her.

Cassidy has dark brown, curly hair that she usually wears in a weird half bun thing. She’s very skinny and tall and awkward, like a giraffe. That’s the perfect way to describe her—a giraffe. A giraffe that wears long skirts that always go down to her ankles and red-rimmed plastic glasses. I have met Cassidy three times now. The first time, she came to school during my gym class. The second time, she came to the Red Roof Inn when we were living there. And now, the third time, she’s back at my school. I’m glad she didn’t cut into my lunchtime.

“Hiya, Jonah! How are you doing today?” She beams at me with her almost too-white teeth.

“Great,” I reply. We both know I don’t mean it.

“We need to talk about some things, ok? Let’s head into Dr. Powell’s office.” She pats my shoulder, and leads me into the guidance counselor’s room, except Dr. Powell isn’t there.

I sit on the couch in the office and curl my legs up underneath of me. She chooses to sit across from me in just a normal chair, which is weird because there’s a beanbag in the office. I don’t know why she would choose a plain, hard chair over a beanbag. Honestly, I don’t know why I didn’t choose the beanbag. But I don’t want to move now.

“Jonah, I wanted to be the one to talk to you about this. I didn’t want this to come as a surprise for you later today...” Immediately, my mind overflows with thoughts of my mom.

“What happened to my mom? What did you do to my mom?” I speak uneasily, each word that comes out of my mouth seems like I pronounce it wrong.

“Your mom is going to be ok, Jonah.” She speaks calmly.

“Going to—going to be? Is she not now? Where is my mom? What happened to my mom?” I can’t see straight anymore. The outline of Cassidy’s body in front of me smears with the tears building up in my eyes.

“Jonah, I need you to just listen to me for a minute, ok? No need to get worked up when you don’t know what’s happening yet.”

“No, no. I know. I know I know. Mom told me all about you. I know everything. We don’t like you, ok? We don’t. So, can you just go talk to someone else? Anyone else?”

I'm ok, mom's ok. We really don't need you to come ask us questions. Can I see my mom? Is my mom here? Is she at her job?"

"No, she's not here right now. But the good news is she's getting a job so—"

"See you obviously don't know anything. She doesn't need to get a job, she has a job. You're dumb. She *has* a job. Is that where she is now?" My teeth grit together in rage. This is just exactly like Cassidy, coming into my school to tell me lies about my mom. Just exactly like Mom said. She warned me about this the first time Cassidy ever visited me. Mom told me to listen carefully, that everything she says is a lie, so I did. That's how I know she's not telling the truth right now. This woman wants me to never see my mom again, and I don't understand it. But that isn't going to happen. Not to me. Not after everything me and mom have gone through. This woman is stupid. Just plain stupid. I guess that's why she didn't pick the beanbag, because she's stupid.

"Ok Jonah, I really need you to listen to me. We can make this as easy as you make it. Do you need to take a minute?" Her voice is stern now, which is ridiculous, because if anyone's voice needs to get stern it is mine.

"No, I don't need a *minute*. What is so important that you need to take me out of class for, again? Have more questions for me? Want me to go over my sleeping arrangements again for you? Need to write that down? Need—"

"Jonah . . ."

"Cassidy . . ."

“You won’t be seeing your mom for a while . . . until she can get this job, make some money, and find you both a permanent place to sleep. Until then, you will be living with a foster family.” Her eyes stare straight into mine. She tries to hide it, but I know I see her hold back a smile. Just a little twitch in the corner, but enough for me to catch onto her game even more. This must be fun for her.

“You . . . you bitch,” those are the only words I can find before I can’t hold it back any longer. The tears welling up in my eyes finally escape, pouring down my face, just like I’m a child again.

“Your foster family will pick you up today as a car rider. Their names are Deborah and Rick, they have no other kids. They’re good people. You’ll have your own bed to sleep in and good food to eat in the morning. Do you have any questions for me? How this all works?” It’s almost like she doesn’t care that my whole life is falling apart. It’s like she isn’t noticing the constant stream of water running from my eyes that I can’t stop.

I take a pause.

“Will you at least do something for me?” I try to hold myself back together.

“Of course, I will. What can I do?” She returns to the calm voice she used from the beginning of our talk.

“Will you give these to my mom? I always bring these to her,” I reach inside my pocket and grab the warm, wet plastic bag of carrots I had saved from my lunch.

“Yes, I will,” she nods and smiles without her teeth and places the carrots in her bag. I really hope she does, because I know what I have to do now.

“Also tell her I love her, and I will see her soon,” I say, standing up, my heart racing. Cassidy looks at me, her eyes confused behind her bright red rims. I look right back, just like she did when she told me I wasn’t going to see my mom for a while. Our eyes lock, and I can tell she knows what’s going to happen next.

I begin to run, as fast as I can, down the hallway lined with inspirational quotes and colorful paper crafts. They flip up as I run past them. I want to tear them down. Their positivity mocks me. I need to find my mom. I don’t need the help of another family. Running is the only option. Cassidy shouts down the hallway behind me to stop, only I know she can’t chase after me. It’s against the rules. No teachers can ever run after students.

In front of me, the glass doors to the outside serve as my finish line. I can see the cars zooming past, the birds gliding through the air, the clouds floating aimlessly. That will be me soon. I just need to break through those doors, and my prize will be freedom. My pace quickens, making this the fastest I’ve ever run, Cassidy still screeching in the background.

But just as fast as I find my pace, I lose it all the same. My shoelace unravels, thread by thread beneath me, and before I can blink my eyes, the palm of my hands meet the tile, my face inches away from the floor. Out behind me, Dr. Powell grabs my hands and crosses them over my chest, squeezing me tight, just like I was one of the kids in special ed.

“Come on Jonah, come on buddy,” he whispers as I finally fall apart, relaxing all my muscles, tears cleaning the dusty tile below me. I am a foster child now.

Kiera

Which is better: a closet full of clothes or a jail cell? You might say, seems like two strange things to compare. Apples to oranges. But I would ask again. You might say, um probably a closet full of clothes.

You might say a closet full of clothes, because when you imagine a closet full of clothes, you see colorful dresses and shirts and pretty little shoes lined in a row. It might make you think of walking into your closet at the beginning of the week with all your fresh, clean laundry hung in order from red to orange to yellow to green to blue. It might make you think of the seasons changing and switching out the sweaters in your wardrobe with polka-dotted sundresses and big floppy hats. You might say a closet full of clothes because, to you, that closet holds pieces of clothing that allow you to express who you want to be.

But, more importantly, you might say a closet full of clothes because you've never spent an entire night in a closet full of clothes, crying and slamming your fists on the door to get out, until you eventually lose hope and collapse on a pile of dirty t-shirts beneath you. You might say a closet full of clothes because you've never experienced just how incredibly dark it is with the door shut and the lights off, and how every second it seems that the walls shrink down closer to you. You might say a closet full of clothes because you've never sat in that space wondering how you could use your collection of belts to choke yourself to death so you would never have to find yourself here again.

In school last year, my teacher had us watch a documentary about prisons in the United States. It was interesting, really, because when you think of prison, you think of damp, scary cells that you're locked in with another person pooping beside you. You don't think of free time or solid food or organized sports teams or the freedom that you actually have when you're locked up. The documentary made sure to tell us that it wasn't always good for the prisoners though, that sometimes there are a couple of bad apples, but usually those prisoners would get sent to solitary confinement. The other billion zillion prisoners can do pretty much whatever they want. They shoot basketball, they do drugs, they read books, they play cards, they work out. Yeah, they have to sleep in a room with another person, and I'm sure the beds aren't very comfy, but that's probably the worst part of it all. So, in a way, I can't really be mad that when I say "closet full of clothes," you think your happy thoughts. Just like when people used to say "jail cell," I would think awful, pitiful thoughts for the prisoners. But now, I look at things from a different angle.

About seven years ago, my mom died from cancer. Yes, it was awful. Yes, I still cry about it. Yes, I always keep a pink ribbon on my backpack. But, no, I don't actually really remember her at all. I remember watching home videos of her and thinking how much we looked alike. I remember my dad telling me about how much she loved to sing, so then of course I figured that I loved to sing as well. I remember looking at pictures of me with my hair braided so beautifully, and dad would tell me that that was all my mom's doing. I remember those things, but I don't remember her at all.

What I do remember is my time with my dad during those next five years. My dad was, hands down, the coolest dad in the whole world, so cool that I even made him a mug

at a paint-your-own-pottery place that said that exact statement. My dad wanted us to experience things together, he said that's what mom always wanted us to do when she was alive. So, we made this pact that every weekend we would make it our mission to find something new and fun to do with each other. One week we went on a hike to the biggest waterfall I had ever seen, and then we snuck behind it to sit on the rock and look at the world from the inside. Another week, we had a competition to see who could make the best dessert using only the ingredients we had in our cabinet. I'm pretty sure all I did was microwave three different types of chocolate chips together and pour it over a piece of bread, but dad ate it anyways, and I won the challenge. The next week, we went to the pet store and bought all kinds of glow-in-the-dark fish and took the next three hours naming them and giving them each their own backstory. Overall, my dad was a good dad. Better than any dad I could have ever asked for.

And he loved my mom so much. He made sure to remind me all the time, any chance he got. But still, I would always wonder if my dad would ever remarry. Since I really don't remember my mom, it was never a huge deal for me. I liked that it was just me and my dad, but at the same time, I didn't want my dad to be lonely. If anyone deserved to have a beautiful, loving wife, it was him. I decided, about five years after my mom died, that my dad needed to go on a date. I bugged him about it so much that he eventually did.

His girlfriend's name was Tina. She was very pretty. She had glossy, black hair and olive skin. She was petite, and she smiled a lot. She always wore a maroon-colored lipstick, so when she did smile, her teeth seemed almost florescent against her dark lips and skin. I really liked that. In the beginning of their relationship, Tina was everything I

wanted for my dad. She was nice to me, taking me to get my nails done, hair trimmed, and training bras fitted, things my dad had slacked on in the past five years. She seamlessly joined into our weekly adventures, even suggesting new things we should do, like try ice skating or strawberry picking. And she was so, so sweet to my dad, showering him with plates full of ribs and potatoes and tickets to his favorite sporting events. He was happy. I was happy.

Their relationship continued for a year when they decided to get married. Dad, of course, asked me first if I would allow him to ask for Tina's hand. He explained that this meant we would move in with Tina, and she would be my stepmom. But he reminded me that I would always be his #1 girl, although it never even crossed my mind that that would change. I remember my dad beaming as he showed me the ring he picked out—a simple, yet elegant, round diamond surrounded by multiple smaller blue gems. He told me how he planned to take her to the restaurant where they had their first date, and have the waiter put “will you marry me” in chocolate sauce on the plate of their cheesecake for dessert.

As soon as the I dos were said, Tina changed. I guess you could say that I should have seen enough Cinderella movie spin-offs to see that coming. But somehow, I didn't. Tina turned from a sweet makeshift mom to a hateful, mean, evil stepmom. But the problem was, my dad didn't see it. She would belittle me in front of him, pushing at my biggest insecurities, things I had shared in confidence with the previous version of Tina. She would throw away my things and swear she didn't know where they went when my dad asked. But she never did anything too bad until my dad got a promotion. From then

on, he had to travel three days out of the week, every week, leaving Tina and me alone for seventy-two whole hours.

It was in this time that I realized just how nice a jail cell would be, as opposed to a closet full of clothes. Tina found that if I did anything she didn't like, all she would have to do was throw me into the closet and prop the couch up in front of the door so I couldn't get out. Time-out, she would say. But this time-out would last for entire days at a time. Sitting in the dark, cold closet. Without food. Without air. Without my dad to help me.

When she would finally let me out, she would remind me that I could never tell my dad or much, much worse things would happen, and not only to me. I would cry and cry. Helpless. Which would lead me back to the closet, because Tina had a no-whining policy. Eight hours in the closet for shedding a tear for any reason. When dad came home, he would hold me tight and ask me how my weekend was without him. He would ask me what adventure Tina and I found this week. I would smile and Tina would answer for me, tales of birdwatching and scarf-knitting would emerge from her mouth, painting the room further with her lies. She would kiss him on the cheek, and he was happy. I couldn't bear to steal my dad's love from him. And even more, I couldn't bear to see what Tina would do to me or him if I told him about my trips to the closet. So instead I had to do what would be best for me—get arrested.

I had never been in a fight before, but I had seen a few. There were fights at my elementary school all the time. Usually, they ended with the school police officer coming to take the fighters to his office. I assumed, from there, they would get put in jail, because why else would the officer take them? All drains lead to the ocean, all fights lead to a jail

cell, right? There wasn't anyone in my class that I didn't like, let alone wanted to fight, but I picked Nayla, because she was small and didn't seem like she would throw that much of a punch back. I didn't want to hurt her, really, just do enough for them to find me unfit to continue to attend school here and put me in jail where I belonged.

Once I had my target set, I walked into school determined and excited to never see that closet or Tina ever again. I basically skipped into class and took a seat in my chair. I had planned to do it in the cafeteria, because that's where the most fights happen at school, and I wanted it to seem normal. But fifteen minutes into Morning Meeting, I couldn't hold it back any longer. I stood up from my chair and walked straight up to Nayla. Can I help you, she asked. Sure can. I punched her square in the nose. Everything in that moment went so fast that no one understood what happened; the whole class got extremely quiet, even Nayla, until she was able to process the events that occurred. She let out a squeal, not a happy squeal, but like a hurt squeal, sort of like a wounded walrus, and in that moment, I realized just how much that hurt my hand as well. I didn't expect that kind of power to come from my fist, but it did, shooting all the way up my arm. Bright red blood poured from Nayla's nose and my stomach turned. I did that. My teacher ran to Nayla with wet paper towels and a frozen smiley face she kept in the mini freezer in case of injuries. I waited for the officer to barge through the door, but he never came.

So, I went to him instead, running down the hallway, tears filling my eyes. I punched Nayla, Officer Fitz. Arrest me. Free me.

Only fights don't lead to jail, they lead to Out of School Suspension. Did you know that?

Jay and Corey

It'll be hard to move away. I've lived here my whole life. A solid 10 years. I've had the same best friends since we were all in Ms. Holt's kindergarten class. Seriously, they're my day 1's. I'm gonna miss them a lot. They've been here for me through everything, like when my dog ran away or when my dad and mom got a divorce, and me and my bro had to move in with my grandparents. And they've also been here for exciting times like my last birthday when I finally turned double digits or when I won the race against the boys in my grade, making me the fastest boy on the playground. So yeah, it won't be easy to not have them down the street from me anymore, just a block away to play or talk with any time I want.

I'll also miss my basketball team. I never joined the school team here or anything, because mom couldn't afford it, but we did have a team of our own in Kids Club, my school's after-hours program, and all the best players were on that team anyways. We'd easily beat the school team eight out of ten times we played them. I'm sure of it. I'd bet money on it. With me on point guard and Elijah on shooting guard, we are unstoppable. Half of them on the school team aren't even good. Their parents are just rich. Everyone knows that.

But the hardest goodbye will be Corey, for sure. I mean, that's my li'l bro. The prodigy. He's a smart boy, a *really* smart boy. Like sometimes I don't even understand what he's saying because he's so smart, and he's only six! He can name every single type

of shark there ever was and tell you what ocean they are most likely to be found in and what they like to eat and how to get away from one if it's attacking you. He remembers every person he meets—first and last name—and how he met them. He learned how to tie his shoes before he knew how to talk, which was impressive considering I was still wearing Velcro shoes at that point, but I'd never admit that to him.

He's a good kid, but sometimes he throws these crazy tantrums. I'm talking . . . crazy. He flails around and flaps his hands like he's a bird and screams at the top of his lungs. It can be embarrassing when we're in public, but I always try to calm him down. It's just tough because so many things set him off. I keep a list of everything on a piece of paper in a journal I hide in my room, in case someone else needs it one day. Since I'm leaving him now, I guess I'll give it to Grammy and Pops, but they already know everything.

Things that make Corey scream:

- Turning lights on and off like strobe lights
- When people call his whales dolphins or sharks
- When his food touches other food on his plate
- The color neon yellow
- When people touch his hair
- When people pronounce his name wrong or spell it wrong
- If someone doesn't say "bless you" after he sneezes
- Getting wet

I'm sure there are a couple things I'm missing, and sometimes random things set him off, but those are the major ones. Some of them are easy to steer clear from, like making sure we buy the paper plates that look like lunch trays so none of his food will touch. But some of them are harder, like avoiding water, because we still can't find a way to give Corey a bath without him hollering his head off.

Usually he's good for me, though, because I'm his big bro. He looks up to me. If I tell him it's gonna be ok, he usually starts to get better pretty quickly. He doesn't do that with everyone. At school sometimes they will even have me come down to his classroom if he starts to throw a fit. I just talk to him for a little bit, maybe toss him a basketball to pass back and forth or ask him about his whales. I am calm when I talk to him. I think that's the difference between me and other people with my brother. He does not like when people are stressed out. I guess I should add that to the list.

I don't want to go with my mom. I'd much rather just stay with my grandparents, but I don't really have an option because my mom technically still has full say in what I do. Last month, Mom met this man named Gerald at the gas station she works at, and I guess they fell in love and want to get married. The only problem is that Gerald lives in Louisiana and has his own business down there, so he said mom will have to come with him, because he won't move to Tennessee. None of this actually involves me, so I thought I would be able to stay here where my home is. But the other problem is that mom is pregnant now, and she said that she won't be able to take care of the baby while she's working nights and Gerald is running his company, so I'm gonna have to do it. I mean, I have done a good job taking care of Corey, so I can see why she would want me to come, but it's not fair. I'll be leaving behind my whole entire life, my friends, my

basketball career. And my bro doesn't even get to come with me. Actually, my mom said very clearly that Corey isn't *allowed* to come. I think it's because of his tantrums. Mom doesn't do well with those, which I'm guessing is part of the reason we were sent to our grandparents' house in the first place.

There was a boy in my class last year, Devon, who threw fits like my brother, and only wanted to talk about trains, just like Corey only wants to talk about whales. My teacher told us at the beginning of the year that Devon had Autism, and that he had some needs that were a little different from ours. He would be in the classroom for half of the day with us, and then the other half, he would go to the special education classroom. After she explained this to us, everyone in the class, for the most part, was nice to him and helped him any time we could. We all entertained his train facts and random *chooo chooo*'s from the back of the classroom when he got excited about something.

But even though Corey was so similar to Devon, my brother's experience with his classmates was a lot different from Devon's. The kids mocked Corey all the time, causing Corey to get upset and get in trouble. One time, Corey bit another kid in Kids Club because the other kid was making fun of him for creating a dorsal fin out of construction paper and taping it to his back like a shark. Corey told me he bit him because he was a shark, and the other kids shouldn't laugh at a shark, because they could kill you, which I suppose is a valid point. Another time, Corey emptied a whole bottle of neon yellow paint on one of the girls in his class, because she said he had to use that color to paint the sun, but Corey doesn't like that color, and she knew that. There were many other times that Corey got in trouble for screaming at someone or hitting someone for teasing him or

doing something he didn't like. But it didn't make sense to me, because no one ever treated Devon the way they treated Corey—like an alien or an annoyance.

I remember one day, I finally had enough of it. I marched right up to Mrs. Stevens, the lady in charge of the whole Kids Club, and demanded that Corey get the same treatment as Devon.

“Jay, Devon has Autism. Corey does not.”

“But they act the same. They do the same things.”

“Your mother told us that your brother did not have any special needs when you first started coming here, buddy. Therefore, we cannot put your brother in the same classes as Devon, and we definitely cannot tell the other children to mind Corey's special needs.”

“Well, that's just messed up. I'm gonna talk to my grammy about that.”

“Go ahead, but ultimately it will have to be your mother that says whether or not we can do anything for your brother.”

I knew my mom wouldn't listen to me, though. So, I never even tried. Maybe now that Mom will be in a different state, Grammy and Pops will be able to get Corey in the classes Devon is in. Maybe.

Kaylynn

I think he started dying the day my mom died.

Fridays were my favorite days because on Fridays he would always pick me up from school in his shiny, black jeep, and we would always swing by Dairy Queen just before we turned into our neighborhood to go home. He tried to trick me every time though, saying that he forgot his wallet or that he wasn't in the mood for ice cream today. But, just as it was almost too late, he would whip the jeep right into the drive-thru. He didn't even have to ask what I wanted, he already knew. Because we got the same thing every time. Even on the days I wanted something else, I kept my lips shut, scared that I would break our tradition. We would race to see who could eat their Blizzard the fastest. I always won but suffered the consequences when my brain froze, and I had to stick my thumb to the roof of my mouth to relieve it. A little trick he taught me. And just when we were about to pull into the driveway, he would make me pinky promise with my small, chocolate-covered finger to never tell Mom that we had dessert before dinner . . . again. Looking back now, though, there's no way Mom didn't know. My ice-cream mustache had to be a telltale sign. But then again, I'm sure there were a lot of things Mom knew about Dad that he thought he kept secret from her. Maybe that's why, when we walked into the house that Friday afternoon, we found Mom asleep. And not even the doctors could wake her up. They told me not to blame it on me or anyone else. They told me that she just wasn't herself anymore.

I would understand when I'm older. But I already understand. Dad made her feel funny. Like he made me. And she couldn't take it anymore.

I loved my daddy, I really did. But after that things weren't the same. He didn't talk for months, and the only way I knew he knew I was still there was because he sat out a plate for me at supper, filled with leftover pizza or a frozen dinner, barely thawed. I would eat it anyway, careful not to dismantle the only acknowledgment I got from him. He would eat in silence as I told him all about my day, how high of a reading level I had, and how much I didn't like math, which is why I wasn't making my best grade in that class, but that my teacher said I was doing well anyways. I didn't tell my dad, but I think she just felt bad that my mom died. Most people did. They thought, because I was so young, that I couldn't pick up on the whispers and desperate stares I got as I walked by. But I did.

Eventually my dad started to talk to me again. Only this time it was different. My dad had always been sweet to me, made sure to remind me how much he loved me and spoiled me endlessly with stuffed animals whenever he came home from a business trip. But now his tone was just a little bit softer when he told me he loved me, running his fingers through my hair and massaging my back before bed. And this nightly routine soon led to me waking up in my dad's room the next morning to scratchy, bearded kisses on my small, warm cheeks. I guess he moved me there during the night to be with him. I think he just missed Mom, and I was the closest thing to her.

When we went out, he would dress me in oversized sweaters of my mom's and yell at people for getting too close to me. He didn't want anything to happen to his baby girl. But, in the privacy of our own four walls, he didn't make me wear mom's old clothes. Instead, we played dress-up. We played a lot of dress-up. It was fun pretending, and Dad

had a wild imagination. Some days he would be my doctor, checking my whole body for my yearly check-up. Other days, he would lie down on the couch and have me give him massages from his head to his toes. It was almost like I owned my own spa! Most days he wouldn't make me go to school anymore. He said that it didn't matter, that I needed to be with him. I think he caught onto the puppy-dog stares I was getting from my teachers and friends, and he didn't want me to have to deal with that.

Only what he didn't know was that, even when I did go to school, I didn't deal with it anyways. I didn't look at my teacher when she asked me questions anymore, not even during morning meeting when we could share fun things like what our favorite color was or what we wanted to be when we grew up. I just didn't say a word. Not even to my best friends. Everyone blamed the silence on me losing my mom, and I let them think that, but that wasn't it. Some of the other teachers in my hall would come in my room and sit down with me to try to get me to talk, but I never budged. It was funny, kind of, because after I wouldn't reply, they would turn to talk to my teacher just like I lost my hearing as well as my voice. But I hadn't. They thought I should be sent off somewhere to a school for *special* needs. I wondered if they would understand there that I could hear.

Even though I wanted to respond to them, I just decided it was easier to not say anything, because Dad started to make a lot of pinky promises with me, like the ones we used to make before we saw Mom on Fridays after school. But now they were oaths to never tell anyone, ever. I didn't know what he didn't want me to tell, so I just nodded my head and didn't say anything. After we would intertwine our pinkies, he would touch me a lot, sometimes real soft and sometimes real hard. But either way, it started to hurt me. My stomach would flip any time my dad came towards me with his pinky outstretched, and I

soon realized these weren't the secrets I wanted to keep. I missed our old sticky-fingered pinky promises. I missed my old dad.

That's when I decided that he was sick, that *he just wasn't himself anymore*, that he was dying just like my mom died. Only this time, I didn't want it to be a surprise. I didn't want to walk into the room and find him sleeping. I thought, it's my turn to play doctor.

So that morning, when my dad was heating up the water for our shower, I snuck to the back part of his closet—the part that had all of mom's clothes. I dug through her drawer full of fuzzy socks, gloves, and hats for the winter. The warmth of the wool on my fingertips was interrupted by a cool metal in the bottom right hand corner of the drawer. Right where mom said it would be, if there were ever a stranger in the house. I was barely able to grip my hands around the base of the long, sharp knife as I held it behind my back and walked towards the bathroom. The door swung open, my dad standing in the doorway. My heart jumped as I examined the twisted, dark hair that covered his body. He came towards me, unbuttoned my shirt, and pulled my hair to get my face closer to his.

Carson

There aren't a lot of people you can go to during a time like this. There aren't a lot of people that understand. Though some *think* that they do. My relatives, for example, shower me with pictures of my dad and home videos of him playing with me and memories of some special moment they had with him. They tell me how good of a guy he was. How everyone just lit up when he came around, baring the most warming and welcoming heart of all.

I've noticed people tend to exaggerate when a death occurs, turning my average dad into the protagonist of the world. Or maybe making me the protagonist of the world? Insisting good things are destined to happen to me like some perfectly written novel. Now that my dad died? *It gets better from here. You're so much stronger now.* But I'm not sure exactly how that adds up. How can one tragic event equal a sunshine-fairy-rainbow world of happiness from here on out? My favorite saying of all is when people, strangers, friends, teachers, my mother, inform me that *he's in a better place now,*
Carson.

A better place.

A better place? How do you know?

Because if I had to guess, I would say he's in Hell.

He sure isn't in Heaven, if that place even exists.

But, yeah, ok. I certainly hope it is better for him. Wherever he is. I certainly hope it is.

Don't get me wrong. My dad was my favorite person when he was alive. He just wasn't Jesus 2.0 like everyone says now. He was normal, no need to exaggerate it. Like any other dad. He took me to school, he made breakfast for the family on Sundays, he poked fun at my mom with me when she would do something dramatic like say we both needed to stop watching so many sports shows because she didn't want us to get violent mindsets.

Ha.

Violent mindsets.

She did say that a lot.

Maybe she was right. Maybe I'll stop watching sports.

My mom is certain that a therapist will cure everything. Just absolutely convinced that if I taaaalk about my feelings, eventually I won't picture my dad's head splattered across our living room floor like a watermelon dropped off the top of the Empire State Building. She's sure that I'll finally be able to make peace of it all. Make peace of that random Thursday afternoon. But I've already played it back too many times to count. To me, that day will forever be nothing but chaos.

I remember being sticky when I stepped out of the bus that day. It had just rained, and the air was still thick with water. I felt weird walking to my house from the bus stop,

almost like I should have been swimming instead. I don't know if it's just the aftermath of it all, but I swear looking back it seemed like I was under water, everything in my path turning into a watercolor painting. But not a good one by Picasso or whoever does watercolor paintings. Instead, one I painted in art class in kindergarten when I didn't listen to the teacher who told us over and over to rinse off the paintbrush before you use a new color. So, my painting of a car or my family or whatever it was turned into a puddle of chocolate pudding on the page instead. I also think the world filled with water because it took more time for me to get home than usual. I was in slow motion, like the air was pushing back against me, reminding me of trying to run through the pool after screaming Marco and hearing Polo right beside me, but by the time I would trudge myself through the water, there was no one there.

As soon as I got to my house and opened the front door, the air drained. I was a fish out of water. And instantly I was wishing for a tropical storm. A tsunami. A hurricane. Something to hydrate my gills. I don't know if you know this or not, but bass are in the top five for the worst fathers in the animal kingdom. They eat their children. At first, the dad protects them from the outside world. Then, I guess the dad gets tired of that role and turns into the outside world himself, leaving the baby fish to recognize this flip and then find protection from their own protector before they get swallowed whole.

My dad didn't eat me. But he did swallow me whole. Right then, as I stepped foot into the entryway of our house. He was standing in the middle of the living room, directly in front of me. His hair, usually gelled down perfectly, looked like he had just woken up from a night of tossing and turning, tormented by his nightmares. He looked at me. Our eyes locked. I think I said *dad*, but then again, I don't know if I was able to speak in the

moment. And I'm also not sure he looked *at* me. I think *through* me might be a better way to describe it. An eternity of five seconds passed, and my eardrums stung with the shot of a bullet through my dad's head. His assassin? Himself.

Your dad loved you.

It wasn't your fault.

Maybe not.

But he had the choice to pull the trigger once he saw me. He could've stopped.

Made up a lie as to why he was standing crazed in our living room, gun in hand.

But he didn't.

Do you think a therapist can erase that scene of my life? No, a therapist can't help me. No matter how many years of schooling they have, they will never know how I feel, so they will never know how to help me. My friends, relatives, strangers can't help me. All they know are generic sympathy Hallmark card sayings. What do you say to someone who watched his dad blow his brains out? Is there a card for that? My mom can't even help me. She kind of understands. But she didn't *see* him make that decision. She wasn't there for that like I was. But she's still struggling with this. How can she help me if she can't help herself?

If I was going to talk to someone, the only person I think that could truly understand what I'm going through is this boy named Corey. Everyone knows about Corey and his crazy mom. I always thought what happened to him was awful, or at least

what everyone says. I've only ever met him once when I played a game of basketball with his brother, and I've definitely never talked to him about what happened, but now, I think it might be good for both of us to hear how selfish the people in our lives were. How much they suck. How they were better off dead from the beginning. I need someone to tell me this and be honest with me, unlike the other people in my life. I mean, I would say that about Corey's mom if he wanted me to, because, in a way, she did the same thing my dad did. When Corey was about two or three, his mom left him and his older brother for drugs maybe or guys. The story changes. Then, the boys had to go live with their grandparents, which was for the best. But then, earlier this year, their mom met this guy and got knocked up, and the guy made her move to another state. They took Corey's brother with them, but they left Corey here, because Corey's mom refused to deal with his disability.

It might be strange for a sixth grader to be going to a six-year-old for a therapy session, but who's going to question the poor boy who watched his father die? Today, I will find the opportunity to talk to him. To see if we can help each other, to see if we can reassure each other. The only people in the school who possibly could.

The bell rings. School's out, now's my time. Instead of walking to the right for the bus line, I shoot straight out of my classroom to the left towards Kids Club, where I know Corey will be. A stream full of third graders hits me from the side, jumbling me up in the crowd of everyone. I don't remember it being this crazy on the younger kids' side of the school when I was in third grade.

“Whoa whoa whoa, where ya headin’, racer?” My old third grade teacher puts his hand on my back, knowing I’m always a bus rider. Always.

“Kids Club. Mom’s switching it up these days. A lot of change is going on,” sympathy card, come on.

“Really?”

“Yup. Well, great talking to you. Don’t want to be late for my first day at the Club.” I speed past him, but I can feel his eyes tracing me weaving in and out of the oncoming traffic.

I enter the cafeteria. Random grades are scattered throughout the room talking so loudly over one another that I swear they must be holding a competition. Immediately, I’m noticed. It’s probably not normal to see a new face in here towards the end of the year. I pretend I don’t hear one of my friends from class yelling my name and waving frantically in the air. I scan the room back and forth. Corey. Corey. Corey. Where is Corey?

“Waaahoooooooo splashhhhhh waaahoooooooo!”

Whale noises? I look to the table beside me, and in the back-left corner is Corey, splashhhhhhing away. I walk towards him, preparing for the conversation in my head.

“Hey ther—”

“Carson Stewart.” My name? He stops playing with his whale toy, eyeing me now instead.

“What?”

“Carson. Stewart.” He drops his toy and points at me.

“Yes, yes. That’s my name. So . . . you remember me?”

“You got three baskets on my brother’s team. Carson Stewart.”

“Just three? No way. I was hoopin’ on—”

“Yes. Just three.” He picks up the whale again. I sit down beside him, trying to hold his attention.

“Hey, um, Corey,” I touch the fin of his whale, and he snatches it away from me.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I won’t touch it again.” Corey stares at me, his eyes questioning why I’m here. Why am I here? This wasn’t a good idea. Relating to a baby? What was I thinking? I stand up to leave.

“Carson Stewart. Sit.” I sit back down.

“Ok, um, so what I was going to talk to you about was . . . my dad.” His eyes don’t move. “Do you know about my dad?”

“No.”

“Well . . . well, my dad died.”

“Oh.” At least it wasn’t the normal fake-concerned response.

“Yeah, he died because . . . well . . .” This was way harder to get out than I thought it would be. He just looks so innocent. Like he could never understand something as ugly what happened to us. “So, your mom?” Not how I planned that to go.

“My mom is alive. With Jay.”

“Yeah, I heard . . . What do you think about that?”

“They are living together.”

“Right . . . but, like, without you?”

“Yes. I am here with my grandparents.”

“But doesn’t it just make you mad? Doesn’t it just make you so so mad that your mom could leave you and never look back?” I probably shouldn’t have said that. Oh my god, he’s so young. How do you take back words?

“No.”

“Oh, ok. Well, good. That’s good! I’m—” I start to get up again.

“Are you mad?”

“Mad? I mean, yes, I am mad. I am so mad that my dad was selfish enough to kill himself. I’m mad that he left me and my mom and can never ever ever look back.” My voice raises a little louder than I want it to, and tears form in the corners of my eyes, but I wipe them away before anyone can notice.

“It is ok to be mad, Carson Stewart. It is ok to cry. Your dad is like a whale.” That’s a freaking new one. This was the worst idea. And the bus has definitely left me by now.

“Never mind, bud. This is too much for you. I’m sorry I—”

“Your dad is like a whale. Whales kill themselves sometimes. They go to the shoreline and beach themselves on land. They dehydrate and die.” He flips his whale upside-down on the table.

“What . . . why?”

“Many reasons experts think. One reason is because they hear very loud sounds called sonars that people cannot hear, but people make these noises to communicate with other boats underwater. Because it is so loud to the whales, these noises cause their ears to bleed. They get confused and end up beaching themselves, because they can’t take the bleeding anymore. Something must have been hurting your dad. He was sick, Carson Stewart. He was like a whale. My mom is like a whale too. Whales sometimes get distracted by fish and other sea animals, and they get really close to the shore line. Sometimes they beach themselves because they feel stuck there. Sometimes they can escape if a dolphin comes to save them to lead them back to the ocean. I don’t want my mom to feel stuck. I want my mom to live with my brother. I want my brother to be like a dolphin for my mom.”

Corey grabs the whale and flips it back over. He moves the whale around the table and into my hands. “Here. Don’t be mad at your whale, Carson Stewart.”

Michael

When Ms. Martin writes on the board, I always hope a mouse will fall from the ceiling. I've never really thought about a mouse falling from the ceiling before, or even wished that it would happen, until a week ago when a mouse actually fell from the ceiling while Ms. Martin was writing spelling words down for us to copy, and that's all I've wished for ever since.

It was like any normal day. Ms. Martin was talking on and on like usual as she was writing on the board. Katie and Jazmyne were practically battling each other to see who could answer Ms. Martin's questions the fastest. Micah was picking his nose and wiping it under Jonah's desk because he was asleep like always and would never know. And I . . . well, I was dreaming about being a WWE fighter. If I was a WWE fighter, I would never have to know any of the spelling words on the board, and I definitely wouldn't have to know how to do multi-digit multiplication, which is my least favorite thing to do. All I would have to know is how to fight other people, and I am already pretty good at that.

But, unlike any normal day, the class had an unexpected visitor prancing around right over our heads. I can imagine him now, scurrying along, lost in the many long hallways of our school, trying to avoid the extreme heat of the florescent lights scattered throughout his pathway. Maybe trying to find something? Maybe his family? Some

cheese? When all of the sudden, the tiny little mouse must have made a wrong turn and slid down the air vent straight into our classroom and right onto Ms. Martin's shoulder.

At first, she didn't realize what happened, which is what I find the funniest. I'm sure she assumed it was someone, probably me, that threw a paper ball at her or something because she quickly turned around and gave the class that *who did this* look before she glanced at the floor to find a gray fur ball racing across the carpet.

"AHHHH!" Her scream had to have pierced through every single classroom. She ran and jumped on top of her desk. All our papers flew through the air. Everyone followed Ms. Martin's example and either hopped on their own desk or ran out into the hallway. I, on the other hand, wasn't scared. I emptied my pencil box onto the floor and crept up behind him until he was trapped in a corner. Ms. Martin whined in the background, telling me not to touch the rodent because it could have diseases. I just zoned her out. I looked directly at the mouse.

I'd never seen one in person before. He was about the size of my fist and the color of a rain cloud. He shivered and wiggled, trying to find a route to escape from my shadow. Eventually, the mouse tilted his small pink nose upwards, letting his whiskers touch the brick of the wall, he raised his paw to try to climb up, and then I snapped my pencil box closed around him. Inside my box, I could feel him running laps around and around trying to find his way out.

"Just let him outside, Michael," Ms. Martin protested from her safe spot on the desk. Which I found funny too, because if she wanted to get away from the mouse, she

shouldn't have jumped on her desk to get closer to the ceiling where another mouse could easily pop out.

"Nah, I want to mess with him a little more," I shook my pencil box from side to side.

"Michael, just put the mouse outside please." Everyone was screaming in agreement.

I opened the box, slowly and just a little bit, enough for me to sneak my hand inside and grab the mouse by the tail. He squirmed, curling himself upward, trying to regain his control.

I walked towards Ms. Martin and waved the mouse in front of her, "What do you want me to do with this?"

"Outside. Michael. Now."

I started to walk towards the back door but stopped when I saw my shiny pair of scissors, that I'd thrown out of my pencil box only minutes before, lying on the floor. I reached down, picked up the scissors, and poked the mouse's soft stomach. That's when I realized how easy it would be to kill him. I poked him again a little harder. The point of the scissors rocked the mouse from side to side like he was on the swings on the playground. He clawed the air frantically as if he could fly away if he gave himself one more push.

"Don't do it Michael! Let him go!" Jazmyne cried from her desk. "Be nice to him! He has a life, too!"

Only that made me want to kill him more. I looked around at everyone in the class, still hiding and screaming and crying, and I think I actually let out a laugh. How could they be scared of something like this? I guess they have never seen anything scarier. This was nothing.

I poked the mouse one more time, and then I opened my pair of scissors and attempted to close them around the mouse's neck to cut him in half, but it was too hard to get a grip on him, and he slid out of the blade's grasp. I tried again and failed. Then I squeezed the body of the mouse in my hands as tight as I could to get control. I could feel every muscle of the mouse tense beneath his warm, squishy skin. Carefully, I used my other hand to open the scissors and fit them around his neck again. I closed down. The mouse squealed and red oozed out onto my hand. I opened the scissors and closed them again, just to be sure he was dead. His neck was still connected to his now limp body, but it rolled back and rested on my hand. His eyes stayed open, black and beady like they were before.

"Still want me to put him outside?" I asked Ms. Martin. She was crying, along with the rest of the class. First, they were screaming to get him out of there, and then crying because he was dead? These people never made sense to me.

"That's fine. Just set him outside." She said between sobs.

"Can we have a funeral for the mouse?" Katie begged.

The class liked that idea, but I didn't, so I opened the back door and slung the mouse as far as I could. Drops of blood splattered the floor and wall, and I wiped my hand on my pants.

“Michael, come here.” Ms. Martin demanded. I walked over to her and had to raise my head all the way up to look at her, still standing on her desk. “I hope you know I am going to have to call your father.” She always said that when I got in trouble.

“Too bad you can’t.” I knew more than she did.

“Oh yes I can, and I will.”

“No, you won’t.” Stupid bitch.

“Michael, yes. I will. I will right now.” I showed her every tooth in my mouth, cheesing as big as ever.

“How you gonna do that? Dad’s in prison again. You got the phone number for his jail cell?” I dropped my smile and stared at her. Knowing she had nothing to say back.

She squirmed, kind of like the mouse did when I had it pinned against the wall, and she didn’t say anything. Instead, she came down from her desk, and told everyone to line up at the door. It was time for lunch.

Right now, I’m living with my grandparents since my dad’s in prison and all. This is where I stayed the last time my dad was locked up, so I already know which bedroom is mine and what time is dinner and how laundry is done. Last time dad went to prison, it was only for nine months. He stole a TV from someone’s house. I still don’t know why he did that, because we have a TV that works perfectly fine in our own living room. But I’ve never asked him. We always pretended like nothing happened ever since he picked

me up from school the day he got released, still wearing his dingy orange hoodie with the number 37645 printed on the left side of his chest.

This time, though, I don't think my dad's ever getting out of that place. My grandparents think that they're quiet, but they're really not. I can hear them after they put me to bed, talking to their friends in the living room, or listening to the latest updates on the news. My dad did something very bad this time, something that makes my grandma cry every time she talks to someone about it. Her hands shake, and her eyes glaze over. Something about it makes me want to cry too.

About a month ago, my dad left the house to go to the store, or at least that's what he said. But, supposedly, my dad went to this woman's house instead. She lived right down the street from us. I had met her a few times—she was quiet, young, and almost so pale she looked gray in the light. We would pass her when my dad walked me to school in the mornings. She was always out watering the flowers on her porch. Dad would say something nice like, *thank goodness we have you to keep some color on this road or don't you look good today, ma'am!* Sometimes he would even ask me if I agreed, so I would mumble out an *of course* and we would go on our way to school.

A few hours after he came back, made dinner, watched TV, and went to bed like any other day. Life continued on normally for the next two and a half weeks. Never would I have suspected that my dad killed our neighbor that day. He was so calm, flipping through the TV, and stopping to point out the best holds he saw on any wrestling

channel he passed. That was something we always did together—watch WWE. He’s the one who showed me fighting. He’s the one who told me that’s what real men do.

After some of her friends and family expressed concern about not seeing her for a couple days, the police broke into her house to find her body, stabbed to death, with dried blood traced all over the living room. They said it looked like the woman tried really hard to get free from him but couldn’t find her way out. They did some kind of a test on her to confirm that she was raped, and then eventually found my dad’s DNA as a match to the crime scene.

The news reports said that my dad broke into that woman’s house. I’m sure it wasn’t very hard for him. Maybe she even let him in. Maybe he said he liked her hair that day, and she invited him inside for some dinner. That could have been how it happened, but I’m not sure. My grandparents blame it on drugs. They tell all their friends that their son could’ve never done it if he was sober. He couldn’t have cornered that woman, trapped her inside her own house, raped her, and killed her.

Whether it was the drugs or not, my dad was a murderer. He did something worse. Worse than anything I could ever do. I would never compare to him. That’s why I wish there would be another furry little intruder into our classroom. And I wish it would fall right on Ms. Martin’s head this time.

She would scream again. The class would cry again and run like they’d never seen such a vicious mouse in their life. And again, I would kill it. Maybe I’d stab it some more. Maybe I’d leave it on Ms. Martin’s desk, right by her feet and walk away. Until then, I hope. I wait. I look at the light pink stains on the wall by the door.