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Come True

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COME TRUE

By

Melody McNeill

THESIS

Submitted to
Northern Michigan University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Office of Graduate Education and Research

2013

ABSTRACT

COME TRUE

By

Melody McNeill

This collection of short stories examines how children deal with problems in a world that is not what they imagined. Some of the younger kids in these stories experience conflict for the first time, forcing them to cope and adapt after that loss of innocence. Some of the older kids understand that life is not perfect, but they are still hurt by people who let them down and by hopes that do not pan out. Some kids are trying to find their way in life, and we see it is their parents who struggle to reconcile expectations with reality. Death, disease, and divorce occur against the backdrop of games, parks, and music as characters and readers alike question whether or not dreams come true.

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2013

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Bruce and Carol McNeill, for raising me in a loving family with an authentic Christian faith, and for always supporting me as I have worked to make my dreams come true.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis director, Jennifer A. Howard, for her endless encouragement, understanding, and advice throughout the long process of writing and rewriting each of these stories (and many others). No matter what shape a story was in, she always knew what to say to make it better and gave me the confidence to revise accordingly. I would also like to thank my thesis reader, Matt Bell, for offering his excellent insight on my stories. He could always pick out clichés and sentences where I wanted to explain too much to my audience. John Smolens and Dan Gocella also provided valuable writing instruction in graduate workshops where most of these stories were drafted.

Nick Capo was my first creative writing professor during my undergraduate career at Illinois College. I still remember his lectures on topics such as the seven basic conflicts in stories, well-rounded characters, and the importance of a good work ethic and time management skills. His foundational workshops contributed to my application and acceptance to graduate school and helped mold me into the writer I am today.

Laura Soldner deserves many thanks for the hours she spent training me to teach college courses; answering hundreds of my questions about teaching, writing, and life; and buying all the Teaching Assistants snacks and gifts to encourage us. I would also like to thank Dr. Ray Ventre for his leadership in the English department and his support of faculty and students, and Angie McCabe and Lori Rintala for answering my questions quickly and cheerfully, even to the point of working apparent technological miracles with the printers.

I'm thankful to my fellow TAs for sharing what they know related to teaching and writing and for making graduate school more fun. I would also like to thank the Northern Michigan University Grants and Contracts office for awarding me an Excellence in Education research grant for the summer of 2012 that fueled key research and writing.

Finally, I am incredibly grateful for my loving family and friends who have been with me throughout this adventure. I appreciate your patience as I've spent these past two years more absorbed than usual with inventing worlds. Rest assured that if my characters bear any resemblance to you, it's only in the positive traits.

And to Jesus Christ, my savior, provider, and the source of my joy, thank You. I truly could not have done this without You.

This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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INTRODUCTION

Focus

I have a friend who is an incredibly gifted artist. Painting, drawing, sculpting, writing, playing music... You name it, he excels at it. What boggles my mind is his lack of formal training in any of it. He simply sits down and experiments with a medium and produces beautiful work. He considers his creative spurts a gift from God, so he can't always control when he makes something excellent, but he is free of using sheet music and other structured methods, so he can improvise with others on the spot.

My friend and I are opposites in many ways, and this is one of them. I love structure, and although I can visualize a picture or hum an attempt at an invented tune, I'm much better at looking at a drawing and mimicking the lines I see than making something up. I don't take song requests when I play piano – I can't even sight-read that well – but if you give me a set of sheet music and a few weeks or months to practice, I can play any song artfully.

The odd thing is that when it comes to writing, our preferences flip. It seems logical that my desire for structure would lead me to write nonfiction essays or research papers, maybe creative nonfiction if I was feeling really wild, and leave the fictional imaginings to my friend. However, he is the memoirist. I admire and enjoy creative nonfiction and occasionally dabble in it, but when I sit down to tell a story, I'd rather not be forced to write within the lines of facts, flexible though they may be. My stories usually contain some connection to my own experiences, but I value the freedom to

change a character's age and/or gender, alter the setting, throw in a new conflict, mix up a subplot or two, and see what develops.

When I set out to write my thesis, I wasn't entirely certain what shape it would take. I knew I wanted it to involve kids, because I love writing young voices. I've never quite left behind my inner child, so my penchant for playfulness combined with years of working with preschoolers has given me ample material to recreate children's conversations and thought processes. Kids have an innocence and honesty that can get to the heart of the matter yet fail to comprehend the stakes. In an interview with Salon.com, Karen Russell said of using a child's point of view, "It's almost like you get a first person and a third person in one. You can have a really clear-eyed but distanced view of what adult behavior looks like" (Kinser). I enjoy making kids my narrators because it's fun to recreate that perspective. It gives me a lot of freedom to explain a situation in the simple way they see it while subtly allowing the adult reader to grasp what else is in play.

One example of this technique is in *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. The book is a series of vignettes told from the point of view of a 12-year-old Latina girl. The young narrator is often naïve about the gravity of events that occur in her neighborhood, but her straightforward descriptions reveal much. For example, in the chapter entitled "The Earl of Tennessee," she describes how often a neighbor's wife changes appearances. The variations in the woman's hair styles, heights, etc. puzzle the girl, and the story concludes without much resolution for her. However, the author plants hints in the circumstances surrounding the changes and the times of the woman's visits to tell us the man's "wife" is, in fact, a prostitute – many of them.

My story, “You Can’t Make Me Go Back to Disney World,” employs this distorted perspective when Veronica describes her terror at meeting the costumed characters who make the theme park famous. Only when we view the life-size Disney characters through her young eyes can we understand her reluctance to return to Disney World, especially when the hotel offers equally exciting and far more comfortable adventures.

That story has another element central to my thesis: a conflict between Veronica and her mother. Parent-child relationships form the backbone of most of these stories. In the introduction to an anthology of stories about childhood, Lorrie Moore writes, “Parents are, after all, the drama most daily present for their children. A child’s parents are both the impasse and gate to the world and to the heart” (XII). In a body of work about children, families naturally play a major role. I once heard someone say, “You know you’re a writer when you’ll never forgive your parents for your happy childhood.” This refers to the age-old advice to “write what you know,” and the idea that an unhappy life provides material for gripping stories. While there is an element of truth to that, I have great relationships with both my parents, and I was able to write about conflicts I never experienced. My stories use a variety of parent-child relationships to highlight the changes characters experience, and in this way, the situations can be universally appreciated.

Point of View

Although I’ve had streaks of writing stories in one particular point of view, I have never felt married to any of them. First person is a fun choice for childhood stories

because it relays the unique vocabulary and opinions of youth, including the distortions discussed above. Russell used the phrase “clear-eyed but distanced view” in describing a child’s perspective (Kinser), and I often strive for that effect with my first-person narrators of any age. Even adults can have an uninformed or biased telling of events that obscures the truth, like the mom does in “*D.S. al Coda*,” but seeing the unreliability of these characters provides readers with more satisfaction when they can grasp the deeper meaning and arrive at a conclusion before the narrator.

It can be easier to capture a child’s voice in the first person, but it is certainly not the only fun or useful point of view. I use third person when I want a more distant narrator and the freedom to change voices or style. The shifting verb tenses in “The Ocean Awaits” would not have worked as well for me if I had created a first-person narrator who was limited by where she was and what she knew. Second person also appeared in my thesis. After I read examples of it skillfully employed in *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney and *Self-Help* by Lorrie Moore, I had a lot of fun experimenting with it in my own writing. “You Can’t Make Me Go Back to Disney World” places the “you” in the story, a clearly identifiable character we see indirectly, and “What Stays Behind” recreates an entire semester abroad through an address to an unknown “you.” There were a few times in the process I considered putting all my stories in first person to play with voice and reliability, but because I’m not fond of having limitations in my writing, I decided to leave myself free to use whichever point of view best fit a particular story. The result was a balanced mix of the three which offers a nice variety.

Story Origins

My thesis begins with the flash fiction story, “You Can’t Make Me Go Back to Disney World.” Because I write so much about kids, I applied for and was awarded an Excellence in Education research grant from Northern Michigan University to study Walt Disney in the summer of 2012 and spend a week at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. I amassed an incredible amount of research while I was there, from observations to interviews to pictures, and took away plenty of details that informed a good portion of my thesis. While I was writing, I read a piece that had the title double as the first line of the story, making it integral to setting and plot development, and I wanted to try the technique myself. “You Can’t Make Me Go Back to Disney World” is a fun title because it is a phrase not many people would say, and it piques interest as to the nature of the character who does say it.

My inspiration for the plot came from a conversation I had with Corey, the cab driver who took me to the airport for my flight home from Orlando. People always had questions when I told them I was a writer visiting Disney World to conduct research, and Corey went one step further and gave me ideas based on his many years of observing tourists. He thought it was silly to bring young kids to the park, because they tire out easily, the hotel pool sounds like enough to them, and they won’t remember most of it anyway. That perspective turned into this tiny, fun story which allowed me to incorporate Disney imagery and the many miserable kids I observed during my trip. While I would be happy to return to Disney World, I have a feeling those kids would have been fine without it.

My story focuses on young Veronica's first premeditated tantrum, her time to figure out how to express what she wants, but we also sympathize with the mother, who must decide how to react and then live with the consequences of that action. In brainstorming the details of Veronica's voice, I considered the way words run together when you're too young to distinguish them. For example, before I knew my letters, the fast section in the middle of the alphabet song sounded like a nonsensical word: "Ellemenopee." Therefore, Veronica would logically think that her friend Jill's last name was "Fromacrossthestreet," since she always heard those words linked to it. After I wrote this story, I read *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros and realized she had capitalized on this idea first. In the vignette "No Speak English," she illustrates the Latino father's limited understanding of English by writing that he only ate "hamandeggs." Seeing that technique used effectively in print further encouraged my own use of it.

My next story, "Sunset at Babcock Park," is another short-short story inspired by true events. I took a summer course on flash writing with Dan Gocella in 2012, and before my first story was due, my mom took me to Babcock Park to spend the day kayaking and reading on its quiet beach. There were people fishing on the banks the whole time we were there, and suddenly the last two lines of the story came to me. The rest of it developed quickly in my head (a rare occurrence), and I sat down that very night to write this story. It's one of the first I wrote that highlights the sense of missed opportunity and dissatisfaction in our fleeting world, which became a major theme of my thesis. I know next to nothing about fishing, so I'm grateful to Erkki Mackey for providing needed input, such as explaining to me the difference between bait and lures.

“*D. S. al Coda*” exists because I started taking more time in graduate school to play piano, and as I worked through new songs and experienced again the struggle to turn a bunch of black markings on sheet music into something pleasant-sounding, there were too many metaphors and significant memories running through my head not to write about music. Very little of the story and its characters correspond to my life beyond the observations and musings I’ve accumulated since beginning to play piano at the age of five. While the plot is a sad journey for our narrator, it is all too familiar to mothers and to children who pull apart to seek their own identity before they can grow back together. We know Cris will be alright, but we still ache for Catherine, the young mom watching her baby mature.

“What Stays Behind” is the product of a friendly challenge from another graduate student who attended the 2013 Association of Writers and Writing Programs (AWP) conference with me. I really did throw away a pair of tennis shoes on our last day of the conference to save space in my suitcase, thereby confusing everyone in our hotel room. I hadn’t realized people would feel so strongly about holding on to shoes. We thought writing the line, “You pulled my shoes out of the trash can,” as an opening would be a good attention-grabber. My graduate student friend is a poet, so on our flight from Boston to Chicago, she wrote a poem with that first line, and I wrote this short-short story.

My shoes did have the experiences in Argentina which I describe in the story, but I didn’t meet a special guy while studying abroad, and the shoes did make it home afterwards, albeit much worse for the wear. I had to replace them, so I brought them to Boston as a spare pair in case of rain or snow, knowing I could throw them away if I needed to, which I did. This story was a fun opportunity to recreate some of my favorite

memories from living in Argentina, and the end contains an optimism accompanied by a question of its basis and of the reliability of anything in this world.

“The Ocean Awaits” is the oldest story in my thesis. I first wrote it as a short-short story for a fiction workshop my senior year of college. The assignment was to write something based off of a picture. I found a painting of a girl standing in a swimming pool looking at a blue horizon, and I imagined an ocean out there she traded for the safety of her comfortable pool. It reminded me of the quote from the speech “The Weight of Glory” by C. S. Lewis: “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased” (26). I liked the story’s potential, so I expanded it from one page to 16 and added elements like the Olympics (to offer comparable stakes to Heaven) and Lou Gehrig’s disease (from which three of my family members have died) to provide conflict revolving around Kimmy’s offer to compete again. My whole family loves the water and I have many friends who have been on swim teams, but I am especially grateful to Rebecca Jaszczak for her insight into the life of a competitive swimmer at a high level.

This story has always been in third person, but I played around with verb tense and structure until achieving the mixed up flashbacks I currently have. I had already written some flashbacks in the present tense by the time I read “What is Seized” by Lorrie Moore from her short story collection, *Self-Help*. Moore does the same thing by having her narrator describe scenes from her mother’s photographs in the present tense.

Again, seeing her utilize the technique increased my confidence in doing the same thing. “The Ocean Awaits” is a special story to me that illustrates our pull between temporary pleasures and eternal ones, and I’m glad it has survived the dozens of revisions to make it to my thesis.

The idea for “Monopoly” came from learning my friend had been born with epiphora, the condition Leanne has in the story. I was fascinated by the ramifications of not being able to control your tears. I could have written a much longer story, but I wanted to zoom in on the relationship between two sisters and on how the younger one copes with everything that happens to her older sister. My friend was also a big help in brainstorming ideas with me throughout graduate school whenever I had a story that was stuck, and she begged me for two years to create a character named Ferguson, so my workshop peers saw that name in multiple rough drafts before it finally landed here. Ellie, this one’s for you.

Finally, the story “Come True” is the culmination of my research about Disney and kids. Reading its descriptions of places and rides always takes me back to my trip to Disney World, and I hope it has that same effect on a reader who has been there, while still being accessible to one who hasn’t. Most of Katie’s facts are from actual signs posted throughout the parks; Google searches and a few books about Walt Disney provided the rest. I had read a few fact-based fictional stories before traveling, which prompted me to take pictures of all the information I saw in the park in case I wanted to use it later. (That’s partly why I ended up with 1800 pictures after only a week in Orlando.) The facts I chose added a neat layer to the story about truth and reality vs. perception, and they are yet another element of life that disappoint Katie and Anna in this

“loss of innocence” story. The girls’ friendship is the thing which shakily withstands the trial this time, and although they faced more disappointment than they imagined and more challenges will come, their most important knowledge is that they have in each other a friend who loves them and will stick with them.

Themes

My collection of stories has undergone an incredible number of changes from start to finish, including many stories which were cut from the final body of work, but the connecting thread has always been kids and parents trying to make sense of their changing world. I value hope and happy endings and have often said there’s too much sadness in the world for people to subject an audience to more unhappiness. However, cheesy plot lines and perfect characters are so unbelievably distant from everyday experiences that happy endings delivered poorly will alienate audiences. In an article for *RELEVANT Magazine* entitled “I’m Not a Christian Writer,” Andrew Schwab argues, “It is the power of the creative medium, in creativity and ambiguity itself, to ask questions, to evoke thought, rather than just give answers.” With that in mind, I wrote stories that rarely end on a positive note. Characters face obstacles and realize their worlds are changing, but the stories conclude with them still searching, full of regret or confusion, instead of having all their problems neatly solved.

That led to an internal conflict. My Christian faith is a big part of my life and writing, and I want to share my joy and purpose with my readers via stories with a positive message. While reflecting on my “unhappy” stories, I initially questioned if I had failed to achieve my goal and if my failure was a sort of selling out. It was then I realized

the stories in my thesis are related in their acknowledgement that life is fleeting and things don't always work out. We should make the most of the time we have here. However, nothing on Earth will satisfy our needs, and that dissatisfaction is meant to point us to Jesus for true fulfillment in the hope of Heaven.

Schwab's article about Christian writers also states, "The ultimate role of the artist in culture is to provoke a response in the audience, to cause the listener, the viewer, to wrestle with [concepts] of life, love, regret, salvation, and eternity so that the author himself fades into the background of the work itself, thus leaving the greater question with the mind of said audience." As I have expanded my influences and stretched my writing abilities, I have learned that sometimes good stories are not about showing us an ideal world, but about showing us the real world in order to expose its shortcomings and make us wish for the ideal. We don't realize how great Mom's cooking is until we move out and live on ramen noodles for months. *Come True* points us toward home.

YOU CAN'T MAKE ME GO BACK TO DISNEY WORLD

“Oh, yes I can,” you say. That voice makes me eat Stinky Peas or drags me to hot, crowded rooms where boring people talk a lot and I have to Lookdonttouch.

“It’ll be fun,” you say, but your smile’s cracked like Chip from *Beauty and the Beast*.

Fun is being the Mommy when I play house with Jill Fromacrossthestreet. Or bouncing here on the biggest bed I’ve ever seen in my whole entire life. Or sitting on the squishy blue chairs watching the Disney Monorail whoosh by our hotel faster than a wildebeest stampede. Not Fun is going outside where the Florida sun slimes me and melts my ice cream, and giant fuzzy monsters keep trying to touch me while we walk a bajillion miles because Lenny the Loser wants to stand in another line.

“Young lady, I’m counting to three.”

I’m not a baby anymore.

“One...”

Three would be bad, but I have a plan. I saw Jill do this one time and she got to stay outside past when her Mommy said Timeforbed.

“Two...”

I scream. Real loud, like when Lenny pinches me. I pinch my leg and scream some more.

“Veronica Rose,” you say, and I’m about to stop because that voice means no dessert, but there’s a knock and the cleaning lady’s wondering if I’m okay and I keep on

screaming until you nod and shut the door. You don't say Three.

The air conditioner next to the bed starts blowing. I sit quietly and rub my leg. It feels like Christmas.

SUNSET AT BABCOCK PARK

Ages ago, a hot day like this would have found Ellen lying on the grass with her son Keith hunting for puffy white sharks and dinosaurs in the clouds. Today, sitting alone near the shore of Lake Waubesa on the last day of summer, the sky above Babcock Park revealed nothing.

Retirement allowed Ellen to escape to the park to read when her air conditioned house felt mechanical. Here, gentle waves rolled along, and the trees murmured with the wind. She had made it partly through chapter six of a new mystery novel when two boys pedaled in and dropped their bikes on the grass. They raced past Ellen to the docks, almost hitting her lawn chair with their fishing poles and tackle boxes. No other adults were present. In a small town like McFarland, most mothers didn't fret over giving their sons free reign.

Her focus lost, Ellen watched the newcomers settle in. Baggy shorts and t-shirts swallowed their scarecrow limbs, and they kept shaking their wispy blonde hair from their eyes. They had so much growing to do, she thought. The taller boy looked old enough to be starting high school the next day. He wore a generic gray shirt from last year's Rose Bowl. It was probably purchased before the Badgers were crushed by their smaller opponents on New Year's Day. He couldn't have guessed his shirt would commemorate defeat. Ellen had watched the game with her husband and struggled to follow the plays, hoping to latch onto a piece of knowledge to display if Keith called. The phone had stayed silent.

The two boys stood on separate docks and studiously picked out worms. Once the bait sank into the water, they chomped their gum and weighed the Milwaukee Brewers' postseason chances.

"They're toast," the taller one declared. "Time to pick a different team to cheer for in the playoffs."

"But Braun's hitting good."

"Too late. They've lost too many games."

Ellen made a mental note to look up the player's name later. Keith would know it. She should give him a call, she thought. See how he'd been. When he was little, Ellen would take him to play at nearby Madison pools with waterslides and crowds. Now, she frequented this more intimate park where strangers waved in greeting and friendly gossip fueled the motorboats that pattered in and out of the landing.

The sky slowly lost its bold, blue coloring to ribbons of peach with cobbler clouds. The boys fished unsuccessfully, catching nothing except for some leaves when the shorter one cast his line too high and it stuck in a tree branch.

"Way to go, dummy," his friend said.

"Shut up. I wasn't thinking."

In Ellen's novel, the detective was running out of time to put together the clues. Ellen tuned out boat cranks that sounded like roulette wheels. She didn't see the geese that flew in, webbed feet skiing across the lake's surface. Her nose barely registered the scent of the yellow-green algae lining the shore. She sped through the pages, dying for the suspect to confess.

The boys started yelling. Someone had hooked a fish.

The taller boy strained against the bend in his pole, young muscles outlined like a cartoonist's sketch. Pink skin testified to hours in the sun. Splotches of sweat had turned the back of his shirt two shades darker.

His friend ran over. "How big is it?"

Ellen leaned forward slightly in her chair. The children who fished here often caught enough for a small supper, but this one sounded like a whopper. It would surely turn into a whale when the boy told the story. She watched him battle the fish, playing with the line and leaning back and forth.

"Get him!" his friend yelled.

This could be their last chance to catch anything before heading home, before facing their school's whitewashed halls. Ellen willed the fish to give in as it jerked him around. She had never been fishing but remembered Keith returning from trips with her husband, either elated or morose after an experience she couldn't speak to.

The boy looked like he was winning right up until the moment the line snapped and the fish fled. Motionless, they stared at the ripples heading away from the docks and away from the fiery sun making its gradual descent below the line of trees behind them.

"It's gone," the taller boy said.

And so it was.

D. S. AL CODA

When I was a child, I had a list of things I wanted to be when I grew up: Barbie, lion tamer, first female player in the NBA. Being widowed at a young age and raising a daughter on my own never made the cut. When my husband died, I had to figure out which blogs to read and which advice to ignore, like that of our neighbor Peggy who lets me know every time she thinks I should do something differently, from the number of cookies I give Cris to the day of the week I do my laundry. Apparently Friday is the only good day for it, and missing a load because I'm working is inexcusable. I haven't won Mom of the Year yet, but Cris's art projects carpet half my bedroom, and I like to read the book she made in first grade called *My Hero is my Mom*. It cheers me up on the days I do everything wrong.

Today I come home from work to find Cris practicing piano and concentrating hard on the sheet music. Her blonde hair, so much like mine, is tied back in a ponytail, with a few loose strands that she blows away only to have obscure her vision again. She keeps her fingers rigid as they bounce over the keys, no doubt stuck in a position she has been taught is a good technique. Her skinny legs don't quite reach the floor.

"Hey, Squirt. Aren't those arms supposed to be a little looser when you play?"

"Hi, Mom. Listen to this," she says. "It's called *staccato*. It means you play the note and then jump off the key like you got burned." She demonstrates the woodpecker technique for me. My mom taught me that when I took piano lessons, but I haven't taught it to Cris. I took lessons in fourth grade, so I didn't think an eight-year-old would need that information after only a few months of playing.

I ask, “Does this mean you haven’t practiced basketball yet?”

Cris shakes her head and reminds me we have to go to a piano lesson. I keep talking at her while we get into the car. “Your first game is next Saturday. You’ll do a lot better if you practice your lay-ups before then. You could be a star player.”

“What’s ‘a match for null’?” Cris has found the crossword puzzle from the newspaper I got at work.

“Void,” I say. “Are you listening to me?”

“Uh-huh,” Cris says. “What’s ‘makes a mistake’?”

“Forgets? So we’ll—”

“Nope, it’s only four letters.”

“Then I don’t know. We’ll shoot some hoops after your lesson.”

Cris nods, or maybe just bobs her head to the car radio. I let it go and work on the crossword puzzle with her until we get to Ms. Reichardt’s house. She lives in the same mud-colored house she did when I took lessons from her as a child. It’s smaller and less spooky than I remember, but her neon skirts and short haircut offend the senses all the same.

I park on the street because no one is allowed to park in her driveway, even though she doesn’t own a car. She keeps all her pets in the house with her, but I think her greatest fear is one of them will escape and get run over by a careless driver. According to her, everyone is a careless driver. She is waiting for us inside the house, and we take off our shoes and greet the two terriers who rush toward us, the cat in her arms, and her, in that order. Cris’s voice jumps an octave higher than mine to express proper enthusiasm for the creatures. I wonder where the rest of them are hiding.

We walk past a fishbowl and into the piano room with a cat on the bench. Cris pets it until it stretches and jumps off, Ms. Reichardt stands behind her, and I sit on the old wicker chair in the corner where my mom once listened to me stumble through scales. Cris gets halfway through her first song before Ms. Reichardt says, “That was lovely, Cristina, but you played like you were in urgent need of the lavatory. Do you need to relieve yourself?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Try again, please. Slower this time. Make sure you count.”

I hated counting when I was learning to play. It seemed silly to complicate music with math when I could play the notes and figure out the rhythm as I went. Apparently I wasn’t good enough. Ms. Reichardt could always tell when the beat was off, which she described as sounding like a man falling down a hill and hitting every bump on the way before plunging to his rocky demise. She rarely let me play a song without interrupting to lecture, “You must count the beats. Art is nothing without order. Only when you understand the composer’s written intentions can you draw out the music’s inherent beauty. Try again. One, two, three, four.” Her house is crowded and dusty, but the grand piano and its music have to be immaculate.

I see Cris’s lips moving as she carefully strikes the keys. When she finishes, she turns around to look at Ms. Reichardt, who smiles and sighs. “Marvelous. That’s coming along quite nicely. Catherine, you never learned to play this piece, did you?”

She must remember I quit before reaching the level my daughter is at. Cris practices every single day; I begged to stop after a few lessons with Ms. Reichardt. The novelty of learning an instrument wore off after I realized it consisted of repetitive

exercises and brushing pet hair off my clothes. Not nearly as fun as playing basketball outside with my dad. I couldn't believe it when Cris asked to take piano lessons from Ms. Reichardt because her friend was doing it too, but I thought her interest wouldn't last. I was wrong.

Cris responds before I have a chance to. "No, she didn't learn it, because I asked her what this symbol means and she didn't know."

"That's not true. I said I thought it meant to repeat something."

Cris looks at Ms. Reichardt. She answers, "*D. S. al Coda* is Italian. It means you go back to this S symbol and repeat everything you played after that. Then, down here it says, 'To Coda,' so when you get to that point, skip ahead to this circle with a cross through it. That's the coda. Then you play from there until the end of the song."

"That's what I said. You repeat," I say.

"Why does it skip around so much?" Cris asks, still focused on her teacher.

"Because the publishers are cheapskates who don't want to write all the notes again," Ms. Reichardt says. "The composer wanted the middle to be repeated. The audience thinks the end will be the same the second time as well, but it's actually different. It complements the song."

"It says something nice to it?"

I can answer that one: "No, it adds something that makes the song sound better and more complex. Like peanut butter and jelly in a sandwich instead of all jelly."

"Yes, Catherine. It completes it. Like... peanut butter and jelly, I suppose. Now play it again, dear, with the coda this time."

Cris obeys, and Ms. Reichardt again calls it marvelous and says Cris should play the song at the recital next weekend. My chair creaks as I straighten up and ask her to repeat herself.

“I’m having a piano recital for my best students next Saturday morning. Cristina is the youngest student invited and will be featured first.”

“First, I’d prefer that you call her Cris, just as I have always preferred that you call me Cathy. Second, I’m afraid she can’t go. Her first basketball game of the season is at the same time.”

Cris turns to look at me fully for the first time since she sat down. “But, Mom—”

“No ‘buts’ about it,” I say. “You are not missing basketball for this.”

Ms. Reichardt tries telling me I’m being unreasonable to deprive my daughter of this opportunity when she has so much potential, unreasonable to have her chase after a silly ball like a Neanderthal instead of cultivating an artistic soul. They’re the same arguments she once used to keep me from quitting and pursuing my own dreams. They didn’t work. I point out that sports teach teamwork and athleticism, which music does not, and *Cris* chose basketball long before piano.

“But I want to quit,” Cris says. Her blue eyes catch the light and spit fire. I’ve never seen her like this. “I don’t like basketball.”

“Not true,” I say. “You’ve always loved it.”

“No, you have. I love piano, but you don’t care.”

I see Ms. Reichardt start to agree, but I glare at her before her mouth opens. She’s done enough already. “That’s not fair,” I say. “Your dad built our hoop himself. How do

you think he would feel about you quitting after only a few years because you found some new hobby you decided you liked better?"

"He loved me. He wouldn't make me do something I hated."

I had feared a fight like this would one day come, with the implication, "Why weren't you in the car accident instead of him?" I never imagined it would happen this soon or hurt this bad, like the pain I feel every time I visit his grave and ask myself the same question. "Cris, I—"

"Call me Cristina. I like that better, too."

She turns back to the piano. Her fingers move over the keys like spring rain hitting the pavement. It's not a challenging piece, but I can hear how the simple chords sound artful in her hands. Even the repetition is beautiful, the way the second time through is never the same as the first. A lock of hair falls in front of her face. I'd like to go tuck it behind her ear, but instead, I listen. The storm builds, and I lose myself in the music until it grows into something I no longer recognize.

WHAT STAYS BEHIND

I'm guessing you pulled my shoes out of the trash can in the Buenos Aires hostel. It must have been the Adidas logo, valued at 200 pesos, which caught your eye. I'm sure you missed the white leather, hidden under red clay from the jungles of Iguazú, where monkeys in trees heard me shriek at a spider the size of my fist while Nico laughed and laughed at the *gringa*. I doubt you saw the grains of sand ground into the shoes' seams from a trip to San Rafael with Nico, where a *zonda* wind like the breath of God made us hide under our towels, shoes exposed to the blowing sand, my head safe on his shoulder. Most of the sand was washed away in Valparaiso, Chile, when I wanted a picture by the Pacific Ocean and where the waves got to me before Nico snapped the shutter.

What you probably noticed first about my shoes was the dust, brown and stubborn and thoroughly Argentine, from a semester of walks to and from *la universidad*, jogs in the park with Nico, and nights out shopping or dancing with the other girls in the exchange program. You saw the laces pulled tight and the tops smushed down from when I used all my Tetris skills to make them fit in my suitcase. But the souvenirs – key chains and scarves and jewelry for my mom and a leather jacket for my dad and an alpaca sweater for my roommate – refused to make room, and I wanted to wear my new *alpargatas* on the plane. I left my old tennis shoes on the floor by my bed for a half hour before Nico came to take me to the airport, and then I set them in the hostel's trash can on top of the napkin and crumbs from the *medialuna* I had for breakfast.

Four hours later, I flew back to Minneapolis.

I'm planning to move to Argentina once I finish college. My mom says I'm too young and my dad says he's suspicious and my roommate says I'm crazy, but Nico said he'd wait for me. I can almost see us walking down *Avenida 9 de julio* toward the giant obelisk that commemorates the founding of Buenos Aires. As the city's two million people pass, I will look down and see you, one stranger among many, wearing my shoes. They will be darker, colored with your own dirt and memories, but I will stare and see remnants of the burnt red clay that resisted every scrubbing. I will nudge Nico, and we will laugh at how perfectly things come together.

THE OCEAN AWAITS

When she is three, Kimmy and her parents go camping at a Florida state park. She watches as they set up the tent after a struggle, splash in the water, and alternately bemoan and photograph the raccoon tracks and torn chocolate wrapping near their cooler in the morning. They laugh and laugh. Years later, Kimmy will grip this fuzzy memory of the best quality time the three of them ever had. Before her mom's new job kept her busy. Before her dad passed away.

*

Kimmy walked into her apartment and sank onto the couch. There were more unsupervised banshees at Wal-Mart today she'd wanted to strangle. Their mother had been too engrossed in her cell phone to keep her kids under control, and they always seemed to grab a shirt from the bottom of whichever pile she had just folded. Picking up clothes after brats was hardly the job Kimmy had dreamed of having after college, especially with the number of NCAA swimming trophies she had earned, but she knew the risks when she dropped out.

Kimmy had planned to make lasagna for dinner. The rhythmic layering of noodles, sauce, and other ingredients was a pattern she could trust. She was almost too tired to cook, but her boyfriend Grant had requested it. He wanted to come over after his shift was done in a few hours, so she started visualizing the contents of her cupboards to make sure she had enough ingredients. There was pasta, sauce, and oregano, but she may need to use a different kind of cheese to round it out... Kimmy's listing was interrupted

by the ringing of her cell phone. She recognized the area code but not the phone number until she answered and heard the familiar voice on the other end.

“Kimmy? Coach Chambers. I saw your mom the other day at practice. She suggested I give you a call.”

“Really? She didn’t tell me about that.” Kimmy had often doubted her mom knew where the pool was.

“The Gators sure miss you,” he said. “Ever think of coming back to Gainesville?”

“Actually, no. Sorry.” She wondered if he believed her. If she believed herself.

The coach reminded her, as she knew he would, that they would love to have her back on the team. What she didn’t expect was to hear that Jerry Macintosh, the Olympic trainer she had worked with in New Mexico, felt the same, and he wanted her to swim for the University of Florida again during the next season to gauge her readiness for the Olympics. Something inside her ached hearing Coach’s enthusiasm again, picturing him cheering for her and leaping off the pool deck when she had started winning big meets and breaking NCAA records. He wouldn’t understand how deeply she had buried swimming when she buried her dad. She had left her swimsuits in Florida, let her blonde hair grow long, and avoided watching any more meets.

Kimmy finally spoke up. “I can tell you right now I’m not ready. I don’t swim anymore. I don’t think I’ll ever make it back to where I was.”

“Your NCAA records suggest otherwise. It won’t take much training to remind your muscles you’re one of the best in the country. Why don’t you come visit some time? I’ll fly you down here. The new girls would love to meet the name etched into so many school plaques.”

“I’m pretty busy.”

“Right. Your mom said you’re at Wal-Mart.”

“I work hard, Coach. I’ve gotten two raises since I started.”

“That’s good, Kimmy. I’m glad you’re happy there. I’ll be in touch.”

Kimmy hung up before allowing her thought, *Please don’t*, to escape. The last time she’d seen Coach Chambers had been at her dad’s funeral two years ago. That was the last time she’d seen anyone from college. Friends had stopped by her parents’ home in Gainesville, Florida, with cards or meals for a few days after the funeral, but Kimmy made her mom tell them she was sick. She didn’t leave her house until a week later when she moved to Illinois. Grant, her high school sweetheart, attended a small private college there in Jacksonville. He found an apartment for her to rent, got her a job at the Super Wal-Mart where he worked, and didn’t blame her for quitting swimming.

Kimmy called her mom.

“Howdy, stranger.”

“Why’d you give Coach Chambers my number?”

Her mom hesitated, then echoed the reminder that the team wanted her in the next Olympics. “Everyone says they missed gold in the 4x100 medley relay last summer because you dropped out. Jerry wants you back.”

Kimmy hung up the phone. Moving away and changing her number had failed to protect her.

*

When she is four, Kimmy stains her dad’s shirt with a snotty-nosed bear hug almost daily. He is the one who stays home working on freelance writing jobs. Her mom

is absorbed in her own career as a paralegal. Water is everywhere in Gainesville, so her dad spends hours with her at the local pool every week, and Kimmy learns to swim before she learns to read. She starts by splashing in the kiddie pool with neon orange floaties on her arms. Becomes comfortable putting her face in the water. Takes off the floaties. When she goes underwater, everything echoes and feels bigger, like the world is a million miles away and it's just her and her dad, together.

One sunny morning, they move to the big kid pool where her dad shows her how to do the dead man's float, supporting her stomach when she starts to sink. For fun, he grabs her hands and runs backwards in the pool, pulling her after him and making motorboat noises while she laughs and squeezes her eyes shut against the splashing. After this, she tries adding a flutter kick to propel herself forward and doesn't stop until she gets tired, floundering in the middle of the pool, calling for him to save her. He does.

When she is six, Kimmy starts taking classes every summer to learn specific strokes and diving techniques. She has already seen professional meets, and her teacher shows her how she'll go faster if her hands cut an S-shape through the water every stroke when she does the front crawl. "Freestyle," the TV announcers call it. The chlorine dries out her hair and skin, but Kimmy is too young to realize or care. She loves how many different ways she can use her arms and legs to move through the pool. Even a resting stroke like the breaststroke will take her places, almost without effort.

When she is eight, she washes the dishes as a surprise for her mom, who has been busy with work. Kimmy's hands are wet and soapy, and a plate slips out of her grasp, crashing to the floor with no water to slow its descent. Her dad helps her clean up the

shards and admires how clean the other dishes are. Her mom doesn't speak to her the rest of the night.

When she is ten, Kimmy learns to do a flip turn off the wall. It's a disorienting maneuver that floods her nose with water and leaves her scraping the concrete wall too many times when she misjudges the distance. She begs her dad to let her quit swimming. He refuses.

"You have more heart than any of the other kids in your class, but you're letting one little somersault keep you from succeeding."

"'Heart' doesn't mean anything. It's just a dumb thing people say when you're not good," Kimmy says.

"Okay, you're tall," he says. "How's that for a compliment? Your height will always give you a head start, and you shouldn't waste it. Unless you'd rather play basketball?"

"Daddy, I can't."

"Can't never did anything. Keep practicing. Visualize yourself making the turn."

Kimmy tries again but splutters and coughs up water.

The next day, he buys her nose plugs. They're perfect. She shows them off to everyone in her class. The stupid boys say, "Only babies wear those." Kimmy doesn't want to believe them – she's still pretty sure they have cooties – but she doesn't wear them again unless her dad is watching. She forces herself to learn how to turn without inhaling half the pool. When she gets good enough to show her dad, he takes the family out to dinner.

"You smell like chlorine," Mom says.

“I showered,” Kimmy says.

“We’re raising a fish here, hon. We’ll have to get used to the smell,” Dad says.

Her mom spends the meal making notes on a legal pad. Kimmy barely touches her cheeseburger.

“Knock, knock,” Dad says.

Kimmy sighs, but her dad knocks on her head until she plays along. “Who’s there?”

“Boo.”

“Boo who?”

“Don’t cry. It’s only a joke.”

Kimmy musters a smile for his effort, and he buys her a hot fudge sundae. The fudge melts into the ice cream, creating light brown rivulets that spill over the cup’s edges before he helps her eat it.

When she is thirteen, Kimmy is caught cheating on a math test. Her parents ground her. At dinner, her mom stabs at the chicken cordon bleu. Kimmy envisions her chasing down a live chicken with a fork, feathers flying everywhere. If she weren’t terrified, she might giggle. At least her dad always explains his discipline. Anything beats passive-aggressive dining. She finally retreats to her room, and he comes in a few minutes later. He says, “I’m disappointed in you, Kimmy, because you know better. But I will always love you.”

*

Kimmy realized she had zoned out when she thought she heard her dad’s voice. Her cell phone buzzed on the counter. The text message from Grant said he had to work

late and would talk to her later. She exchanged her lasagna plans for a Snickers and curled into a ball on her couch. *Lifetime* movies filled her television screen with relationship drama and tear-jerking happy endings all night.

The next morning, Kimmy biked to Wal-Mart for her 10-5 shift in the women's section. Mary, a matronly chain smoker with a gold "10 years!" employee name tag, was already sorting returned clothing into separate shopping carts based on their department. She wore the same floor-length khaki skirt with white tennis shoes and a different bead necklace made by her granddaughter every day. She got to sit on a stool while she worked because of a foot surgery she'd had months ago, but at this point Kimmy figured she held on to it to avoid having to support her enormous weight any longer than necessary.

"The people who worked last night didn't get returns at six," Mary said, and was doubled over by a hacking cough. "Sheila probably sat here the whole time complaining about her roommate. She's threatening to move out again, so the whole world has to hear about it." Kimmy mumbled something appeasing and moved to grab a cart of clothes, but Mary said Claire wanted to see her first.

Kimmy ambled back to her department manager's office and found Claire on the phone. Kimmy stood and examined the walls filled with managers' schedules, training checklists, and safety warnings until Claire finished her conversation and waved her to sit.

"I'll be quick," Claire said. "I appreciate how hard you've worked for us the past two years. You're a quick learner, flexible about moving between departments, and your

annual evaluations are good. One of our assistant managers is transferring to another store, and we'd like to offer you his position." She paused. "You don't have to answer right away. Take a few days to think about it, and get back to me next week, okay? That's all for now."

Kimmy rose, thanked Claire, and walked back to the apparel section. She ignored the returned clothes Mary had set out for her and spent an hour folding t-shirts, her brain whirring with too many choices to do anything requiring thought. Tinny Top 40 songs played throughout the store over granola bar commercials on repeat near her department. She never understood why every third grocery aisle needed a TV on the end. They screamed desperation. *Don't ever go out of earshot of reminders that our food is awesome!* Still, people came. They came and whined and made messes you couldn't clean fast enough and were sure Target had a better sale on that skirt and demanded to talk to a manager, because they had their rights. The customer is always right. They're number one.

*

When she is 18, Kimmy swims in her first NCAA championship race. She pumps her legs together in the water, a furious mermaid using the butterfly stroke to surge toward the pool wall. She had visualized this race during her warm-up routine, seen every precise stroke. Up. Breathe. Down. Her abs contract to help her dolphin kick, and every time her head bursts out of the water, it's like knocking over a pane of glass. Or a row of critics who said a freshman wouldn't make this far. Her dad shielded her from much of the press, both positive and negative, but Coach Chambers sometimes read the UF swimmers their headlines to make them hungry. Kimmy's rival was Sonya, a junior from

Auburn whose own mother had set records in her day. The two girls had close times throughout the season, and Kimmy never missed a chance to watch a meet her opponent raced in and critique her stroke. Her dad had updated the alarm message on her cell phone for morning workouts: *Sonya's still asleep. Get up.* When she hit the gym, she imagined Sonya sitting on her weights, trying to keep her down.

Now, both girls have earned their spot in the NCAA championship for the 100-meter fly. Kimmy and her teammates have been tapering their workouts to save their strength, and they shaved their legs and armpits for the first time in months at the hotel last night to remove additional resistance. Kimmy's new bobbed hairdo is trapped under two swim caps. Nothing gets in her way.

When she swims close to the pool wall, her flip turn is clean, and she does not waste unnecessary time gliding but pushes herself, calling upon every 6 a.m. workout to come through for her now. She expends every last bit of strength to hit the final wall and surfaces, gasping for air. She had an edge on Sonya going into the last lap, but she's not sure she maintained it. She takes off her goggles and looks for her dad. He's yelling – everyone is – and jumping up and down, but that could mean anything. She looks for the boards. Sees her lane listed first. Shrieks, looks back at her dad, and pumps her fist in the air. First place. She will later learn she set a national record, obliterating the goal number she's had etched into her brain.

Kimmy pulls herself out of the pool, grabs a towel, and shakes Sonya's hand. "Good race," she says. Ignoring years of warnings about safety, she dashes across the pool deck to where her dad is waiting with a bear hug. "Congrats, kiddo," he says. "I knew you could do it."

Coach Chambers hugs her, yells something about making the Gators proud, and then the reporters descend. Kimmy has been interviewed after plenty of wins, but this is another level. She barely has time to process the questions but tells the reporters she did her best, owes her victory to her dad, and couldn't be happier. She grins at the camera flashes before rushing off to change for the medal ceremony.

After the ceremony Kimmy and her dad celebrate at an all-you-can-eat buffet, per tradition. They like seeing employees react to her multiple plates full of chicken, steak, ham, mashed potatoes, green beans, broccoli, carrots, rolls, and more. Once she started swimming six hours a day and requiring a diet to match, buffets became the best value for a night out. Her mom didn't travel with the team and isn't there to join the celebration – another tradition – but her dad says she sends her love. He assures Kimmy she'll be proud of her daughter's victory.

As soon as they sit to eat, Kimmy says, "Dad, there was an Olympic coach named Jerry Macintosh at the meet. They want me to train with them in New Mexico this summer." She's not surprised he tells her to go for it.

"I'm so proud of you, sweetie." He picks up a dinner roll. Months later, Kimmy will wonder why she didn't notice his hands shaking. He adds, "Know why you won today? That last flip turn."

"Nope. Because I'm tall."

"You're welcome."

*

Kimmy had begun to put away the returned women's clothing. She got a text from Grant, who was working in the toy department that day: *I wondered why the baseball was getting bigger. Then it hit me.* He had a joke or two for her each day, especially when he knew she had a long shift, and she usually liked his corny humor. It reminded her of her dad's. Today she didn't text back.

A man and his young daughter walked up to her and asked about swim goggles. Kimmy pointed in the relative direction of the sporting goods department on the other end of the store. She glanced down at the girl who was probably dreaming of seeing underwater and said, "They aren't the best goggles, though. I mean, they'll work, but if you're serious about swimming you should go to Dick's Sporting Goods in Springfield."

The little girl grabbed the man's hand and danced around. "Can we, Daddy? Please?"

"Sure, kiddo." He looked at Kimmy. "Sounds like this shopping trip will last a little longer. Thanks for your help."

Kimmy watched them walk off, his hand swallowing his daughter's, together in the moment. Kimmy wanted to tell the girl to hold on tight. Life would move on, their busy schedules would pull them apart, and they wouldn't get to share these simple shopping trips much longer.

*

When she is 19, Kimmy spends her summer in New Mexico. She's in the pool so much she sweats chlorine, but her times keep improving. Jerry wants her to continue training with them to swim the fly on the upcoming Olympic 4x100 medley relay team. She tries to call home every week or two, but near the end of the summer her dad often

sounds tired, so they don't talk long, and then school kicks in again with its academic and physical demands. Going home for Thanksgiving should be the high point of her semester.

She sits at the table with her dad while her mom carves the turkey. Kimmy brags about how the team is doing this year and about the couple of new girls who've really added a lot. Her dad gets up and tries to carry the tray of turkey to the table, but it falls with a thud and a clatter. Kimmy jumps to clean up the turkey as her mom helps her dad to a chair.

“What happened, Dad?”

“I guess the Butterball gave me butter fingers.”

Her parents exchange a look that hasn't fooled Kimmy since she was eight. They have a secret.

“Seriously. You don't just drop a turkey,” she says.

So they tell her. It doesn't take long. Her dad has ALS – Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis – Lou Gehrig's Disease. The disease affects the nerves in his brain and spine, and therefore his movement and mental processes. This explains the shaking, the tired speech. He was diagnosed a few months ago, but they didn't want to tell Kimmy when she was away and focused on her swimming. The doctors made the diagnosis late, and they aren't sure how much time he has left to live.

Kimmy watches their faces: Her mom's, eyes full of tears as she rests her hand on her husband's to still his shaking. Her dad's, smiling to make everything okay. Kimmy breaks eye contact.

When the weekend is over, Kimmy has to go back to school for exams. The first place she goes is the pool, but it no longer comforts her. The chlorine smells harsher, like the killer it is, and the empty echoes amplify the lack of people who are there for her when the races are over and the reporters have left. She jumps into the water and does a simple breaststroke to clear her mind, but she gets to the wall and cannot bring herself to do a flip turn. She reaches up to grab the diving block and holds herself there until her strength gives out.

When she has dried off and changed, she calls her advisor to say she's dropping out after this semester. She calls Coach Chambers, too. He says he understands. Promises to save her a spot on the swim team. She believes him, because she knows she's good and he's always been kind to her, but she doesn't promise anything in return.

*

When Mary got back from her break, Kimmy asked to go home early. Claire frowned and said it wasn't a good time, but Kimmy made a sick face and was allowed to leave. When she got to her apartment, she dug through a box in her closet to find her swimming scrapbook and took it out to the living room. She had made it the summer after she graduated high school as a present for her dad, and he later added newspaper clippings from college. It had pictures of them on the beach at vacation, certificates of completion for each level of swim classes, and pictures and blurbs about every high school meet but one.

*

When she is 14, Kimmy stands over her dad. He doesn't have ALS yet – doesn't have any idea it's coming in a few years – but he's lying on the couch with the flu.

“Kimberly Ann Pearce, I will not allow you to miss this meet on my account.”

She blinks away his threats. “You just threw up twice, and Mom’s stuck at work. That makes you my number one priority.”

“Your priorities are screwed up.” He tries to convince her that her freshman year of high school is the time to prove herself; that whatever bug he caught will pass; that he won’t allow her to play games or have fun if she stays home.

“The game is called Take Care of Dad. It’s lots of fun. Or you can ground me.”

“I’m not going to ground you.”

“Then I’ll ground myself. Let me know when you can keep down some water.”

He still isn’t happy with her, but he gives in. Her team gets third place at the meet. She sets her final token on Home and beats her dad at Sorry.

*

Kimmy heard a knock and found Grant standing at her apartment door.

“I heard you went home sick,” he said, holding a Tupperware bowl of soup.

“Come on in.”

He set the soup on her counter and walked into the living room. She saw his eyes pass over the scrapbook lying open on her couch.

“Claire offered me an assistant manager position today,” she said.

“Congratulations! About time they recognize you’ve been there longer than half the department.” Grant’s look turned thoughtful, like he was doing a Word Search puzzle. He nodded his head in the direction of the scrapbook. “Why’d you get that out?”

Kimmy’s smile lost its shine. “I’ve been thinking about Dad.” She sat down with her scrapbook. “Coach Chambers called yesterday.”

“Where’d he get your number?” Grant asked.

“My mom.” Kimmy relayed the details of their conversation, including the interest of both her college coach and Olympic trainer in having her return. Grant asked if she was going to join the team again, and she looked down at her scrapbook. The article about her NCAA championship had made the front page of the sports section, above the fold. *Freshman Phenom Pearce Wins Gold*. The picture showed her in the water, fist in the air. The page next to it, the last page of the book, was a picture of her and her dad standing outside the training center in New Mexico with their arms around each other, grinning.

“I think you should go for it,” Grant said. “You could really have an impact on the world.”

Kimmy felt like she’d gotten too close to someone swimming in front of her and been kicked in the jaw. “Or waste more of my life in a pool instead of with the people I love. Why are you suddenly on their side?”

Grant put his hand on her leg, but she shrugged him off and got up to get a glass of water. “Babe,” he said, “I’ll always be here for you, but this invitation, especially after two years, is the chance of a lifetime. Why wouldn’t you at least fly down there and try out?”

“My life is here,” she said. “I got a promotion.” People remembered the two years since her dad died, but they seemed to forget it had been four since she quit swimming. The smell of chlorine still took her back to the hospital. She turned to set her glass down but misjudged the distance to the counter, and it crashed to the floor. She sank to her knees and picked up the big shards, hoping not to cut herself on what she couldn’t see.

Grant knelt beside her, talking while he helped her clean up. “I’m not asking you to stop grieving, Kimmy. But would your dad really have wanted you to take a Wal-Mart promotion over a shot at a gold medal? It’s like you’re too happy playing in a mud puddle to see the ocean awaits you. You’re a champion.”

Kimmy’s cell phone rang, and this time she recognized the number as belonging to Coach Chambers. She considered the fun she’d been able to have the past two years with Grant and at Wal-Mart, where she was now being offered some sort of security. Compared it to the painful memories resurrected that week. Declined the call.

“I can’t,” she said.

*

When she is 21, Kimmy sits by her dad’s hospital bed and stares at his eyes, pretending not to see the machines keeping him alive. He’s been paralyzed for a few weeks now. The air smells stale and slightly acidic. The painting on the wall shows a countryside landscape and a farm from probably a hundred years ago. There are blue butterflies in the meadow. She tells her dad, “The UF is in exam week now. I’m sure glad I don’t have to mess with that anymore. Two-a-day practices are nothing compared to cramming for finals.” He can’t answer, but that doesn’t stop her from sharing anything that comes to mind. Sometimes she gives him updates on swim races that she knows would interest him, but she never actually watches the meets, just gets the information online. She talks to make him listen. She talks to make him live.

“Remember your favorite story about the day I thought I learned to swim? I was only four years old. You showed me how to float on my stomach, the most boring thing ever, but you wouldn’t let up until you were sure I had good form. You told me to kick,

and I thought I was a natural. I was so proud of myself. I didn't realize you were still supporting me. I'm pretty sure I started to drown about two seconds after you let go."

Kimmy can laugh about it now, but she remembers how terrified she had felt. One second her dad was with her in the pool, confident and happy. Then, he disappeared, and she was alone in an ocean so deep she couldn't touch the bottom. She forgot all his instructions to keep her back straight and keep kicking. The water that had helped her move forward now pressured her to sink as she grasped for anything to hold. Her splashing only made it harder to see which way was up. She yelled at her dad for leaving as the water closed in over her head.

MONOPOLY

My older sister, Leanne, was born with a blocked nasolacrimal canal. Her condition upset the system's normal functioning, and tears would stream down her face for no reason. They didn't have anywhere else to go.

Doctors performed a probe and irrigation procedure to stop Leanne's excessive crying when she was four years old. I was one at the time. They stuck a metal instrument through the duct to open it up. Her eyes could now process tears normally, but our parents couldn't. Crying was a meaningless reflex. An injury caused a grimace; a fight, yelling; a disappointment, a soft retreat to my room to think.

*

In eighth grade, I got into an argument with my best friend Stacy at a sleepover. We were playing Truth or Dare, and Molly asked me when the last time I cried was. I said never, and Stacy challenged me with a list of her emotional memories, like when we watched *Twilight* or learned how African slaves were treated centuries ago or heard that our friend Ferguson made a Valentine for his mom. She didn't remember that I had been quiet while she blew her nose. Everyone told me I was weird. Stacy Googled an article that said only animals didn't cry, and I said I quit Truth or Dare.

I told my sister about my fight, and Leanne suggested we play Monopoly. I liked to buy the railroads and the red properties first. When she drew the Chance card that sent her to the Reading Railroad to pay me double, I made a big deal of counting all the money she paid me, but when she got lucky and bought the properties to round out her

green and dark blue monopolies, I quieted down. She was close to buying houses for her green monopoly, so I said I had homework to do.

The next day we watched a movie in English class about this organization that raided a dog fight. The pit bulls' eyes were yellow, and the matted blood on their fur formed a chess board, but one of them had enough strength to lunge and bite a rescuer's arm. The movie summarized the next series of events. Clips of the dogs in the hospital, writhing as veterinarians bandaged their sores. Interviews with the rescuers, shaken by the brutality they had witnessed. The prosecution of the dog fighting organizers, fined and jailed for their crimes. At the end, they showed the man who had been bitten by one of the dogs. He had taken the animal into his home and cared for it until it healed and trusted him. The final scene was a video of the man's young son playing in the grass with the rehabilitated pit bull. As the orchestra music swelled in the background, I heard a few girls in our class sniffing, Stacy loudest of all.

The credits rolled, and an overhead page told me to go to the main office. My mom was there. Leanne had been in a car accident. We drove to the hospital in time to see a bunch of nurses standing around Leanne's bed like the people who had treated the bloody dogs. One of the nurses intercepted us and shook her head slowly, like she was moving through water.

When we came home from the hospital, I saw our Monopoly board with all the houses Leanne would never buy.

*

I Googled Leanne's condition once. One name for it is epiphora, which refers to any excessive crying. That word can also mean a word or phrase that's repeated at the

end of sentences, an “epistrophe.” I didn’t understand why there had to be so many different usages; why people couldn’t say a word and all mean the same thing.

COME TRUE

I had dreamed of my arrival at Disney World my whole life: standing by the green grass and flowers arranged to look like Mickey's face, with brick buildings like something they'd investigate in *National Treasure* in front of me and tall fences penning me in. The sky was as clear and sunny as the weatherman promised, but when I looked up, I thought I saw a vulture circling high above the park. We had just learned about them in science. I thought it was gross they eat road kill, but Mrs. Robertson said they're one of the few species that mates for life, so I guess that's cool. You can't judge a family from the outside. The bird flew closer, though, and I saw it was just a crow.

The only thing keeping me from seeing Cinderella's castle was Mrs. Robertson droning on and on about staying with a buddy and following the rules. Maybe the other fifth-graders needed help, but I'd been researching The Magic Kingdom for weeks and knew exactly what I wanted to see during our two days here.

As soon as the lecture was over, I jumped in the line to swipe my ticket. Anna had a backpack, so she had to get it checked by security. I waited for her at the beginning of Main Street, U.S.A. The buildings were made from brick, or white with red awnings, and looked like they were from a hundred years ago, with names like "emporium" and "confectionary." I squinted and tried to measure the size of distant windows with my fingers.

"What are you doing?" Anna came up behind me.

"I read that the second stories here are shorter than the first stories, to make the buildings seem taller," I said.

“Oh. Can we go now?”

I decided not to tell her the Magic Kingdom was built in 1971, five years after Walt Disney died. Instead I said, “Sure,” and led her straight towards Cinderella’s castle at the end of the long street. Even though I knew the height trick, the magic worked. It looked bigger than I’d imagined. The blue and gold towers stretched above anything else in the park. “Hey, the towers match Cinderella’s ball gown and hair,” I said.

“Yep,” Anna said.

I had her take a picture of me by the castle, and we watched a show being staged in front of us. Maleficent, the evil witch from *Sleeping Beauty*, was threatening to cast a spell on Mickey and Minnie. Little kids in the audience were crying.

Anna nudged me. “They remind me of you and your dad with that mouse.”

“I forgot I told you that story,” I said.

When I was in preschool, Cinderella was my hero. She had blonde hair and blue eyes and did chores like me, so I didn’t see why I couldn’t have a fairy godmother turn me into a princess. I watched the movie every day. We have videos of me singing to the robins in our backyard, and putting on my long winter gloves and dancing in circles around our living room. One day, when I was probably only four, I caught my dad throwing away a mouse he’d trapped. A skinny metal bar pinned it down, and its wiry tail dangled in surrender. “You killed Gus-Gus,” I said.

“Katie, he’s not real. This is a bad mouse that could have hurt us.”

“He *is* real,” I said. My dad tried to explain the difference between movies and reality, but I wouldn’t listen while the evidence of his crime was clenched in his hand. I was inconsolable for days.

On stage, Anna and I watched Peter Pan run around Maleficent and tell the audience the only way to defeat her was to believe that dreams come true. The crowd clapped, the witch vanished in a puff of smoke, and fireworks shot off while the characters celebrated their victory by singing and dancing.

“That was dumb,” Anna said. “Let’s go on some rides.”

As soon as we learned our class would get a fifth-grade graduation trip to Disney World, Anna and I had mapped out what we really wanted to see. I wanted to get characters’ autographs, but Anna had been here before and said it was weird because they were actors. She wanted to revisit her favorite rides. We compromised: We would go on a ride together, and then Anna would explore a gift shop while I stood in line for characters and tried not to notice that their voices didn’t sound like the movies. In Adventureland alone we saw Ariel and Prince Eric by The Pirates of the Caribbean and Jasmine and Aladdin by Aladdin’s Magic Carpet Ride. I took every opportunity to tell Anna a piece of information. “Did you know ‘Rajah’ means ‘king’?” “A tiger’s skin is striped just like its fur is.” “A group of tigers is called an ‘ambush’.” Anna never shared my enthusiasm, even when I said facts about her favorite animal: “They have a baby elephant in the Animal Kingdom. Do you know how elephants mate? Once a year the boy elephants will nuzzle a girl elephant, and whoever she nuzzles back is the one she’ll have a baby with, so her mate changes every year. It’s not exclusive or anything.”

“Whatever, Katie. Let’s go on Splash Mountain.”

For lunch, we walked back to Main Street, U.S.A. to get hot dogs at Casey’s, a baseball-themed shop with cheap food. After ordering, Anna unzipped all the pockets of her backpack and dumped its contents on the counter.

“Jeez, you need a smaller bag,” I said.

“I can’t find my wallet.”

I stepped closer and looked at everything with her. Pens, paper clips, a brush, a camera, hand sanitizer, and some park maps were there, but no wallet. We moved out of line and tried to figure out what could have happened. She had put her ticket in her wallet at the beginning of the day but didn’t remember anything after that. An employee walked over and offered to take us to Guest Services, one of the brick buildings by the park entrance.

When we got there, a nice lady named Lisa gave Anna a Kleenex. “Are you two sisters?” she asked.

“No, we just look alike,” I said. “We’re here with our class.”

Lisa wrote down Mrs. Robertson’s name and cell phone number and asked Anna to describe her wallet.

“It’s pink, I think it’s leather, my name’s on it. My mom got it for me when she went to Atlanta once. It had a hundred dollars, my park ticket, my library card, and a picture of my family.” Anna’s voice was Jell-O.

Lisa said, “Our team will be on the lookout and call your teacher if we find it. I’m sure it will turn up by the end of the day. Meanwhile, we’ll give you a new park ticket and vouchers for lunch at The Crystal Palace. You can keep them in this.” She pulled out a new wallet from behind the counter she was at. It was black and shiny and had a big picture of Minnie on it. It made me wish I had lost my wallet.

Anna wiped her nose on her sleeve and put the wallet in her backpack. “Thanks,” she said.

“You’re welcome, sweetie. Have a magical day.”

When we left the building, I said, “That was so cool. I wonder if they can replace anything.”

“It’s not the same,” Anna said.

“Well, you lost some money, but that wallet was getting old anyway. This one’s so much better, and now we get a nice lunch with princesses.”

It turns out The Crystal Palace actually had Winnie the Pooh characters. I was still happy, but Anna wouldn’t get her picture taken with them, no matter how much they prodded or hugged her. Even Eeyore was smiley. I got extra pictures, filled two more pages of my notebook with autographs, and made three trips to the buffet line while she sat and picked at her food. She told me she wanted to retrace our steps and look for her wallet. I offered to pay for her meals on the trip and not tell anyone she lost it, but she was insistent. “It has to be here somewhere. You mapped out our visit, so it’ll be easy to visit the same places and shops. Please?”

“Fine, but you owe me,” I said. “There are 22 characters who visit this park and we’ve only talked to ten so far.”

It took all afternoon to wander the park, question employees, and wait in lines to check seats. No luck. As it was getting dark, I saw the White Rabbit. Anna didn’t say anything when I ran over to him, just searched the bushes along the path. After getting his autograph, I walked back and asked her if we could do something new.

“Sure. Let’s go on Dumbo.”

“Seriously? That’s a baby ride,” I said.

“I don’t care. It was fun when I was little.”

“Whatever you say. Hey, did you know elephants are the only animals that have death rituals? They’ll still bring an elephant food and water right after it dies to try and revive it, and then they get really quiet and eventually bury the body.”

“That’s awful,” Anna said. “Knock it off with the facts.”

“Fine. Go on Dumbo by yourself.”

“Fine.”

Anna joined noisy preschoolers and tired parents in the line, and I left her for the Goofy Barnstormer. The ride looked super crazy, like it crashed through a billboard, but of course everyone got back safely. Typical Goofy. The line was too long, so I waited for Anna and tried not to look bored.

She sat in one of a dozen seats shaped like baby elephants that rose into the air and slowly flew in a circle. Out of the corner of my eye, it looked like her elephant seat was unattached from the rest of the ride. Any minute now, the plastic animal would flap his ears and carry her high above the park, out of my reach. I turned and made sure that the mechanical arm still moved her in a circle with the other seats. I half-waved as she made a revolution, but she didn’t see me.

We didn’t talk much the rest of the night, and her wallet didn’t turn up. I knew the next day would be better after we’d had a chance to rest and start over. Our class was going to Epcot. Some people had warned me it was a boring park. Mrs. Robertson called it “educational,” so I figured they were right. Still, I’d heard you could meet a lot of Disney characters in the World Showcase. Belle was in France, Snow White was in Germany, and most importantly, Mary Poppins was in the United Kingdom. In addition to being one of the greatest non-princess movies ever, *Mary Poppins* was the reason

Anna and I became friends. We were in third grade together and somebody pointed out, “When you say your names fast, it sounds like that first nanny who left the family in *Mary Poppins*. Katie Nanna.” It’s a small role and the nanny seems pretty mean, but how often do you get your name in a Disney movie? That introduction started us talking – we both loved the scene of the movie where they jump into the painting and ride the carousel that comes to life. We were inseparable from then on. “Here comes Katie Nanna,” people would say.

At recess, when other girls watched the boys play soccer, we acted out Disney stories. Sometimes they were from the movies, and sometimes they were about princesses who were secretly sisters and had new adventures. Evil stepmothers were no match for us. We played on weekends, too. Her mom used to drive me to their house and have brownies or cookies ready for us, but she got really busy with work this year, so then we played at my house more. I knew if anything on our trip could cheer Anna up, it would be *Mary Poppins*.

Since the World Showcase was on the opposite end of Epcot, we started at an exhibit called The Seas with Nemo & Friends. I couldn’t believe how many fish there were. Aquariums reached across the walls in almost every room, holding sharks, manatees, eels, turtles, crabs, and more fish than I could count. Each species on display had its own board of information or a game to test your knowledge. I was in heaven. I called out facts to Anna trailing behind me. “Dolphins communicate and work together on things.” “Sea turtles don’t have teeth.” “Clownfish stray no further than one meter from their home during their entire lifetime.”

“I wish I was a clownfish,” Anna said as a couple kids ran by us.

“Sharks don’t have backbones,” I said.

By the time we’d explored the whole area and seen the dolphins fed, it was time for our lunch. I bought us cheeseburgers from a place called Club Cool that had metallic teal, hi-tech decorations and free samples of Coke from around the world. I drank them all really fast and called Anna a slowpoke, but she threw away her cup and sat down at a table.

I followed her. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“This is about your wallet, isn’t it?”

“No.” She started tearing a napkin into pieces.

“They gave you an even better one,” I said.

“I don’t feel good. I want to leave,” she said.

“But we haven’t seen Mary Poppins yet, or the other 28 characters who are here.”

Anna snapped. “I don’t care about Mary Poppins, okay? I don’t care about your stupid facts on the stupid characters in the stupid park.”

I thought of the dolphins I had read about who supposedly communicated so well. I wondered if one dolphin ever looked at another one and had no idea what she was trying to say.

“But it’s our dream trip,” I said.

“Well, sometimes dreams don’t come true, Katie. Sometimes you wake up and your mom’s gone.”

I made a soft noise like I had stubbed my toe but was trying not to wake anyone up. “What happened?”

Anna looked down at the napkin scraps piled in front of her as if seeing them for the first time. She lined a few up on the table, but it was still a mess. “She left a few days ago,” she said. “The picture in my wallet was from the last time we were all happy together.”

Anna’s parents fought more than mine did, and sometimes her mom took business trips for a few days, but it hadn’t seemed like that big of a deal to me.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I asked.

“No.”

“You know, Cinderella didn’t have a mom.”

Anna got up and walked out of the restaurant. I scrambled to clean up the shredded napkin pieces, but I couldn’t take care of all of them. A couple flew out of my grasp as I hurried to the garbage can and out the door.

I followed Anna back to The Seas with Nemo & Friends. She sat against a wall and watched the clownfish swim as kids crowded around to see “Nemo.” I was bored, but it didn’t matter as much anymore. I explored the aquariums until I had practically all the displays memorized.

When I got hungry, I asked Anna if we could go back to the Magic Kingdom. “We never got to eat at Casey’s,” I said. “Maybe we’ll find your wallet this time.” We left the fish exhibit and were surprised to see it had grown dark. The bus ride from Epcot was silent and slow.

“We should order Elephant Ears,” I suggested. “Did you know elephants use their ears to control their body temperature and to signal their emotions?” Anna shrugged, her face turned to the window.

People were already sitting on Main Street, U.S.A. to get a good spot for the parade. I had hoped no one would be in Casey's, but there was a big crowd looking for snacks and a seat. It took us a long time to wait in the line that stretched outside along the row of perfectly disproportioned buildings.

Anna broke the awkward silence first. "Nemo wouldn't have left," she said.

"Huh?"

"In the movie. If clownfish don't go more than a meter from their home, then Nemo wouldn't have gone to school, and he definitely wouldn't have swam out to touch the boat."

"Right. And he wouldn't have lived long in the fish tank, because clownfish need a certain type of anemone that feeds and protects them with its tentacles that sting most fish."

"Do sea turtles really live to be a hundred?" Anna asked.

"Eighty is usually about the max, but they survive a lot to get there." I told Anna about how sea turtles leave their eggs on the beach, so the baby turtles have to avoid predators and get to the water by themselves when they hatch. As cute as Squirt was in *Finding Nemo*, he wouldn't have been swimming with his dad in real life.

"Movies are dumb," Anna said.

We ordered our food and took turns doodling in my notebook. I thought she'd like the big elephant I drew, with a trunk spouting water and ears that looked like box fans. She drew an ocean underneath it, with a baby turtle swimming by a sea anemone full of clownfish. "Do sea turtles and clownfish even live in the same habitat?" she asked.

"They do now," I said.

We finished eating and left the restaurant. I found a space on the sidewalk and told Anna it would be a good place to watch “Wishes,” the nightly fireworks show. She shook her head.

“I’m ready for bed,” she said. “You can stay if you want, though.”

I looked up the street at Cinderella’s castle. The soundtrack to the show had started, and the towers flashed blue and green and pink as the music pulsed. It was the coolest thing I’d ever seen, like an electric Easter basket. I wanted to stay and hum along with “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” but Katie Nanna had to go. We walked out the gates as fireworks shot off behind us.

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