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Holes and Patches

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Holes and Patches

I am standing in the middle of the road, a quiet side street in an upstate New York village of 6,300. At least, it's usually quiet. Today, the oak trees lining the sidewalk bounce the war cry of a stubborn three-year-old between them the way scabby-kneed children toss rubber balls across a parking lot at recess. All I asked was that Emma move back to the curb before an SUV late for soccer practice came barreling around the bend, the garbage truck arrived early, or Mrs. Hansen returned home to find her little miracle frolicking along the pavement, trailed by the most inept babysitter in all of suburbia. This request has put me on the wrong side of a preschooler's war against safety. Emma can identify all twenty-six uppercase letters of the alphabet. She can ride a bike with training wheels and Velcro her sneakers securely. She will walk where she pleases.

"Emma." I say her name in a warning tone, stressing the last syllable and letting it trail like a question while we each calculate our next move. Her nose scrunches, her hands find her hips, and I know I am in for it. Her eyes are like a forest, shifting from green to brown according to her internal seasons. Now they are a feverish August morning, and they dare me to cross her.

"Come over to the side with me." I hold out my hand. In response, she folds the collapsible pink doll stroller she has been pushing along. Her short brown hair is sticking to her sweaty forehead, and she pauses to wipe a strand from her eye before rearing back with her makeshift weapon. *Whack*. A wheel makes contact with my shin.

"If you want your M&Ms, you have to listen." I am not above bribing a child with sugar and red dye #40. *Whack*. I am apparently not above taking a beating from one, either.

"You. Can't. Tell. Me. What. To. Doooo!"

I am a nineteen-year-old legal adult who can write complex theses. I can operate an industrial printing press and tie a mean double knot in my shoelaces. I want to sit down and cry. The image is ridiculous, the two of us blubbing on the asphalt, unable to safely navigate our way across the street. Cars would brake for us like they brake for the geese that confuse themselves in the middle of Lincoln Avenue near the pond by my house. Drivers would beep or wave impatiently, making sweeping motions with their hands as if they had the telekinetic power to brush us aside.

But feigning nonchalance is a talent of mine, and my inner distress goes undetected. When I do not visibly react to her display of violence, Emma drops the stroller and stomps to the sidewalk. She walks the rest of the way home with her head up and shoulders back to indicate that this slight change of route is her choice and has nothing to do with the fact that I asked her to take it a few minutes earlier. Startled by my own emotional instability, I let any resentment toward my two-and-a-half foot charge drain into the pavement as I bend to retrieve the miniature pushchair. In fact, I begin to marvel that a person who's only been around for three years can function at all. Counting nine months of fetal limbo, I've had two decades of existence in this strange world, but I feel as though I am toddling precariously on the stilts of self-awareness. Emma strides like a girl who has not yet discovered she is breakable. Later, she falls asleep in my lap.

I have been babysitting the Hansen kids for eight years, long before Emma was adopted at one month old. Now, her siblings are growing self-sufficient and I spend most of my energy chasing the youngest Hansen child around the house and yard. Today, however, is different. In addition to all four Hansens, I have also acquired Milo and Sophie from the house on the other side of Mrs. Hansen's garden. The skinny blonde duo, ages seven and three, have made a habit of joining us for fort building and butterfly catching. With six overheated children under my wing on this cloudless summer Wednesday, Milo and Sophie's father eventually takes pity on me and invites us over for a swim.

I make Emma wait at the edge of the pool until chlorinated water nips at my waist and I am deep enough to catch her. She leaps into my arms and enthusiastically washes away any hopes I had of keeping my hair dry. I let her go and she bobs off in her vest like cork on a fishing line.

Mr. Jim is a tall, stocky man with a shiny head and firm handshake. He emerges from the sliding glass door in a pair of red swim trunks and wades into the pool behind me.

"So where did you say you go to college again?"

"Geneseo," I respond distractedly. I am hesitant to make eye contact because watching a fearless three-year-old in a pool of school-aged children is like playing the game in which a marble is placed under one of three cups, and one must visually track the designated cup through a lengthy scrambling in order to receive the marble back at the end. Mr. Jim is determined, though, to have a real conversation. He is a stay-at-home dad, his wife works long hours, and he needs to exercise his adult voice before he is stuck speaking in sing-song for eternity.

"Oh, I hear that's a great school. What are you going for?" Before I can answer, a stream of water invades my ear and we are caught in a firefight between Milo and Sophie. "Milo James, apologize to Miss Meghan!"

"Oh, just Meghan's fine."

"Miss" makes me feel formal and deceptive, like the rare days I switch out my jeans for a dress. The title seems to signify a presence I do not own. It is for people whose roles are stable and defined. Miss Cobb was my Kindergarten teacher, Miss Sharon my swim coach. Although I am nearly twenty, my identity is pockmarked by adolescent confusion and one too many perusals of Camus. We move towards the side of the pool and out of disputed territory.

"Anyway, I'm double-majoring in English and International Relations."

"So you want to be a teacher?" He glances down at seven-year-old Lydia, Emma's sister, who sees monkey bars where my limbs should be. Now she is wrapping her arms around my neck as she plants her feet securely on the shelves of my hips. I am grateful for her fairy-like build. *I'm an English major who loves kids. Teaching could be fine.*

"I have absolutely no idea."

"That's okay." He lets a short, breathy laugh escape his smile and shakes his head. "I'm forty-two, and I still don't know what I want to do." He goes on to explain that he used to be an engineer but realized it wasn't for him around the time Milo was born.

"Well, I'm sure your kids will look back one day and appreciate that you were there to raise them. As far as careers go, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

I wonder how Mr. Jim feels about being called "Mister."

A few days after we go swimming, I leave my babysitting post to spend a week in South Carolina with my father's family. One morning while I'm gone, the Hansens awake to discover Nemo, their beloved pet fish, floating in his tank. The children scoop him up with a net and tote him to the backyard for a proper burial beneath a maple tree. Milo and Sophie spot them from next door and hop off their swings to join the ragtag procession. Emma looks up at her friends to explain.

"Our fish just died."

When Milo responds, the Hansens think they must have heard him wrong. He clears his throat and repeats himself.

"Our dad just died."

A year has passed. Emma is four, and the two of us are growing dusty on the floor of her garage. It is a humid summer morning not unlike the ones that followed Mr. Jim's heart attack, the ones spent rolling plastic trucks back and forth on the cool concrete with Milo and Sophie while adults unraveled like yarn dolls in the house next door.

Emma and I are playing horses, and I am in character as "Baby Horse." I don't know what prompts Mommy Horse to stop crouching on all fours and sit cross-legged in front of me. Our previous conversation consisted mostly of whinnies and the occasional snort. It is clear, though, by the wrinkles in her forehead and the whitening of her lips as she presses them together like hands in prayer that she has done some serious contemplation between trips to the trough and vet.

"Can you jump all the way to Heaven?" *Where did that come from?*

"Um, nope." I hesitate, trying to answer the way I believe her devout Catholic mother would. "Only God can take you there."

"When you die?"

"Yes."

She pauses, and I think the conversation is over. I realize now why so many privately cynical parents still drag their children to Sunday school each week. Who wants to explain to a kid the possibility that, when she's done, she's *done*?

"I wish we didn't have God." *Curveball.*

"Why?" I ask. She is silent. Her eyes are still like a forest. There are questions beneath rocks waiting to be upturned in muddy creek beds. There are answers beneath layers of leaves on the ground.

"Emma?"

"If we didn't have God, we wouldn't have to go to Heaven. I don't want to die."

We sit quietly for a moment. I absentmindedly poke some pits in the cement floor. She knows she is breakable now. She is beginning to see voids in the universe she once trusted, but my words cannot fill them for her. I could tell her that Heaven is a beautiful place. I could tell her that God loves her, and everything will be okay. I could tell her that no God doesn't mean no dying. But it's 80 degrees and loose stones are nesting in the flesh of my knees and I am too tired for logic or faith.

"Me neither." I sigh.

I think about the cavities in the ground where Nemo and Mr. Jim have peeled and shriveled. I wonder how long it takes the earth to reclaim its territory.

My mother takes the passenger seat again. She has been forcing me to drive the twenty minutes to Emma's house every morning. I have had my learner's permit for three years, but few things give me more anxiety than the gargle of an engine and the sweaty leather of a steering wheel. I have barely come to terms with occupying my own body, and maneuvering a vehicle makes me feel as though I have grown a heavy metal shell. I take up more space, and space means responsibility. A larger region of existence lies within my immediate control; my clumsiness and inadequacy are amplified. I want to be small and inanimate, but the car expands my presence. My breath quickens as I jam the key into the ignition. While my foot is on the pedal, every inhale is a theft and every exhale an apology.

Half an hour later, I ring the doorbell and a chorus of shouts and giggles greets me in response. Emma and Lydia attempt to shove each other out of the way as they race to the door and tumble onto the patio.

I take them to the creek and they fight over who gets to release one of their captive frogs from its yellow pail prison. Lydia screams and Emma bites her sister on the arm. It turns out okay, though, and within an hour they make up over popsicles beneath the soothing draft of an overhead fan.

After lunch, we venture outside to look for bugs. Emma keeps a chrysalis in a small hand-held cage. I catch a glint of wonder in her eye as she picks up the container by the handle and holds it to the sky to examine the creature from a better angle. A soft but sudden wind rustles the branches. If God is anywhere, he is in the breeze of awe that passes across a child's face when she sees something lovely for the first time.

When I finally sink in front of the glove compartment on the ride home, I no longer feel bloated and incompetent inside my mom's blue Sienna. Nobody expects perfection. There is beauty in becoming something else.

My cheeks are swollen and my gums are torn in the hollows where my wisdom teeth once nestled. The first time I leave the house after surgery is to babysit. It's just after New Year's, and I haven't seen Emma since the summer. Upon entering the Hansens' front hall I am engulfed in a typhoon of questions and arms and leftover chili-breath. Mrs. Hansen explains my sore mouth to Emma and warns her not to touch my face. For the rest of the night, she takes it upon herself to guard my cheeks from unwanted contact.

"Daddy!" She addresses her father with the sharp tone of a parent commanding a child's respect. Mr. Hansen, lanky in his white coveralls, pokes his head around the corner.

"What's up, Emma?"

"You cannot touch Meghan's cheeks."

"Yes, Ma'am!" He obliges her pseudo-authority with a salute. I laugh to myself. If her father is touching my face at all, dental health is the least of my problems. She turns to me.

"Did you have to go to a doctor?"

"Yep."

"I go to a doctor and he puts the cold jelly on me because when I was born I had a space in my heart."

When she was one month old, Emma's first adoptive parents gave her back to the agency after they discovered her heart condition. The Hansens brought her home shortly after. Now she is five, the tissue has corrected itself, and I am secretly grateful for the medical detour that has brought her to a home where I can share in her endless cycle of stumbling and healing. The initial adoptive family was clearly not ready to bring a baby into their lives. What had they expected? A child is just a more honest version of an adult, covered in holes and patches.

Emma asks me to lie down with her until she falls asleep. As I tuck us both under the thick down comforter, she warns her stuffed animals not to bump me. Within ten minutes her breath becomes deep and slow, but I am not ready to peel myself out of bed just yet. Here we are, the two of us, bodies under construction. I smile as I think of how protective she became of my puffy face, causing a warm ache to radiate from the bruises on my lower jaw. It's painful, this constant state of becoming in which we are never whole. Life chips away at us, ripping teeth from tender gums and children from the soft, warm torsos of their parents until faith in anything constant grows moth-eaten in old garages. But Emma does not shrink in her state of incompleteness, nor does she apologize for her passionate if clumsy command of the space she occupies. My cheeks are throbbing from the grin stretching across my distended face in the dark. The more it hurts, the more I smile. She will walk where she pleases.