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Child Protection

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Child Protection

Across state lines. The words glared at Ramona, and sprung up to pounce and handcuff her. She was too quick, though: she crumpled up the social services packet that had been hiding amongst her T-shirts, and chucked it. Those words had nothing to do with her. She wasn't *taking* Joey; she was taking care of him. Like a mother should. She took a breath and folded another shirt into the duffel bag. Then she stilled, the hairs on her arm awake to the wispy exhale of the packet unfurling against the walls of the wastebasket. Maybe she should take the papers. Better than leaving them here for anyone to discover after she was gone. She tiptoed over and pinched the packet out of the trash. The words leapt out at her again—*across state lines*—and she flipped the pages away from her. She flattened the packet and crammed it deep in the belly of the bag, underneath her clothing and the couple things of Joey's that were here, and not at the Bensons'. She planted her hands on top of the clothes and pressed down hard, creating more breathing room for her belongings and less for that accusation on the page.

A tinny version of an Erykah Badu song erupted from somewhere. Ramona scrambled for her purse, grabbed her phone and checked the tiny screen. Aisha.

"Hey, girl," Ramona said. She sat down on the mattress. Stripped, it felt waxy.

"Hey. I only have a few minutes, but I just wanted to check you know how to get to the house, once you get off the bus. You have the directions, right?"

"Yeah. Walk east to North Charles, then take the 3 to 28th street, right?"

"Right. 340 East 28th. The one with the blue porch and the plastic flamingos. You saw the pictures. You can't miss it."

"That porch does seem pretty unmissable," Ramona said. The porch was really what had convinced her this new chapter was possible and necessary.

Sure, the fact that it was Aisha, and a house of sober, responsible adults in the other rooms helped, as did the cheap rent and raised minimum wage in Maryland—practically double Philly's. The cozy look of those overstuffed armchairs, the improbable robin's egg blue of the posts, and the silliness of that flamingo family cemented the deal. Did Joey have anything in his life right now that was purely silly? Purely sweet? Deborah Benson, his foster mother, had never once laughed in front of Ramona, and her smiles were all Splenda. From what Joey said, the pack of kids running around the house sounded half feral. Ramona would give Joey goofiness again. Give him safety. Love.

"I'll get Anderson to set up the air mattress for Joey in your room," Aisha said.

"Thanks," Ramona said. "I really appreciate it. And I can't wait to meet him!"

"Yeah, it's been too long," Aisha said. "I'm just so glad you're coming, and that the custody hearing went well. You must be thrilled to pieces to have Joey back!"

Ramona glanced down. A crack in the linoleum had gradually zigzagged into a delicate web, over the course of these months. Ramona wasn't going to stick around for the whole floor to cave in.

She and Aisha always told it to each other straight, but she had to think of Joey. She pictured them sitting on that porch, cocooned in blankets and drinking hot cocoa with cayenne, while the sun sank somewhere beyond their concern. Her throat constricted.

"Yeah, you have no idea," she said. "I don't even know what to do with myself."

Soon, they'd be in Baltimore. They'd lie low for a little, and then it wouldn't matter anymore; it'd be just like she had won back custody, all official. It had been too long: thirteen months of visits only every other week, in neutral places. And now, this six-month delay on the reunification hearing! It made no sense. She had clawed out over a year of sobriety (well, with *one* lightning flash of a slip-up, but just one), she had a job at the Gap, and a secure public housing unit...she'd even taken that parenting course. What did they want, her left leg? A letter from the president? Ramona couldn't just throw her hands in the air and leave this up to the fates of bureaucracy. Joey needed her.

"You're awful quiet," Aisha said. "Are you feeling nervous?"

"Yeah, a little," Ramona said. "I've never even been to Baltimore. I'm excited, but there's a lot to figure out. Getting a job, getting Joey in school..."

"Oh, I'll help you out with all that. And everywhere will be hiring for the holidays; you should have no problem. I was going to save this for when you got here, but I actually know about an office job I might be able to get you an interview for."

“Oh, Aisha, that’d be amazing. You’re too good.”

“Well, we’ve gotta have each other’s backs. You kept me sane back in rehab.”

“I’d say you kept me sane, too, but I don’t think anybody could’ve back then.” Ramona said. Aisha laughed. “You’ve done it since, though. Better than a sponsor.”

“Oh, honey. Yeah, you were some hell on wheels. A nice hell, though! Look, I’ve gotta go, but keep me posted about the bus, okay? Bye!”

Ramona hung up, and resumed folding clothes into the bag. Would Joey remember Aisha? She’d last visited when he was only four, just a few months before they’d lost the apartment and moved into Tyler’s. Ramona had been sober that time for two weeks, and even speaking was like swimming through swamp mud. Leaving, Aisha had squeezed her and said, “I think this’ll be the time you make it stick!” But Ramona only lasted another month. It took losing Joey for her to stay sober. From the moment she woke up in the hospital and he was gone, she was rabid for him, volcanic; her pores plugged with seething magma. Once out of rehab (this time in-patient), she focused every cell into leaping through any hoop social services suggested.

But nothing was enough. She saw that now. Despite everything, Joey’s social worker *still* brought up the needle on Tyler’s floor from her first visit, a year and a half ago. The needle wasn’t even Ramona’s, or Tyler’s. It must have been one of Tyler’s roommate’s customers, leaving shit behind. God, she would never have even brought Joey there if she could’ve afforded the rent on their lease renewal. She had made it nice for him, though. The room Joey slept in might have been tiny, but it was a sanctuary. All clean light and fluffy stuffed animals and Christmas tree smell. Christmas tree smell because she’d bought eight of those dangling air fresheners meant for cars. The whole rest of the building reeked of all manner of fumes, but her boy’s room smelled like Christmas, like the only needles lying around were pine.

The Bensons would never do something like that for Joey, Ramona thought, tucking his favorite racecar in the bag. And they didn’t really know him, or the warning signs for magma rising. They weren’t teaching him how to stand up to bullies, or when it was right to help someone in a mess, or better to run away and get help. They were just plain weird. They spoke in tongues! Joey told her so during his most recent visit. It wasn’t like Ramona dragged him to confession every week, but that didn’t mean she wanted him getting mixed up with possession and speaking in tongues. A god that slithered into your soul, and swam around until your head rolled back and your body bucked, and poured out ropes of sound, ecstatic and gelatinous—that wasn’t a god she wanted. No more out of body. No more lightning.

She pulled the sides of the bag together until the teeth of the zipper clenched. A siren seared through the static of traffic outside. Her head snapped up.

Kidnapping, hissed the papers from the belly of the bag.

Rescue, she corrected. Necessary. She yanked the zipper closed.

Ramona stood outside by Joey's school playground now, the grainy strap of the duffel bag digging into her palm. She'd taken extra care to remain unobtrusive. She painted herself beige. She blurred her presence. A huge Goodwill sweater bagged over her blouse, and her brown hair tucked beneath an Orioles cap.

Joey wasn't outside yet. It was 3:27 p.m. He got out at 3:30 p.m. She glanced around and saw a security guard. He nodded at her. She nodded back. He nodded again. She nodded back. He nodded yet again. How many nods did he need? Who was going to keep this from going on forever? Did he have a tic? Would he be more likely to remember her if she ignored him or if she kept nodding into infinity? She wished she didn't have the duffel with her. She wished she had a car.

Maybe the view of the monkey bars could save her. Ramona did the thing where she became a painting. This time she became a painting of a woman gazing at a playground. She'd had a several-month stint as a security guard at an art museum a few years ago: Each week they rotated to a different room, a week in each different room, with just a few paintings to stare at. She thought she'd crawl out of her head. Instead she crawled into the paintings. Once she moved to the Modernist wing, though, it got to be too much. She was becoming splotches and nightmares. Zigzags, splatters, and twentieth-century shell shock. Even humming didn't help; the music escaped her control, and thinned into screeching violins. That was when she started bringing gin in a Poland Spring water bottle. One day she got weepy though, and her breath smelled, and that was the end of that. Vodka would have been safer, but a particularly sour night in high school had ruined the stuff for her.

Nowadays she kept to the Impressionists. Let her be blurry when she needed to be. Blurry, and prettily pastoral harmless. It worked: the security guard was looking the other way. Dude needs a hobby. Or meds. Then again, all he had to look at was the playground. If she weren't hiding, she'd have gone over and shot the breeze with him.

Joey burst from the gym doors in a clump of kids, one organism with many wriggling legs. Two kids were flashing Pokémon cards. Joey and a boy were arguing, "uh-huh!" and "nuh-uh!" He sprang onto the jungle gym and scrambled up to crouch atop the plastic monkey bars.

"See?" he yelled down to his friend.

Ramona shook her head and knew she was doing right. She had to get him back now, away now, while he was still young and elastic. They were both like this, scrambling higher and quicker on dares—or not even on dares: Ramona and Joey were walking dares, dares and desperation and away, away, away. She had to divert his route before the ground got to know his name. All her potential energy for disaster was coiled, and ready to spring from his DNA. Only Ramona, reformed, could feed him the antidote.

They would get on the bus and become fresh, become possible. They would have to lay low for a couple weeks, use cash, work off the books—but she would get a job and get him in school. She would learn to cook with fresh vegetables instead of canned. She could teach Joey, make it fun: ingredients in a potion. He should learn too. They would play in the little yard, and eat on the blue porch. She could make life a humming, solid thing for him. She could do that now. After this getaway.

“Joey!”

Ramona whirled around.

Deborah Benson walked towards her. “Ramona?” Shit. How? *Why?* Joey took the bus home. Could she have guessed this?

“Mommy?” Joey called. Did he see her, or—Ramona’s organs knocked around inside—was he calling Deborah Mommy? She clamped her jaw shut. She tried to become a painting, casual, beige—no, not beige. Now was the time for straw hats, for smiles all around, blue umbrellas on the beach. She looked up and aimed some sunshine at Joey. She brought him into the painting too.

“Hey, buddy!” she said. He waved, and she winced. “Use both hands!” He made a face, brought his waving hand back to the bar, and kept climbing. She used to make fun of hyper-vigilant parents. But during the few days in the shelter, the months at Tyler’s, and all the time apart, a pulsing dread had hatched in her chest; a dread with tentacles that squeezed her lungs and reached outward to protect Joey.

Deborah was approaching from behind, so she probably had already seen the duffel. She turned and stepped in front of it, just in case. Shit, why was Deborah here?

“Joey, come down!” Deborah yelled and then asked Ramona, “What are you doing here?” Joey groaned but inched his feet down. It was always harder coming down.

“I needed to see Joey.”

The duffel practically shouted, *across state lines*. Ramona smiled, smiled, smiled.

“But you can’t, you don’t have a visit scheduled today.”

Oh, please, Deborah, tell me more about everything I can't do. Ramona prepared possible excuses for the duffel bag: picked it up for a friend, carrying groceries, just came from the Y, work uniform...

"I really need to talk to him. There's been a...I need to tell him some bad news."

"So sorry to hear that," Deborah said. "You know how this goes, though. You have your scheduled visits, and we don't want him confused. Stability, you know."

Joey finally had both feet back on the ground. He picked up his backpack and began running over to them. Ramona wanted to say, Stability? I'm his mother. She knew, though, that this most bedrock of boulders, this floor of her world, carried no weight here. Christ, the blinders on these people. Forward march, no looking around or back, no wiggle room for blurry reality. Ramona tried to imagine Deborah speaking in tongues, blurting holy nonsense, body spasmodic in spiritual ecstasy. She couldn't. Deborah was like one of the people at the County Assistance offices, either sneering or so wrapped up in red tape they'd lost their claims to red blood.

"It's an emergency." She tried saying please, but she couldn't do it.

Joey was there, and automatically she crouched and spread her arms, and he dove in, thank God: he was hers, no matter what Deborah said. She closed her eyes for a moment.

"Hi, Aunt Debbie," Joey said, his face still buried in her shoulder.

Damn it, she would say please if she had to. She stood up, clutching Joey's hand.

"Debbie, it's my mother," she murmured, softening her face until she was a mourner: one of those Greek paintings, or maybe a Jackie O portrait. "I've really got to tell Joey. I just need to take him out for ice cream or something so we can talk about this."

"What do you have to tell me?" Joey piped up. "What about ice cream?"

"Joey," Deborah warned.

"Hang on a sec, buddy," Ramona said.

"What's in the bag?" Deborah asked.

Ramona resisted snapping her fingers as the last pieces of this lie clicked into place. "Some clothes for the trip home. I just wanted to see Joey before I head there, in a couple hours. You know, have to settle some affairs..."

"Oh dear," Deborah said, but her face didn't move at all. Maybe she had Botox? Was that what she was spending the foster parent allowance on? Or was she just a robot?

Ramona tried to think in Deborah-speak, system-speak. "You know, I've got real respect for the stand-up job you're doing here, all the rules you keep track of, everything you're doing to take care of Joey. We all want the best for him. I know it's hard. I know you're just trying to do what's right. Just...two

hours, ice cream at Sonny's. I want to talk, give him time to *process*. Stability through these...bad circumstances." Ramona hoped that last part wasn't too much, throwing "stability" back at her.

"Are we getting ice cream?" Joey said. "Because I don't like pistachio anymore, did I tell you that? I want cotton candy flavor."

"Hang on, Joey," Ramona said, still watching Deborah, whose lips were pursed.

Ramona went for broke. "Please," she said. "Debbie..."

It paid off. Deborah blew air out from the side of her mouth. Definitely a smoker.

"I don't like this," Deborah said. "You should have called. But this once. Okay? I've got to get my son to the dentist. I'll pick Joey up at Sonny's when we're done."

"Thank you," Ramona said. "I appreciate it. I can drop him back off at the house if that's easier. Not a problem." Cleaning, cavities... How long did they have? The bus wasn't until 4:45 p.m., and they still had to take the city bus to the transit hub.

"I'll pick him up at Sonny's when we're done," Deborah repeated. She narrowed her eyes. "See you then." She walked toward the older kids. No parting words or reassurance to Joey. What did Deborah do when Joey got hurt playing, or upset trying to do math homework? Did she make up good dreams for him at bedtime? Did her face ever move? Was anyone caring for him this whole time, or just coldly doling out the basics?

Well, Deborah could melt in hell. The important thing was, Ramona was getting them gone. They'd bought time.

"Okay, buddy, hurry for ice cream time!"

"Why hurry?" Joey asked.

"Why hurry?" Ramona repeated. Tell him now? Better wait until they were truly safe. He talked too much, that was always his problem. Like her. "So we have plenty of time to eat all the cotton candy ice cream they have!"

"I can eat more than you."

"I don't think so," she said. "Can you eat fifty gallons of ice cream?"

"I can!"

She pulled him to the bus stop. Ten minutes until the next one. Why was everything so far apart? Who planned the layout of this city, and how shitfaced had they been? Should she take a cab to the station? No, that costs too much, and wouldn't make the Bolt Bus leave any faster, which was the real hurdle. They needed to be away, STAT.

Joey asked, "What do you need to tell me?"

"Don't worry about it. Uh, what toppings do you like? Grasshoppers? Worms?"

“No! Sprinkles and chocolate syrup, and gummy bears, and...and M&Ms...”

A few minutes later, the bus wheezed up to where they stood. They boarded, and Ramona managed to resist knocking the driver out of the seat and whisking them straight to Baltimore.

At the transit hub, Ramona raced to the man in the orange Bolt Bus vest, Joey in tow.

“Two standby tickets, please,” she said, digging out her wallet.

“Nope, nope, nope,” the man said, swinging his head back and forth.

“What?”

“What are we doing?” Joey asked. “I thought we—”

“Hang on, Joey, I just have to talk to this man for a minute.” She turned back to him. “What do you mean, nope?” Saying it out loud felt ridiculous. Who even said *nope*?

“There’s only one left,” he said.

“He can sit on my lap, he’s a little boy. We won’t be any trouble.”

“I am not little,” Joey interrupted. “Where are we going?”

“Joey, *hang on*.” When he was born, Ramona swore never to spank Joey the way her mother had spanked her. There were moments when her hand twitched, though.

“No kids on laps,” the man said.

“Is that official policy? We’ve really got to make this bus. I mean—I’m sure you know best, but is there any way?” It occurred to her that this might have gone smoother if she were beiger and less wild-eyed, if she weren’t wearing the giant sweater and Phillies cap, made a prettier painting or slinkier words. Maybe that ship had just sailed, though. The years of playing along for leering landlords and managers, and the couple months of pretending for Tyler had beaten the eyelash batting out of her. She was exhausted from all that survival. She wanted to be done. She wanted to be safe.

“It’s official, all right,” the man said. “One’a youse on, or both’a youse off.”

She blinked. Groceries, clothes, came from the Y...answers for the wrong crisis. Gin and tonic, please. No. She wished there were someone to talk to, that she could sit on the hospital courtyard picnic table with Aisha and smoke, vent, hash this out. A cigarette, at least. She stabbed her palm with ragged fingernails. Christ! Focus. Could she send Joey on the bus, have Aisha meet him at the station, and get on the next one? No. She couldn’t. What if someone took him? She wasn’t letting him out of her sight again.

“Where are we going?” Joey whined.

“Okay. When’s the next bus to Baltimore?” Ramona asked.

“7:30 p.m.” He looked at her. “Scuse me, I’ve got to help the next person.”

“Okay. Okay,” she said, not moving.

“Mommy...”

“Okay,” she said. She pulled Joey away, walking backwards a few steps.

What could she do? The other bus lines to Baltimore were more expensive, and she didn’t know if they had earlier times. 7:30 p.m. They had to be gone before Deborah got back; they couldn’t just hide out here and wait. Why hadn’t she told her the name of an ice cream place across town? Why had she said one that was actually here? It made sense at the time. She should have bought the tickets in advance. Why hadn’t she done that? Right, she couldn’t; then it would be on her credit card, and if the social worker called the cops, they would know right away.

Did she know anyone with a car? Well, Tyler. The thought was like rotten cabbage. But maybe this was too big not to try it all; maybe she could play dead inside, waste into a pastel silhouette, just for today, and plead for one last thing. It might work. But no, he would take control of the plan; he wouldn’t want to take them to Baltimore. He would come up with a plan for them to stay in Philly, or hide away somewhere, together. No. She couldn’t risk it. She would go to the Greyhound window and hope.

“Mommy,” Joey yelled. He’d been calling her. Shit.

“Yeah, buddy, what? I’m sorry.”

“What are we doing? Why aren’t we at Sonny’s? You’re *ignoring* me, and Aunt Debbie is coming soon and we haven’t even gotten ice cream.”

She stroked his hair. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. We’ll get ice cream soon. I’m just trying to figure something out, okay? I need a few minutes to think.”

He ducked away. His voice rose in pitch. “Are we going somewhere? Why were you trying to get us seats on that bus?”

“Listen, Joey, I know you’re confused. I’ll explain everything soon. But you gotta give me just a few minutes. Just a few minutes of the quiet game so I can think. I’m figuring things out for us, for you, my special buddy, right? Just come with me.”

She started walking inside. Joey’s face was bubbling up to an eruption, his mouth a fault line. He held his hand out of reach, but he followed. Better to be inside, anyway. She scanned the area. No Deborah. Wait, was that cop looking at them? They needed to be away. No trace, no late buses, no run-ins before they were out of state.

The worst-case scenarios tumbled out of the duffel bag; sirens screamed in Ramona’s head. What if this didn’t work? If she were caught? Could she go to jail? Joey was her son, though. At the very least, he’d get taken back to Deborah, or someone else. Maybe someone worse. Some people in rehab had horror stories about the foster system. Some friends growing up, too—not good homes. And forget six months. If she got caught now, they’d never give her a reunification hearing. But were they ever going to as it was? If she couldn’t get him back by playing it straight, maybe there was nothing to lose.

But what if they got caught? Would they cancel her visits, even? It just made no sense; she was his mother. He was her son. He needed her.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket, and she jumped. How's it going? ETA? Aisha.

She stared at the screen, thumb frozen. What was she doing to Aisha? Ramona knew how cases went for poor kids, and was banking on the cops—if they even got involved—losing interest after a few weeks. But what if it didn't work that way? Aisha would be so disappointed in her—and could maybe get in trouble, too. Aisha had stood by her these past five years, even though Ramona kept hitting ditches on the recovery path while Aisha walked on upright. Aisha worked so hard for her piece of solid ground.

So had Ramona.

She closed her eyes. What if she went to jail? This was a pretty bad purgatory, these twice-a-month visits, this answering to everyone and getting told to roll over and beg for slivers of hope. But forever apart, no hope left, jail... that would be sheer hell. That would be no life. People in rehab had stories about jail, too. And what if Joey got sent to someone worse? Deborah seemed soulless, and those kids ran wild, but so far, no one was hurting Joey. They were feeding him. He had a roof. Ramona hadn't let herself consider all of this so as to hurtle forward with this plan, but she couldn't stop now. What if he got sent to someone worse? What if Ramona's attempt to get him back stuck Joey with someone who screamed or hit or worse—the chest of a boy in group therapy flashed through her mind, as he lifted his shirt to show white, puckered burn scars, Oh Jesus...she couldn't do this.

She couldn't play with those kinds of cards. She needed him back, but she needed him safe more.

Ramona looked up from her phone at Joey. There was no Joey to look at. Her head swiveled to scour every corner of the corridor.

"Joey!" she yelled, not seeing him. The duffel slammed into her calf again and again as she ran. "JOEY!" Had he made a break for the ice cream? That must be it.

She burst into Sonny's Ice Cream Parlor, strands of hair sticking to her neck. It wasn't very busy. She ducked to be sure he wasn't under a table. He wasn't. Ramona stood paralyzed for a moment. She looked around a second time.

"You seen a little boy? Six years old? Brown hair?"

The cashier blinked at her, chewing gum. "What?"

"A boy!" Ramona yelled. "Have you seen a boy?" The cashier shrugged. "Dumbass," she hissed, and turned tail.

Would he go back outside? The bathroom? If he was lost somewhere, or hiding, or climbing... He loved toy trains. What if he got on a train and it

pulled away? Would he? He would probably go outside first. How far could he have gotten already while she was looking in Sonny's?

She was through the door, her pores welcoming a gust of cold air. She blinked. Her feet had kept running, her body kept carrying her through all these panicked machinations. "JOEY!"

He was there, standing so small by the curb where the bus employee had been. The strides to reach him felt slow, as though sloshing through soup or subconscious. Ramona's muscles seemed to melt. She sunk to the ground and yanked him into her arms. Her mouth was moving in strange shapes. A gush of something more than air but less than words was trembling its way out of her, but she didn't know what, and didn't care. Her stomach hurt and the muscles around her jaw jumped.

"Mommy? What are you saying? I'm sorry. Mommy?"

A low, animal howl came from her. Knots of syllables—from thank God and why would you and my baby—unsnarled and rushed out from her throat in ropes of garbled keening. Her chest bucked in dry sobs and her elbow buckled under the weight of the duffel. But she couldn't let go of Joey: he was hers, he was here. She had them locked in a strange dance, in a possession, in a fervid love-fear—dissolved to clanging atoms, skinned to its most primal translation.

"Mommy?" His voice was sliding back in time. Five-year-old Joey, visiting in the hospital after they'd pumped her stomach. She needed to get it together. She needed to be okay for him. Clutching his shoulder still, she pulled back and drew in a ragged breath.

"I'm so sorry, buddy," she said. "It's okay. I was just so scared."

"At first I was mad," he said. "But then I came out here to fix it by myself."

"To fix it by yourself?" Her body was still shaking. She knelt, and let go of the duffel bag.

"Yeah," he said. "I was gonna convince somebody on the bus to give us their seat. But then they were gone already."

"You were gonna—but you didn't even know what was going on. You didn't know where we were going." Ramona realized she was speaking in the past tense. They really weren't going. A gust of air unspooled from her lungs, and finally she was still.

"I don't care," Joey whispered.

She closed her eyes, and pulled him close again, her soul swimming in him.

"Listen," she said, after a few minutes. "Do you feel safe with Aunt Debbie? Are she and the other kids treating you okay?" She asked this every visit.

"Yeah," Joey said. "It's okay."

"Okay," Ramona said. "Well, we've got to get you back, then. Ice cream then home." She eased herself up.

“Not *home* home, though,” Joey said. “Right?”

“No,” Ramona said. “Not yet.”

“I want to go with you,” Joey said. He swiped at his eye with the back of his hand.

“I’m so sorry, buddy. I love you so much. Today was a bad thing. I’m so sorry. I almost broke the rules, and we’ve got to keep quiet about that. We’ve gotta follow the rules really good so that one day you can come home with me. Can we do that?”

Joey nodded. They began walking back inside, to Sonny’s. A painting of a mother taking her son out to ice cream. But blotchy faces, a gutted mother. She wanted to pick him up and carry him, but he was too big and probably wouldn’t let her besides. She settled for holding his hand, which he probably wouldn’t let her do anymore either, soon.

“MOM!” He yelled. “What? What?” Had they blown it? Was Deborah back already? What?

“It’s a Pikachu balloon! Up on the gate! Can you reach it?”

She knew before turning that no matter where this balloon was, she would find a way to get it. The ribbon was tangled in the gate against the wall of a side corridor, the end of the ribbon about twelve feet up. Ramona looked up. In the whole of the hall, there were seven or eight balloons slouched against the thirty-foot ceiling above. They walked over, and she set the duffel bag down. She breathed deep.

“Stay right here,” she said. “I mean it.”

Joey nodded. She hooked her foot through a space in the gate, and then balanced the other on a nail, grabbing at the first rail. She hauled herself up, legs dangling for a moment before kicking against the slippery bars with enough friction to push off, and onto the rail. She was crouched on the rail, now. She looked slowly behind her. Joey was still there, and no one was looking. She reached up for the next bar, and with the other hand seized the balloon’s ribbon.

“Mommy,” Joey said.

“Yes?” She asked without turning, scared to lose her balance. “Use both hands.”

Ramona thought: No painting of this could exist. Slowly, she made her way down.