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In Between: A Memoir

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In Between: A Memoir

by

Naomi Lynn Weyaus

A Creative Work

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement

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Master of Arts

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Table of Contents

	Page
Prologue	4
Section I: Birth.....	10
I.....	11
II.....	17
III	23
IV	30
V.....	37
VI	44
VII.....	50
VIII	56
IX	61
X.....	67
Section II: Death	73
I.....	74
II.....	78
III	84
IV	90
V.....	94
VI	101
VII.....	108

	Page
VIII	113
IX	116
X.....	120
XI	127
XII.....	135
XIII	143
XIV	151
XV.....	157
XVI	162
XVII	167
Section III: Life.....	172
I.....	173
II.....	177
III	185
IV	191
V.....	194
VI.....	198

Prologue

I walked up the stairs holding onto Alonzo. He was old enough, at two years old, to walk by himself and awake enough for the late hour, but I carried him anyway. I missed him and wanted to soak him up as much as I could in the time that I had him. I was heartbroken that Herbert couldn't come too but had to enjoy my victory where I had one. The boys have only been back with their mother, my uncle's wife, Alex, for two months after spending nearly every day of two years with me while the child protection case was open against her. For two years I loved these children and made them my own and, in an instant, they were taken away from me and there was nothing I could do about it. The point of foster care is reunification with the parent. I can't say I don't agree with it. For most of the children that come into my care that seems like a fine goal. In this case, however, I wanted to rage against anything that tore me away from Herbert and Alonzo.

The transition to them living back with their mother was overwhelming for everyone. I'd been getting calls from Alex every few days in complete hysterics crying about how hard and unfair her life was. She would cry to me saying, "I didn't ask to be born this way!" I agreed with her, no, she didn't ask to be born with cerebral palsy and confined to a wheel chair. She'd only cry harder and say, "I didn't ask to be a single parent!" Once more I'd agree with her, my uncle's sudden unexpected death less than a year before wasn't something any of us had asked for. Then she would say "I didn't ask for disobedient children!" Which is where my agreement with her ended entirely and I'd say, "You asked for children." No matter how hard I pressed I couldn't get it through to her that children don't come out as perfect little automatons that listened and sat quietly, especially at two and three years old. Still, she was convinced that her children were bad, practically criminal. That seemed especially true to her in Alonzo's case.

Alonzo was simply more active and curious about the world. He needed to keep his mind engaged at all times which she couldn't do for him. He got bored easily, which was understandable since Alex had taken away most of the toys because she couldn't wheel over them, and when he got bored he got into things he shouldn't. I argued with her that it wasn't his fault. She didn't agree. Alonzo and Herbert, in my eyes, were the epitome of the perfect children. They were happy and energetic and full of wonder about the world. Herbert had the sweetest heart and a perfect childlike innocence in him. Alonzo was smart, cunning, and cuter than any other child out there! How could anyone look at him and see something less than perfection? Just looking at their faces made my insides feel like they were about to burst open with happiness! My sisters always said similar things about my niece and nephews, but they quite clearly had no idea what they were talking about because it was my children who were perfect.

Alex had called me in hysterics that night which is how I was able to bring Alonzo home with me. I ran him a bath before bed to get the grime of her house off of him and into clean pajamas. For some reason I could never understand, they always seem to be filthy when coming to me from their mother's house. After his bath, I sat him on the counter to brush his teeth. He grinned at me and shut his lips tightly. I smiled at him, I knew that he didn't mind brushing his teeth, he just wanted to play. I tapped his toothbrush against his lips with the beat of a funny song. Sometimes I would sing something I made up or I would sing a song like Old MacDonald and tap the toothbrush for every animal noise. He laughed at the song and I was then allowed to brush his teeth. These moments, as trivial as they might seem, were the ones I lived for. That night we read "Goodnight Loon" together and I turned out the light to let him fall asleep.

Normally, I would leave the room and let him self-soothe, but tonight I needed to be by him so I sat down on the floor next to his bed and began to rub his back. There was a deep ache in my chest and I knew that I was going to cry and I didn't want to do that in front of my mother who was sitting in the living room. I knew she would say they weren't really my children and make me feel worse than I already did. I felt my throat begin to constrict and a headache start to pound behind directly behind my eyes as I suppressed my need to cry. Alonzo wasn't asleep quite yet and I didn't want him to see my tears. I started to sing to him, a lullaby I'd heard from fallout boy years before and that I've been singing to him since he was two weeks old. I can't sing, I don't have the voice for it, but kids don't know the difference. They only know that they love the sound of their mother's voice. How could I not be "mother" in Alonzo's eyes? I was the only mother he truly knew. I sang and I stroked his back and hair just the way he liked until he fell asleep. It didn't take long. It never does.

I sat back against the wall, headache pounding hard and the tightness in my throat making it hard to breath and chest ache with each beat of my heart. With Alonzo only a foot away from me I knew I had to be quiet, but I had a rare moment to let myself grieve and cry out with the agony it feels to be without them every day. Looking around the room I'd constructed especially for my babies I felt the emptiness of their drawers and the dejectedness of unused toys as everything waited for other foster kids to take their place. The tears began to slip easily down my face. I felt wretched for not wanting another foster child in this room. I wanted my children! The room was made for them and the toys bought with them in mind. It wasn't fair! I let my sorrow sweep through and take a hold of me and sobbed quietly into my arms. I cried for my babies and the life it seemed like they would live with Alex. I cried for Alonzo and how he must feel being

confined to his highchair for hours because Alex said she can't trust him. I cried for Herbert and the loss of his best friend and how he seemed to be regressing since he went to live with Alex.

Waves of anger began to wash through me as I thought about Alex and the way she takes care of my babies. I hated her! This enemy woman who had more claim to my children than I do simply because she gave birth to them. Unless she died my claim would never be acknowledged by anyone. I know it's terrible to wish a person dead, but in that moment, I wished it harder than anything I'd ever wished for before. In that moment of weaknesses, crying and filled with profound agonizing pain, it was her I blamed. That selfish, narcissistic, awful BEAST took my babies! I let those violent hideous thoughts fill my head and my heart that, in rational moments, I would never consider. The truth is I love their mother, how can I not when she helped to create my children. It's just truly and incredibly hard not to hate her for taking my them from me. A terrible guilt filled me as I knew that if given the chance I'd make this burning anguish hers instead of mine without a second thought or regret.

Unable to bear the pain a second longer I scooped Alonzo out of his bed and squeezed him as tightly as I dared while rocking him so he wouldn't wake. I buried my nose in his hair and inhaled. He smelled like his shampoo and the laundry detergent I use for his clothes, but right on the top of his head is a scent that was completely his own. I rocked him and let his scent fill the breaks in my soul as my tears wet his hair. I whispered nonsense words to him, "I love you," "It's gonna be okay," "my baby," "my little honey bee," "I love you so much," "I'm so sorry," "my baby," "my baby," "mine." All too soon I had to lay him back down in his bed for fear that he'd wake up. I covered him up even though I knew he'd kick off the blanket soon enough. I

forced my tears to slow and stop. Though my chest still ached, my headache was gone. I gave him one last kiss and left the room.

Section I: Birth

I

Three days of babysitting. That's what I always tell people when they ask me how I started doing foster care. Three days of babysitting. Really, that's all it was supposed to be. They ask me if I knew that this was going to happen. Of course I didn't. I didn't know. If I did how would I explain everything that I did, how would I explain to Herbert and Alonzo everything I did? I didn't know. I don't know if anyone could have predicted what happened. Explaining it is hard enough. I can barely explain what happened to myself. Its easiest to start at the beginning, though the beginning wasn't easy, but the middle of everything was harder.

I was still in Milwaukee working third shift at a Pick-n-Save when I made the promise to babysit Herbert. Alex called me one morning after my shift. I ignored the call and instead went to sleep. Alex is my Uncle Herb's wife and I had been getting calls from her over the last few months about the drama with my Uncle. I'd taken to recording some of the more dramatic calls in case anything did happen. I imagine though that the shouting sounded worse over the phone since I couldn't actually see what was happening. I knew my Uncle was away for the moment, in a treatment center getting some help while Alex was pregnant with their second child.

That afternoon when I woke up and listened to the voicemail Alex left me saying that she had just given birth to Alonzo I decided to call her back. I congratulated her on her new baby and told her "I'll be home in a couple of weeks. I'll take Herbert from you if you want so you have time with the new baby." I didn't think anything of it when I made the promise. It seemed the decent thing to do. She didn't have any help with my uncle gone and it would be hard to take care of a new baby with an 18-month-old toddler wanting all of your attention. It would be

especially hard for Alex since she was confined to a wheelchair. Happy with my decision to help her I didn't think about it again until I moved back home.

I spent the first few days back in Minnesota arranging my new bedroom in the house I was renting with some friends and spending some time with my mom and sister. My sister Jessie had just given birth to her son, Cedar, about a week before Alex's son was born. Cedar was adorable even though he didn't have too much hair and was whiter than I was expecting him to be. Native babies tend to be darker with a lot of black hair on their heads, Cedar was practically bald. Alonzo wasn't. He had a full head of hair and beautiful dark eyes to match. A lot of people say he looks like his brother, Herbert, but he doesn't. In fact, Alonzo looks a lot like me. He took after our side of the family.

I remember the first time I met Alonzo, the little boy that would soon become my whole world. I was excited to see a new baby, but not excited to talk to an aunt I barely knew. My uncle had married her, and I visited and talked to her enough times that she thought we were close. I didn't feel the same way. Whenever I visited her I felt awkward and looked for excuses to leave their house the moment my obligatory visit had ran for, what I determined, a decent amount of time. As my mother, sister, newborn nephew, and I pulled into the driveway of my uncle's house I realized that we didn't bring any gifts for the new baby.

"Mom," I said, "we didn't bring anything to give to the baby." It was an expected thing to bring gifts when visiting a new baby, but we completely forgot to grab anything for it.

"Shit, you're right. They'll just have to understand." My mom said. I was agitated, I felt that bringing a gift was mandatory and I didn't want to go inside without one. At least so I had a

talking point so it wouldn't get awkwardly silent sitting in a room with someone I wasn't completely comfortable speaking with.

“Hold on,” Jessie said, “I think I still have some stuff from Cedar's baby shower in here.” My sister's van was a mess of things since she had her baby boy only eight days before Alonzo was born. We quickly rummaged through the van and ended up scraping together a few new receiving blankets, shampoo, a couple of toys, and a package of pacifiers. Though these things were only tossed together at the last second, I didn't think Alex would know the difference. With everything gathered into a cute little baby bag, we finally went inside.

The house had once belonged to my grandfather and had often featured itself grandly in many of my childhood memories. Now though, it was in disrepair. After my grandpa moved into a new house, my uncle, brother, and cousins used it as a hot party spot where there were seemingly no consequences for damages done to the property. The cupboard doors in the kitchen were missing, the railing leading up the stairs wobbled dangerously, there were various sized holes in the walls ranging from the size of a fist to body sized, and the once cream-colored carpet was a sticky dank brown. Not to mention that it now smelled like a combination of musty basement and urine. Though the house was still filthy, I saw that someone had made an attempt to clean it since the last time I visited over a year prior. The mattress was no longer in the living room, and all the garbage seemed to be contained in a pack-n-play that was situated in the corner. Alex greeted us as we walked up the stairs.

“Hi guys! I'm glad you guys could come.” Alex wheeled over to us. Alex was a dark Sioux woman with long black hair that was constantly pulled back into a messy bun. Her teeth were a bit messed up from what I imagine was drug usage and her eyes were a dark brown that

were set a bit lopsided. She wasn't unattractive, but drug use combined with the effects of her cerebral palsy made her unconventional.

"Yea, we're excited to meet the little guy!" I said cheerfully. I really was excited to see him. "Where's Herbert?" Herbert was Alex's first-born son who was about 18 months old. I was supposed to babysit him starting that weekend. I offered to take care of him so she could bond with her new baby. I thought that having two kids would be rough for someone confined in a wheelchair who had no help. My uncle was in a mental health hospital for the time being.

"He's at Terry's house right now. Alonzo is over there." Alex motioned over to the sofa where a small bundle lay. I went over and picked him up first. He was cute, for a small squishy baby. His features still weren't quite defined and I thought, in that moment, that my nephew Cedar was cuter even if Alonzo had more hair. The baby was then passed around to each adult and the proper oohing and awing was made in turn by each person. The last person to hold him was Alex, who rolled her chair with one hand while holding Alonzo in the other in order to deposit him back onto the couch. Remembering a time when I was five years old where I saw a baby fall off a couch and split his lip open on a coffee table, I felt an impulse to tell her not to. That unsupervised babies on a couch weren't safe. But I let it pass unremarked. I reasoned with myself that a baby that small, only two weeks old, couldn't move enough yet to be in danger from lying on a couch. Plus, I thought, Alex was his mom and it was her choice where to put her baby.

After she put Alonzo on the couch we all filed outside onto the porch so that everyone could smoke a cigarette. Even though I don't smoke cigarettes, I followed. I find that important social things happen while people are smoking and that if you want to be included in any

meaningful or funny conversation its best to subject yourself to the unpleasantness of cigarette smoke. While we were outside, I kept glancing back at Alonzo. I was nervous of him being on the couch. Nervous enough, that I don't remember most of the conversation except to ask Alex if Alonzo had a crib, since the pack-n-play was currently occupied.

“No, I can't get him in and out of a crib,” She said, “I can't stand up and hold a baby at the same time. But Terry made me a Way-Way.”

“A What,” I asked. I had no idea what the hell a Way-Way was.

“It's an old Indian rocking cradle made out of boards, cloths, and strings,” Alex explained. “It hangs about a foot over my bed so I can rock him while I'm laying down.” I admitted that the concept sounded really cool, and later when I looked at it for myself, it seemed safe enough. The couch, on the other hand, still made me nervous. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get the bad feeling I had about the couch off my mind and decided to skip the social niceties of talking during a cigarette, to sit inside with Alonzo. By the time I got inside, it was too late. Alonzo was on the floor. I felt my heart drop into my stomach as I ran to scoop him up off of the dirty carpet. I held him close and inspected his body for any injury. Miraculously, he was still sleeping. I had a brief moment of panic where I thought that the fall must have knocked him out, but let it go when I realized he only fell about six inches onto padded carpeting. He was perfectly well, but I decided to talk to Alex about placing babies on couches anyway. She seemed receptive enough when I brought it up.

“I know he's little and shouldn't be able to roll yet, but he obviously squiggles enough to fall off a couch. Just be careful.”

“I know, it’s just easier to reach him when he’s on the couch like that.” Alex smiled, though I could tell that she wasn’t too happy about receiving baby advice from me. It wasn’t as if I was happy giving it to her, but I just had to be sure that she knew that he was too little to leave unattended.

“Maybe if you change him on the couch and lay a blanket on the floor for him to lay on after? I’ll look into baby swings and bouncers for you.” I made a mental note to look up prices for those baby things and to ask my friends if they knew anyone getting rid of baby stuff. Before we left for the night I made solid plans with Alex to pick up Herbert in a couple of days. We agreed on three days of babysitting. Just enough time for her to bond with Alonzo. Just enough time for me to get to know Herbert better. Just enough time for all of our lives to change forever.

II

A Few days later I was driving down the old familiar road to my Uncle's house. I was on my way to pick up Herbert. Confident that I could take care of him for a few days, no matter what my mom said about it. "Naomi, taking care of kids isn't easy." "Naomi, you have to be careful not to be dragged into everyone's crap." "Naomi, did you have to tell her you'd watch him?" "Naomi, I'm scared you are putting too much on your plate." After a while I started to ignore her. There was no answer that she found satisfactory. It didn't matter how many times I told her "It's only three days mom. Nothing is going to happen." Besides, taking care of Herbert couldn't be any harder than taking care of my baby sister had been when I was 13 and my dad and stepmom were too busy drinking to notice they had a new baby. I was older now, with money, and a license. Taking care of him would be cake. I glanced at the clock on my dashboard. It was 2:30, assuming Herbert had a nap at noon like most kids he would be waking up and we could get out of there as soon as possible. I hated small talk and wanted to avoid as much of it with Alex as I could. It's not that I didn't like her, I just didn't know her very well, even if we had hung out a few times. Mostly I hung out with her because she was married to my Uncle and I think it made him happy that his family liked his new wife. The truth is, my Uncle Herb married a much younger woman, young enough that she was closer to my age of 23 than he was to his 48. Which was more than enough gossip for the family but add in a wheelchair and people started to get uncomfortable. Or maybe that was only me. I talked to my uncle after he first introduced me to her during her work break at the casino.

"you have to be sure" I told him. "Alex, she's not going to get better. You will need to take care of her for the rest of your life, you know that, right?" He looked at me seriously, which

was something new in our relationship. I was just getting old enough for him to talk to like an adult and take my advice and opinions seriously. Something that is probably hard to do when you've changed someone's diaper, babysat them, and watched them grow up.

“Yea, I know that. But I love her.”

“Okay then,” I said. “Then I like her too.”

After that, I only saw her a half dozen times. Every break I had from school I'd take time to visit her and my uncle. We would watch movies, play monopoly or phase 10, and just hang out. I loved my uncle so I always made it a point to include her in Christmas gifts. When she and my uncle got married, they planned their wedding around the dates that I could attend and later when they started having kids, I was named We'Eh to them.

That was the point though. I only hung out with her when my uncle was around acting as a buffer. But now that he was in treatment and I would have to deal with her alone I felt my anxiety start to flare up. I'm not really a people person.

I pulled up to the house and knocked on the door. There wasn't an answer, and then I realized that she couldn't answer it anyway. The door was at the bottom of the stairs, which she couldn't use. feeling foolish, I tried to open the door. Locked. I grabbed my phone to check our text messages, to make sure that today was the day I was supposed to get Herbert. It was. Thinking that maybe she couldn't get down the stairs to let me in I should go to the deck off of the kitchen. It was less likely to be locked and there was big glass sliding doors that she could see me from. Looking over the path from the front door to the side porch was non-existent. Grass and weeds had been left to run wild over the expansive yard for a few years now, and it was taller than me and thick enough that I ran a real risk of losing my shoes if my foot got tangled in

it while I was making my way to the porch. Not to mention the very high probability of there being rabid fur creatures, bugs, and ticks hiding in the tall grass. I almost turned around and left.

Instead I took a large step forward attempted to cover the most ground in as few steps as possible. My hands were held out in front of me to clear the grass before it could touch my face. I was thankful that I didn't have any allergies. After only a few moments battling grass I reached the deck stairs and took a moment to search for ticks before heading up.

The top of the deck was exactly as we'd left it a few nights before. Pop cans turned ashtrays sat out on the deck and various toys and pieces of garbage sat undisturbed. I briefly wondered if I should quick pick it up while I was here and then dismissed the thought. It might embarrass her if I start to clean her house without permission. I know she was trying harder than my uncle ever did to keep the place presentable. Looking through the glass doors, at first, I couldn't see anything but then a movement in the corner of the room by the kitchen sink caught my eye. I could see Alex with her headphones in while washing the dishes. I knocked loudly on the door to get her attention. She startled when she heard the noise and took out her earphone when she came to let me in.

"Hey!" She said. "Come in, come in. I wasn't sure what time you would be here." I stepped into the kitchen. It was still a disaster, but at least the dishes were being washed.

"Yea, I figured after nap time would be best for Herbert. Where is he?" I asked looking around for him.

"Oh, he's over there on the little couch. He just passed out." My stomach turned over on itself. Did she say 'just passed out' as in he only just fell asleep and I would have to wait here with her and make small talk and fricken smile while I was doing it.

“Oh,” I said. “I thought he would be awake by now.” Alex smiled at me as she started to dry off her hands.

“No, he’s usually only falling asleep about now. He’s really active so I just let him run around until he falls asleep and today he fell asleep on the couch. It’s pretty cool, when he’s tired he’ll go find somewhere to lay down.”

“Cool.” It wasn’t really cool. I only said that to be polite. I wanted to mention something about naps and schedules being good for little kids and babies. I’d done a little bit of research before taking on Herbert and all the articles said that kids thrive on schedules and naps. But I didn’t say anything. I would just put him on a schedule for the days that I had him. An awkward silence fell as we were standing there. I grasped at straws, looking for something to say, anything. I finally asked, “Where’s Alonzo?”

“Napping” She said.

“Oh. I’m gonna go take a peek at him.” I walk away from her and tiptoed silently into the bedroom. Alonzo was laying on the bed sleeping soundly. I gently stroked his head being careful to avoid the soft spot. I gave him a small kiss and went back out to Alex. She was looking down at her phone scrolling through some more music which I could hear coming faintly from her headphones. I wondered how she heard Alonzo cry if she had her earbuds in.

“Hey,” I said, to get her attention. “Alonzo’s super cute. I hope you are able to have some good alone time with him when I take Herbert.”

“Yea, I hope so too. He’s already so different than Herbert. Alonzo’s such a fussy guy!”

“Well, hopefully this time will give you two a chance to connect.” I read somewhere in my research before taking Herbert that mom’s and babies needed time to form a bond. “Does Herbert have a car seat? I can install it and give him more time to sleep.”

“Yea, it’s at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Thanks” I said. I was grateful that I could go out the front door to get into my car and wouldn’t have to walk through the grass again. Once I was outside with the car seat I felt better. I don’t know how other people do small talk and niceties. I suppose I was pretty good at it for how much I hated it and how much it hurt my stomach. My mom says that I need to be on medication for anxiety. But that’s what all addicts say to non-addicts. They all want us to have problems like they do. My sister Jessie swears that reading is an addiction and that I’m no better than her because of it. I think most people would argue differently. Reading a book a day is way different than doing meth every day. My mom on the other hand says that I have crippling anxiety and need to be medicated immediately. Dumb. I might have a bit of anxiety, but nothing that I can’t handle. Certainly nothing I need to be medicated for. Everyone gets uncomfortable around people they don’t know well, or making phone calls, or checking out at a store. Its normal.

After a minute examining the car seat and figuring out how to put it in my car I was able to get it secured. I stood outside for a minute longer trying to think of a way to leave with Herbert in a few minutes rather than in a few hours. I’d probably have to lie. Come up with one of those polite excuses that people make when they want to leave somewhere without sounding rude. When I went back inside I saw that Alex was packing Herbert up.

“Hey,” She said when she saw me. “I have a few things of Herbert’s here, but I haven’t done laundry in a while. It’s hard to get up and down those stairs. And He doesn’t have any shoes.”

“Where are his shoes?”

“Natasha has them. I keep bothering her to bring them back, but she hasn’t. I even told her to mail them and she won’t.”

“That sucks, but its ok. I think we have some old shoes of Jordyn’s that will fit him.” I was smiling for real this time. It looked like I could get out of here pretty fast. Sure enough, after some hugs and kisses from Alex, Herbert was in my car and we were on our way to my mom’s house. I asked my mom if I could stay there with Herbert since I didn’t think my new place would be any good for him since I shared it with five other people. That and I still felt like maybe having my mom around in case something happened with Herbert was a good idea. She was great with kids under the age of 10.

III

The next couple of days with Herbert went smoothly. He didn't talk yet, not even a word, so I was constantly worried that something would happen to him and he wouldn't tell me. He didn't even cry all that much. Mostly he just wanted to cuddle and laugh. He had the most amazing laugh I'd ever heard on a kid. It was full bellied and loud. It felt good to take care of him. I bought him some clothes from the second-hand store (since all Alex packed was one pair of shorts and two shirts that were too small for him) we visited my step sister, Krista, for a 4th of July party where she yelled at me to "stop hovering over him and let him have fun in the damn sprinkler!" Finally, I took him to see his first ever fireworks. He loved them. He sat in my lap and was awed. I was happy to play mom with him. It was easy.

The day after we watched the fireworks I was finally taking him to my place. I needed to start unpacking and Herbert was comfortable enough with me now that he didn't chilling with me alone and I was confident that I could take care of him without my mom showing me what to do. On the drive to St. Cloud I was planning on how I would arrange my room when Alex called. I thought, briefly, of ignoring her but pushed the thought aside. She loved Herbert and made sure to call him at least once a day. I answered.

"Hey, Alex! Herbert can't talk right now, I'm driving. But we can call you back when I stop."

"Oh, actually, I was calling because Herbert has a doctor appointment today"

"Oh." I said surprised.

“Actually, both Herbert and Alonzo have well child checks today in Isle. So, could you bring Herbert back early?” I was only mildly irritated by her request since I was already half-way to St. Cloud.

“Sure, no problem. What times are their appointments?”

“They’re at two. So, you should probably leave as soon as you can.”

“I’m already on the road, so no worries. I’ll get there in time.” I hung up the phone with her and found a place to turn around. It wasn’t like my room was going anywhere and I’d have more time and space to clean and unpack it once I dropped Herbert off with his mom.

When I got to the house, Alonzo was lying awake on the couch, deciding to ignore the fact that he was laying unattended while Alex was packing his diaper bag, and Herbert was excitedly giving her hugs and kisses; I picked up Alonzo to say hello.

“Hi, baby!” I cooed at him once he was settled into my arms. I smiled down at him as I swayed him side to side. The more I studied him, however, the less I smiled. There was something different about his head. It looked...odd. I reached up to stroke it like I had the last time I saw him. It felt different. Lumpy and uneven. I thought I was being paranoid. Certainly babies had lumpy heads, maybe I didn’t notice it last time because it was dark in the room. I held him a bit away from me to get a better look. No, something was definitely wrong with his head. It was uneven. The right side of his head was swelling out. I reached out and glided my fingers along it. It didn’t feel puffy, even if it looked puffy. It felt hard.

“Alex?” I said, with a question in my voice.

“Yea?” she looked up at me with Herbert in her lap.

“Did something happen to Alonzo’s head?” Alex looked down at the floor and I could see her trying to find something to say.

“Yea, that’s why I was so adamant that you give us a ride to their well child checks, he fell off of the couch last night. It made a pretty bad sound.” I took a moment to process that I was giving her a ride to Isle. For some reason I assumed that she just wanted me drop Herbert off. Then I realized what she said and got angry. I freaking told her to not put babies on the couch! I warned her when I first met Alonzo that babies and couches weren’t a good mix! I took a breath before I answered her. She probably felt bad enough without me adding to her guilt.

“Yea, we should get going. The right side of his head is looking pretty bad.” Alex looked up when I said that.

“The right side? I thought it was his left that looked bad.” I held him out from me again to get a better look. Now that she mentioned it, the left side looked swollen too, just not as badly as the right side.

“Why didn’t you bring him in last night?” I asked.

“He only cried for a minute and then he was fine. It wasn’t until this morning that I noticed that his head looked different.” What she was saying almost seemed reasonable. That, and how was she supposed to get to the doctor with him anyways, even if she wanted to? I sighed and put Alonzo into his car seat and loaded the boys into the car. Loading my small Pontiac with two car seats, a wheelchair and two adults took some maneuvering. Not to mention that I almost dropped Alex when I had to help her down the stairs.

When we finally got to Isle Clinic there was even more maneuvering. I realized that I couldn’t carry Alonzo in his carrier, hold onto Herbert, and push Alex in her wheelchair at the

same time. I floundered for a second before I came up with a solution. After helping Alex back into her wheelchair, I had her hold onto Alonzo in his carrier while I held Herbert's hand and pushed her into the clinic. When we got inside I was able to take Alonzo from her while she checked in.

The wait to get in wasn't long. The Isle Clinic is small, so small that they didn't have their own doctor. A doctor would make rounds through the area clinics and today wasn't his day to be in Isle. We saw a nurse instead, who was more than qualified to take the boys' weight and height, however, less qualified to examine head wounds like Alonzo's.

"I really think it's just a bump and will be fine." the nurse said. Alex had been arguing with her for the last five minutes about Alonzo's head.

"No, I really want someone to look at it. It looks really bad and it made a really bad noise." The nurse rolled her eyes. I could tell that she was getting impatient with us.

"Fine," she said. "I'm going to put a call into Onamia and see if a doctor can see you there today. Will that work?" We said it would and sat in the small room waiting for her to get back with news from the call. Alonzo was cuddled in my arms. He had a few shots today, but he only cried a little bit and stopped when I was holding him. Alex said she wanted me to hold him after his shots since she couldn't "handle her baby in pain." I agreed. Even if I thought she was being a little bit dramatic about shots. When the nurse came back she told us that she wasn't able to get an appointment for us, but if we went into the emergency room that they would see us there. After another bit of creative maneuvering, though it was getting easier to figure out how to get everyone in and out of the car, and 30 minutes later we were sitting in the Onamia Emergency Room talking to a doctor who was telling us the same thing that the nurse was.

“Here’s the thing,” he said. “I don’t think there is much here to worry about. It does look like a pretty bad bump and you said he didn’t fall far and landed on carpet, which is still a somewhat soft surface, so, what I would recommend is to give him some baby Tylenol and keep an eye on him for the next couple of days to see if the swelling goes down.” I thought that the advice sounded reasonable. He was a doctor so I didn’t understand why Alex was still arguing with him like she argued with the nurse.

“Can’t you give him an x-ray? His head made a really bad sound when he fell.” I could see Alex getting really flustered and upset. Not for the first time that day, I started to wonder if there was more that she wasn’t telling us. Why was she so adamantly going against a doctor’s advice?

“I can give him an x-ray,” the doctor said carefully. “But exposing a baby this young and small to that amount of radiation isn’t something that I really want to do. I think it would be safer to wait and see if the swelling goes down.”

“NO!” Alex was practically yelling. I flinched at the sound and so did the doctor. “I am his mother! And I say that he needs the x-ray!” The room was silent for a moment, all of us a bit surprised at Alex’s outburst.

“Okay then, I’ll go order the x-ray, please wait here.” After the doctor left we were all still quiet. I gave Herbert another snack that the nurses gave us when we arrived. He was getting restless with all the sitting and waiting since we’d been doing this for about two hours at this point. Soon a nurse came in saying that a room was ready for Alonzo to have an x-ray. She looked back and forth between me and Alex trying to figure out who should come into the room with him.

“Naomi, will you go with Alonzo?” Asked Alex. “I just can’t stand to see him with those machines.” I agreed, and secretly wondered if her chair might interfere with the x-ray somehow. Did metal effect x-ray machines? I wasn’t sure, so maybe it was better that I went anyway. Just in case. The x-ray tech had me swaddle Alonzo tightly and lay him on a flat bed and rolled little blankets into a bundle at his side to hopefully protect him from rolling. Then she put a heavy x-ray vest over him, she said it would protect him from some of the radiation and she had me put one on as well as herself. We quickly hid behind the glass panel in the room so she could take the shots of Alonzo’s head. We had to do it twice since he moved a bit in the first one. The whole process only took about ten minutes and then we were back in the curtained emergency room.

Herbert finally started to fall asleep on the cot and Alonzo was sleeping in my arms when the doctor came in with a team of nurses and took Alonzo from my arms and put him in an enclosed baby bed and was yelling at the nurses to make sure he was secure. They strapped him down and closed the lid. The entire time both me and Alex were trying to get someone’s attention. We kept yelling “What are you doing?” “What’s happening?” Herbert woke up frightened by the activity and crawled into his mother’s lap. Once Alonzo was secure the doctor talked to us.

“His x-ray shows that he has a severe parietal fracture on both sides of his head. We are airlifting him to Children’s Hospital in Minneapolis. The Helicopter should be here any minute.” I was stunned. Airlifting him? Fractures on both sides of his skull!

“Can I go with him?” I asked suddenly. I hated flying, but letting Alonzo go alone in that helicopter was scarier.

“I’m sorry,” said the doctor. “I’m afraid that only medical personnel are allowed on the helicopter.” Not very long after the helicopter people came and took Alonzo away. They did their best to assure us that Alonzo would be fine before leaving. We were left alone and stunned. The flurry of activity all happened so fast that I still wasn’t sure what exactly happened.

IV

“Yes, Mom. I will let you know once we know. So far all we’ve seen are nurses. The doctor should be coming in about an hour.” I hung up the phone with a sigh. Alex was busy making her own phone calls while we sat in Alonzo’s hospital room. The phone call to my mom was the third once since we left the Onamia Hospital. Alex had begged me to drive her to Children’s Hospital, she hardly got a word out before I agreed. We left right from the clinic and drove the two hours to the Twin Cities. We stopped only briefly to get some McDonald’s for Herbert. Alex and I still haven’t eaten. I could only imagine that her stomach was tied in just as much knots as mine was about everything. I was worries sick for Alonzo and kicking myself that I didn’t take Alex more seriously. She said it sounded bad when he fell. But a fall from the couch to the floor really wasn’t that far and didn’t hurt him the first time he fell when I was over. He was fine then. It was lucky that Alex had what I guessed was a “mother’s instinct” otherwise Alonzo might not have been x-rayed and the fracture found.

For a while we sat in silence, neither one of us looking at the other, both too caught up in our own minds. I couldn’t say what Alex was thinking, but my mind was filled with dark thoughts of brain damage, seizures, mental and physical delays, and enough health problems to last a lifetime. Alonzo’s fractures could mean anything and until we saw the doctor we would be left with our own horrid imaginations. I sent a brief thought up to any sort of deity that might have been listening. I don’t really believe in God. I always felt that believing in a higher power was an excuse not to take responsibility for yourself. That’s what they say in NA meetings, that you have to believe that there is a power higher than yourself and to put your trust into it. I know right now that I’d fail out of any program that preached that. In my mind I’m my own higher

power and the only one that can determine if my life is good or bad is me. But, if there is a God, I supposed that healing babies should be right up his alley so I sent a quick prayer, just in case.

The rest of my time was spent accosting nurses to grill them about Alonzo's heart rate, blood pressure, and oxygen supply. "What's the top line mean?" "Is that good?" "Well what's the average heart rate for a two-week-old baby?" "should his cord be tangled like that?" "Why do you check for blood pressure on his big toe instead of his arm?" "Is there a reason that the screen is blinking?" "What medicine are you giving him now?" "What does that do?" "Why are you giving it to him?" "Aren't pain medications really dangerous to use on babies? I was just doing some googling and Web MD said..." I suppose that after a while the nurses may have started avoiding our room.

After a long while the doctor finally arrived, with good news.

"As far as we can tell there is no bleeding on the brain, no swelling, no bruising. It seems to be a very clean fracture." I sagged in relief at his words. Absolutely amazing. I could tell that Alex was relieved too.

"We're going to keep him here a few days longer just to monitor him, but after that, you should be free to go home. Do you live close by?" We answered that it was a two-hour drive. And now that he mentioned it, we didn't have a place to stay, didn't have the money to drive back and forth between Onamia and Minneapolis for a few days. I did a quick check of my bank account and found that I had just enough money for parking and gas to get home. The move back to Minnesota had eaten up all my savings. Alex was allowed to stay in Alonzo's room but me and Herbert weren't. I don't know how Alex would feel about Herbert and I sleeping in my little Pontiac for the next few days, but I would do it if it came down to staying with Alonzo.

“I’ll put in a call to our Ronald McDonald house and see if they have an opening for you guys.” After the doctor left to make the call I shot a confused look to Alex. She told me that the Ronald McDonald House acted like a home for people who had to stay in the hospital with their kids. After about 30 minutes a nurse came in saying that Ronald McDonald house had an opening and she could take us there now. Alex said she didn’t want to stay in the room with Alonzo, so I put Herbert on her lap and pushed her down the hall behind the nurse.

It turns out that the Ronald McDonald house is the coolest place ever. It had a fully stocked kitchen, public computers and phones, toys for Herbert, gaming systems set up to flat screen TVs, and small hotel-like rooms that were stocked with towels and little disposable soaps. The bathroom was a little bit more of a problem. As awesome as the place was (and free!) it didn’t have a bathtub, only a shower. Not figuring out any way to bathe Herbert without getting water all over the bathroom, I got into the shower with him. He hated the water splashing in his eyes and screamed until I picked him up and held him against me. I crouched down so I could use a bar soap to wash us. His hair was a little more difficult. I had to be careful to not wash it into his eyes since we didn’t have any of the baby shampoo we were used to. When we were finally dried off we put on the same dirty clothes since we left without stopping at home, but luckily the hospital provided us with some diapers for Herbert. When we got into the one bed in the room Herbert snuggled up to my side and fell asleep. I shot my mom a text telling her the good news and fell asleep soon after.

We spent one more night in the Ronald McDonald house before we found out that social workers were coming to the hospital to see Alonzo. Seeing them walk into our hospital room

made my defensive walls slam into place. Both of them were women, one blonde and one brunette, and were wearing completely impractical high heel boots for this large hospital.

Looking at them I knew that they were everything I was ever warned about as a child. I grew up with tales from my mother and father warning me about the dangers of family services. My mother told the stories of her battle with family services when they took away her health and food benefits.

“I was starving when I was pregnant with Jessie.” She told me. “The county was saying that your father was living with us and that his income should count towards mine so they cut me off. I had to go to court with them.” My mom was never afraid of legal battles or standing up for what she thought was right.

“Is that why you kept Jessie under a lamp when she came home?” I asked. I always heard my older sisters talking about Jessie living under a lamp because she was yellow.

“Yup, she was jaundiced and we couldn’t afford to stay at the hospital so I treated her myself. I won in court of course, your father had his own place, but before that we didn’t have any food. I would tape our empty macaroni boxes shut and put them back in the cupboard and would add water to the milk so that the social workers would think you kids had food when they came to check on you. They never took you away though. I made sure of it.” Whether these stories were meant as cautionary tales or instruction manuals I wasn’t sure. The lesson I took from it was clear: do everything in your power to keep your kids out of the hands of family services. My father’s stories and lessons were much less subtle.

“When they came over you mom called me. I told that social worker lady that if she tried to take my kids from me that she would have to kill me first!” My dad would say this while puffing out his chest.

“She called the cops and I told the cops them same thing, ‘you’ll have to kill me first.’” I would gasp in astonishment.

“What did they do?” I asked.

“They backed off!” He would say, laughing. *“They told that lady ‘he’s willing to die for his kids. Leave him alone.’”*

“No way! Really?”

“Of course. They know when a man is serious. Especially your dad. I wasn’t ever going to let them take you.”

Though my dad’s lessons were less subtle, the message was the same. Never let them take your kids. Similar lessons were learned throughout childhood from my uncles, grandfather, and great-grandmother. They all experienced family services first hand. My grandparents lived through the era and horrors of Native boarding schools and my uncles and dad were placed in white foster homes. So, I knew who these ladies were and what they wanted before I ever met them. They were here to look down their noses at us and pass judgement on children and a family dynamic that they couldn’t possibly understand. They were stylish, impractical, and white. In short, exactly the kind of people that would come to take these babies away from us and never allow us to see them again while at the same time crow to anyone who would listen that they were saving the savages. Kill the Indian, save the Man. That’s what was always said and I know they were still saying it in their hearts even if they couldn’t say it out loud anymore.

I plastered a smile on my face that was as fake as theirs and held out my hand.

“Hi, I’m Naomi!” I said this with false cheer, a small attempt at getting them to let their own guard down enough for me to gain an in. They introduced themselves politely, but stiffly. I could see them sizing me up in their own heads and decided to strike pre-emptively. With a smile on my face I made a small maneuver to quickly gain the upper hand.

“Those boots must have been killer to walk in all the way here! This is a big hospital.” I said this with a laugh, but they knew what I was doing. I was never very good at the verbal warfare that was meant to belittle while still sounding polite.

“Oh, no” said the blonde one with a rigid smile. “It was nothing. I didn’t even notice.”
Ooh, she’s good.

I switch tactics and start interrogating them on where they went to college. I answer snidely and disingenuously when the blonde tells me. “Oh,” I say. “Community college. I guess that’s alright. University isn’t for everyone.” The brunette comes to play seeing that her friend is losing.

“I went to University of Minnesota Duluth.” She says this proudly. I answer back ready to strike her down.

“Oh! UMD is a pretty good school! Not as good as the twin cities campus of course, I was accepted into their honors program. I got accepted into most honors programs, I actually got accepted to every school I applied to.” I say this with a shrug, like it’s not a big deal. I wield my education like a spear and wear it as armor. It’s the one thing no one can take away from me and the one thing that I know I can usually gain the upper-hand with. I need these people to know that I’m not a fool and they can’t fuck with me. They need to think twice before coming at me

with bureaucratic bullshit because they know I'm smarter than their tricks. They need to know I'm not stupid and that they shouldn't talk down to me. I need to make them feel small so they will never know how afraid of them I really am.

V

The rest of the visit with the social workers didn't really go any better. But they allowed us to take Alonzo home with us that night on the condition that they would be coming by around 7am to check on him and the house we were staying at. Driving home from the hospital didn't have nearly the same feeling of panic, but it was still there. The house was a complete disaster and I didn't know if we could get it acceptable in time for the visit from the social workers.

We got home late and immediately put the kids down for bed. Looking around the house I knew that it would never be acceptable to a social worker. They would take one look at the squalor and spirit the boys away to be raised by some stranger looking for an easy pay day.

"We have to clean this up" I said looking over to Alex. She looked up from her phone one earbud dangling from her ear.

"Huh?" I indicated for her to take out her headphones.

"I said we have to clean this up before child services comes over. They'll be here in the morning."

"Yea, I think I'll start in the kitchen then." Alex began to wheel over to the kitchen. I was relieved. I hated doing dishes, and really, I didn't even know where to begin in that kitchen. That being said, I didn't really know where to begin anywhere else either. I took a moment to look around and take stock. It was clear that someone had tried to clean the house but only did a half assed job of it. Hard to do anything but a half-assed job when you are sorting through the house of a semi hoarder. There were random broken speakers on ramshackle shelves, a pack-n-play sat in the corner full of what appeared on the surface to be garbage but on closer inspection was also filled with Herbert's toys. That explained why he was always getting into things he shouldn't—

like the exposed wires and cords connected to the T.V. The couches were dirty, stained, and smelled faintly of must and pee. There was overflowing ashtrays on half of the surfaces that looked as if they'd never been emptied and half full coke cans next to them or laying on the carpet dripping even more stains onto the dirty carpet. The windows were almost a lost cause, all of their screens were missing and the curtains covering them were yellowed and torn half off the window. I thought I might just have to throw those away.

I decided to start with something manageable. I gathered all the dirty clothes, towels, and couch covers and separated them for washing. Once I had a load going I started to collect all the garbage I could find. I started in the living room floor and worked my way into the bathroom. By the time I filled two garbage bags Alex had finished the dishes. I lamented that her condition caused her to move so slowly, but with the dishes out of the way she would finally be free to sort through some of the heaping pile of papers, computers, games, and garbage on what should be the kitchen table. I wasn't entirely comfortable with going through all the papers since I didn't know what was important, but I figured Alex would know since it's her house.

"Well," Alex said to me, "I'm pretty tired. I'm gonna go to bed." I looked at her confused for a brief moment before what she said sunk in. Looking at the clock I saw it was already 11 in the evening and the last few days had been really tiring for her.

"Oh, ok" I said. I wanted to remind her that Social Services would be there in only 8 hours and there was at least 3 weeks' worth of cleaning to do, but instead I wished her goodnight and kept cleaning. By midnight the garbage bin outside was overflowing and I still a ton of garbage to get rid of. I wasn't even through the living room yet and I hadn't even touched the kitchen. I felt myself starting to panic when I heard Alonzo begin to cry.

Quickly, before he could wake Herbert up I went into the room and grabbed him. A brief moment of irritation flashed through me as I saw Alex sleeping peacefully on her bed with Herbert. I ignored it and went to make a bottle. Sitting with Alonzo, on the very edge of the couch since I wasn't yet comfortable enough to sit fully on the dirty cushion I fed him his bottle. He suckled the bottle softly and looked up at me with his dark eyes. I smiled down at him and pulled his swaddle a bit tighter. For some reason he only took a bottle easily and slept peacefully when he was in a nice swaddle. Alex had troubles with it, her hands and arms jerk unsteadily and he is able to break through in moments making the whole process frustrating for her. Probably for Alonzo too. When he was fully satisfied I burped him and changed his diaper. Swaddling him again I rocked him as I took stock of our surroundings. I cleared up most of the garbage on the floor. Now there was a lot of bigger garbage to deal with. The speakers on the shelves, the mountain of papers on the kitchen table and the stuff in the pack-n-play. I couldn't put it in the garbage outside for the social workers to see and I didn't know how to open the garage door to hide it in there—though from what my dad told me there wasn't any room for anymore garbage in there anyways. The last time my Dad and adopted sister tried to clean out this house when my uncle was away they rented a dumpster and when that was full used the garage. I didn't have the time or money to rent a dumpster. I'd have to improvise. The basement! I could put the rest of this crap in the basement. If the social workers asked, I would just say that we don't use the basement due to Alex being in a wheel chair. I could clear a path in front of the door easily enough to make it look ok without them ever going down there. I decided it would have to work. I didn't have another choice.

Laying Alonzo back in his way-way fast asleep I worked some more. I cleared all of the shelves of the unused and broken speakers and computer parts and scrubbed the thick layers of dust off of them. They looked less ramshackle after removing everything that was broken. Putting the garbage downstairs was trickier than I thought. The basement was a maze of abandoned bed frames, couches, dressers, mattresses, bookshelves, televisions, piles upon mountains upon landscapes of random clothes, and other random garbage that made it almost impossible to move. Taking twenty minutes, I cleared a path to the very back of the basement fearing that at any moment I would run into a mouse or spider. Thankfully I didn't encounter anything. After clearing the living room of the larger garbage, I moved to the kitchen table and paused. I decided that there was no way to sort through all of those papers, instead, I decided, I would put them all in the same corner of the basement in case Alex or my uncle ever asked about them. Carrying armful of papers to the basement I had to stop every couple of seconds to pick up a piece that fell. After the fifth piece fell, frustrated I decided to leave it and pick it up later. Going back to the table I stood and once again took stock of the situation. I was spending double the time picking up papers that I dropped. If only I had some sort of bucket. Under the kitchen table I saw an unused dish strainer, that would work.

By moving things into the basement rather than trying to clean and sort everything sped up my time considerably. By the time 4am rolled around most of the garbage was cleared and Alonzo wanted another bottle. I contemplated waking Alex up, thinking that she might want to be awake to help her clean now that she's gotten some rest. I nudged her.

“Alex,” I whispered. “Alex.” She groaned something unintelligible.

“Alex,” I tried again.

“What?” She said groggily.

“Family Services will be here in three hours...do you want to get up now and help clean?” I could see her turning over what I said in her mind as she took a moment to comprehend what I said.

“Wake me up thirty minutes before they get here, ok?” she rolled over and went back to sleep. Feeling that same irritation rise up in me, only amplified by my lack of sleep I went back into the Livingroom to feed Alonzo. This time I sat fully on the couch, comfortable enough now that I washed all the removable covers, scrubbed what stains I could from the rest and doused it in Febreze, stuffed dryer sheets between the cushions, and had draped a clean sheet over it and tucked it for a makeshift couch cover. It actually looked pretty good, and it didn't smell half bad either. Feeding Alonzo gave me time to fume about Alex. I just didn't understand how she could be so blasé about the whole situation her house was putting the boys in. If the social workers saw it they would take the boys away for sure! There was no question in my mind that the house wasn't livable and definitely not an environment for children to be in. I wanted to quit. I was tired, sticky from sweat and dirt, irritated, and the house was still a mess.

Alonzo wiggled in my arms. Someone, maybe my mom, once told me that babies could always feel when someone was upset around them. That they soaked it in. Feeling him fidget and squirm as he was trying to eat made me think that maybe that was true. I sighed and tried to calm myself down. Staring at his little face and dark hair it wasn't long before I was calm enough to think rationally. This little baby didn't deserve to be raised by someone who didn't love him, by someone who wouldn't take care of him and treat him the way he deserved. I set down the bottle and nuzzled my face close to his. I realized I loved this baby. I loved him more than if he was

just a family member but rather loved him as someone who was uniquely tied to me. He wasn't just a cousin anymore. He was part of me now, part of who makes me who I am. Cuddling him close and kissing his head before laying him down my resolve strengthened enough for me to finish my task.

The last hours of my cleaning frenzy ended with me clearing out and scrubbing down the pack-n-play which, along with the toys and enormous amount of garbage in it, had six broken DVD players in it (SIX!). I sanitized the toys I could salvage for Herbert and tipped one of the clear bookshelves on the side to makeshift a toybox for him so he could reach his toys and learn how to put them away. By the time the social workers were pulling up the driveway Alex was awake and dressed and feeding Herbert breakfast as I scrambled to finish drying off the entry way floor that was still damp from when I mopped it and to spray air freshener around before they walked in.

The same social workers from the hospital came and sat down on the couch. They didn't seem to make any faces indicating that they smelled something gross or show any hesitation like they didn't want to sit down. I took that as a win. They looked around and said that as long as someone over 18 was in the house with Alex the kids could stay there as long as we replaced the smoke detectors, got a fire extinguisher, and had a working storm radio. They handed me a list of the stuff we needed and then they left.

After they left I looked at Alex triumphantly as I made Alonzo his 8 o'clock bottle.

"I can't believe I did it!" I laughed. "I didn't think I could get it done but I did and now the kids can stay!" I was so happy I felt like I could touch the ceiling, though on second thought I should probably wipe it down before I touched it. Alex handed Alonzo over to me smiling.

“Yea,” She said, “But I knew you could. There wasn’t that much to clean in here.” Shock coursed through me. What did she just say? That there wasn’t that much to clean? Did I hear her correctly? I replayed what she said in my head, Yup I heard her right. Baffled I sat down and fed Alonzo his morning bottle. Still reeling from what Alex just said. It never even occurred to me to correct her.

VI

“We need to go shopping.” Alex announced later that afternoon when I woke up from a much needed nap. I looked around and saw her sitting at the newly cleared off dining table writing a list of things to get at the store. From what I could glean from my position, it was long. I smiled when I spotted Herbert sitting in the living room playing with his toys. Even if Alex didn’t seem to really appreciate the all the hard work I put into her house, Herbert did. He was so excited to play with his toys that were suddenly all readily available to him. I hoped that this would prevent him from trying to play with the cords behind the T.V. or with the pots and pans in the kitchen.

“We can go to the Wal-Mart in Little Falls.” I said to Alex. “I need to pick up some clothes I left at my mom’s house and I have my DVD case over there. I think I have a lot of movies that Herbert will like.”

“That’ll work. We can eat dinner over there too before we shop, I’ll buy.” I was grateful for Alex’s offer to buy us dinner in before we went shopping. I didn’t have any money at the moment and would be until the beginning of the next month. I needed a job. I didn’t think I’d have to get one so fast when I moved back home, but I didn’t plan on running to and from the Cities so much either.

When Alonzo woke up from his afternoon nap, we loaded up into the car and drove to Little Falls. Little did I know then that this would become a monthly ritual that I would both dread and enjoy. I enjoyed it because it got us out of the house and Alex would buy us dinner, I’m a sucker for free food, but I began to dread it because it soon became clear that shopping with Alex was an *ordeal*.

“Okay, how do you want to do this?” I asked Alex as she was sitting in my passenger seat. “Do you want to sit in your chair, or have me go and grab one of the electric ones?” Alex paused to consider, and after a moment of thought settled on her chair. I shrugged and opened my trunk to get her chair out. I wasn’t sure why she wanted to use her own when the electric ones were faster but didn’t think anything of it until she stood up to get out of my car. I couldn’t exactly see because her pants were black, but I could smell something like urine coming from her. I knew that she had adult diapers in the bathroom, but it honestly never crossed my mind that she actually needed them. Or that she would need them, but not use them. I looked away as I held her chair steady, determined not to embarrass her. She stood for a moment before sitting attempting to pull her pants up to hide the top of her butt. She wasn’t able to pull her pants up all the way by herself and I ached to help her, but I never did. Not that first time, not ever. I was too afraid that I’d embarrass her and figured that a butt crack wasn’t too offensive as long as I made sure she got to the bathroom before any extended trip in the car.

Once she was seated in her wheel chair I grabbed a nearby cart from the cart corral and placed Herbert in the toddler seat and Alonzo at the bottom of the cart still in his car seat. That’s when I realized our next problem. Alex couldn’t push herself as fast as I could push the cart. We tried for a second to have her push the cart and I push her, but it just ended with our cart hitting a parked car. We settled on her pushing herself and me following behind her.

“What do we need first?” I asked her as soon as we were in the store. Alex rattled off a list of different types of diced canned tomatoes and sauces that we would need. I followed behind Alex as she led the way to the correct aisle. We spent about thirty minutes in that one aisle. Picking through the right tomatoes and other ingredients that were in that aisle. Slowly we

made our way to the next aisle. Other shopper bustled around us in their hurry to get their things and go home. That's what I love about going to the store. I'm able to be around people without any expectation of engagement. The anonymity of shopping in a large store like Wal-Mart allowed me to indulge in the small part of myself that craved human company without needing to be an active member in it. The only thing that throws of that off are overly helpful store employees.

By the time we were in our third aisle I was beginning to become overwhelmed. We'd been in the store an hour and a half at that point and I had gotten my fill of people, public, and bright lights. We moved at an agonizing pace. By the time Alonzo began to cry for a diaper I happily took Herbert and Alonzo both to the bathroom. I abandoned the cart outside of the restrooms and quickly changed Alonzo's diaper and Herbert's since we were already in there. Figuring I had a bit of time before Alex would expect me back I zoomed off across the store to look at some baby clothes. It was a relief to walk at my own speed and look at a few of the cutest little baby clothes for Herbert and Alonzo.

"What do you think, Herbert?" I asked holding up a little shirt with a boat on it next to him. "Would you wear it?" Herbert laughed and tugged the shirt out of my hands. He laughed even harder at my surprised expression when he threw it at me.

"You little turkey!" I laughed with him. I covered his face with it causing him to go into a fit of hysterics. He was so easy to please. Quickly he threw it back at me, red in the face from laughing. We played our game for a bit until I decided that we had to go back and find Alex. When we reached her, she had shoved several cans of vegetables, fruits, boxes of macaroni and cheese, and spaghetti noodles into the chair with her. I quickly relieved her of her items and put

them into the cart. We chatted for a small while about all the different dinners she liked to make the boys.

“I love cooking.” Said Alex, “My mother taught me when I was a little girl. She said I had to know how to cook for my husband and family.”

“Not me,” I said. “My mom tried to teach me. It just never stuck.”

Alex smiled at me. “It’s how I show my family that I love them.” I thought that it was a nice thought, one that a lot of people shared.

“Well, it looks like my future husband is gonna have to show love for the both of us!” I laughed. Alex laughed with me. Small conversations like this filled our time in the aisles. But by hour three, Alonzo was wailing for his bottle. I made a quick one right in the aisle and bent over the cart to feed it to him and push it at the same time. When we were stopped I used one hand to grab whatever Alex handed me to put in the cart and the other to keep feeding him. Once I had to let go of his bottle to get to a shelf too high for Alex to reach.

By the time we were done shopping six hours had passed. I was exhausted, my feet hurt, both of the kids were asleep in the grocery cart all but their faces were covered in food waiting to be bought. I had to run and find an employee to open up a register for us since only the self-check outs were handy. We used another cart to put the food in when we checked out. Pulling the cart with the boys behind me and the cart with the food in front of me I walked through the parking lot. I made sure to put the boys in the car first, and then Alex’s wheel chair. Once everyone was sitting down I went to work organizing the groceries the best I could around the chair and the sleeping children. Again, only their little faces were showing as food surrounded them. The 45-minute drive back home was torture. Alex slept while I attempted to drive us home

without landing in a ditch. When we finally arrived Alonzo and Herbert were screaming with indignation at having been woken up buried alive under groceries.

“It’s ok, it’s ok.” I tried to make my voice as soothing as possible but couldn’t get them out of the car until I carried in the groceries that were covering them. I carried Alonzo in first and left him in wailing in his seat next to the sofa and went to get Herbert. When he was finally upstairs I rushed to help Alex in her seat, when I realized that I had to carry in the groceries under her seat before she could even attempt to get out of the car. She had been sitting there on her phone scrolling through her music while I sweat on exhausted feet. I tried not to be mad. It wasn’t her fault that she couldn’t help. As soon as I got her wheelchair free I carried as much groceries up the stairs as I could. Alonzo was still wailing.

I stopped a minute to get him out of his seat and into a new diaper.

“It’s ok, Alonzo. It’s ok. I know it’s late, baby. I know.” Quickly I grabbed a pair of pajamas and got both him and Herbert cozy. By this time Alex was at the stairs and needed my help up them. Gathering what strength, I could I tilted her chair backwards and pulled her up the three steps into the house. She still had another landing to get up to, but she could manage steps when there were railings. I left her to her devices and went to carry in the rest of the food. When I was finally done the kitchen, floor was covered in groceries. I made quick work of putting the cold stuff away and then stopped myself from doing any more.

“Alex, can you take care of the rest of this stuff in the morning?” I asked.

“Yes, just get some sleep now.” I gladly complied and when she was fully in her room I turned out the lights in the living room and kitchen and fell happily onto the loveseat sofa that I was calling my new bed.

When I told my woes of shopping to my mom when I visited her a few days later to pick up more clothes and the DVD's I'd forgotten she wasn't sympathetic. "Just like Americans! Pigs! All of us! Have to complain that there is too much food to carry up the stairs!" I shook my head. There was no use talking to my mom about anything. I was on my own.

VII

“The little prince can’t stand being cold even for a second!” I said cheerfully to Alex as she wheeled slowly from the bathroom with a dripping wet Alonzo in her arms. The towel that was supposed to go around him was laying uselessly on Alex’s lap. I had taken this new approach with Alex when trying to help her deal with Alonzo. She had become very cross after a few days of me trying to give helpful suggestions on how to care for him. I knew that she hated that she had to have me “supervise” her with her own children and I wasn’t trying to be intrusive but there were things that I couldn’t keep silent about like the need for her to support Alonzo’s head when she was holding him and not sleeping in the same bed with him. It was clear to me in my first few days of living with them that she was woefully unprepared for a baby. I wasn’t sure how she managed with Herbert all this time, but my guess was that my uncle did a lot of the heavy lifting.

My new strategy to tell Alex what Alonzo needed was to make it sound like he was being ridiculous. She thought he was ridiculous anyway so I just fed that fantasy to make sure that Alonzo got what he needed. Whether it was the fact that he needed his head to be supported while he was eating so he didn’t throw up after, a new diaper since he hated a dirty diaper, or currently because he was cold after a bath and she needed to hurry up and make him warm. It worked a lot better than straight up telling her to hurry up because he was cold and it made the name “little prince” stick. I thought Alonzo was an absolute doll and the fact that he was apparently “needier” than Herbert ever was never bothered me. Truthfully, I thought *Alex* was a little bit ridiculous, not Alonzo. She got way too frustrated with him way too easily and it’s not like he was a hard baby to manage. Once he got his few needs met he was content to be

swaddled and cuddled. I was itching to go over to Alonzo and end his icy torture but kept reminding myself that Alex needs to be able to take care of them on her own that the only reason I was there was to try and help her gain the necessary skills to take care of them. Still, it was hard to watch Alonzo scream when I knew I could make him warm and happy.

“Stop kicking me!” Alex scolded Alonzo. “Kicking is disrespectful, Alonzo!” Alonzo was still wailing and Alex was struggling to get a diaper on him since he wouldn’t hold still. A flash of anger went through me when I sensed that Alex was irritated with Alonzo. It’s not his fault that he’s cold and kicking! It’s not like he’s kicking her because he’s being disrespectful, he’s only a baby! Kicking is what they do! Instead of reprimanding her, I gave into my urges and walked over to the table with a smile on my face.

“Little prince is so fussy!” I said cheerfully as I deftly took the diaper from Alex and had it on Alonzo in a few short seconds. “Can you hand me his romper?” I asked Alex as I soothed Alonzo as best I could. She handed me his fuzzy romper and soon enough he was warm once again and swaddled in my arms. Finally, he was quiet and Alex smiled. I smiled back, but I was wearing thin.

Though the first few days told me all I needed to know about Alex’s skills with Alonzo, it had been weeks at this point and she wasn’t getting any better. In that time, I had spent uncountable hours making the house suitable for living. I rearranged all of the furniture to make the optimal space for Alex to maneuver, went grocery shopping two more times, and my mom had come over and helped me clean all of the carpets with a carpet cleaner that family services had rented to us for 24hrs only. It took the entire 24 hours to clean and honestly Alex slept for twelve of those hours. Again, I tried to rationalize thinking that she couldn’t be any help anyway,

but it was still irritating. In that time, I had also quietly gotten rid of Alex's mattress and replaced it with one I found in the basement.

One day while Alex was out visiting a friend I was putting Herbert down for a nap and came upon the most wretched god-awful smell that anyone has ever come across in all of existence: Alex's mattress. The day had been going really well. It was nice to have a day on my own with just me and the boys. Over the last couple of weeks Alex's constant presence in my life had become stifling and I'm sure I was just as oppressive to her. The day went normally enough. I lay Alonzo to sleep in the lamb swing I got from my stepsister's friend, Jenny. It ate batteries like they were going out of style, but Alonzo loved to be rocked, so it was worth it. Miraculously a couple of days after I got the swing I found the matching bouncy chair on the curb with a few other baby items. I felt weirdly accomplished getting Alonzo a matching set of baby equipment. After I lay Alonzo down it was only a matter of time before Herbert went to sleep. He fell asleep watching his new favorite movie *How to Train Your Dragon* and I picked him up and walked to the room he and Alonzo shared with Alex.

I took my time holding him, enjoying the feeling of a sleeping toddler in my arms before I lay him down. Herbert was a heavy sleeper, peaceful and innocent. I could have held him like that for days. I leaned down to deposit him on the bed and almost immediately was assaulted by the most awful smell. I scooped him out of the bed.

"What the fuck was that?" I said out loud, suddenly unconcerned about walking Herbert up. I attempted to lay him down again. *I must have imagined it* came unbidden into my mind. A smell so awful that I couldn't fathom it actually existing in the world. My second attempt to lay Herbert down was no better. The deathly odor coming from the mattress was so foul I couldn't

justify any living thing sleeping on the mattress. Quickly I went back to the living room and dumped Herbert onto the couch and went to inspect the mattress more closely. When I turned on the light I saw the mattress stained and wet in some places with dirty diapers lying on it most of them not folded up properly with Alonzo's waste exposed on the mattress. The blankets were damp and crusted in some spots. My vision swam in front of my eyes and I could feel my lunch trying to make a return. I couldn't compare the odor with anything in my entire life that would come close to describing it. My best guess was that it was a combination of years of Alex's bodily waste not being properly cleaned up since I'd already seen that she had bathroom issues, combined with sweat, vomit, and fecal matter all stewing in the mattress in the summer heat. Fetid meat would have been a better scent to be assaulted with. Years later I would still gag when thinking of the smell.

Shaking, unsure of where to start I stepped back to make a plan. That mattress couldn't stay and I would not allow Herbert or Alonzo to lay on it again. I thought I remembered seeing some crib parts downstairs while I was cleaning and ran downstairs to see if it had all of the parts. Downstairs was still as much of a disaster as it was when I moved in since my cleaning motivations were concentrated to the floor we lived on, but excluded Alex's room, until that day, since I thought that privacy was something she would like to maintain. Climbing over some garbage, mountains of clothes, and old mattresses I was able to find the crib in the corner and all of the screws and bolts for it sitting on the shelf behind it. I grabbed what I could and brought it upstairs.

Standing back in Alex's room I stared at the revolting mattress and flapped my arms in disgust with what I was about to do. I leaned down to grab the blankets and stopped myself

suddenly recalling disposable rubber gloves that I discovered under the kitchen sink. I ran to grab them and feeling a bit more protected was able to grab Alex's blankets and throw them downstairs to be washed. Removing the blankets only served to show more filth. I saw old Adult diapers that had never been cleaned up and soiled underwear stuffed between the wall and the mattress. Gagging I stepped outside and tried not to vomit. I took a moment to compose myself. *What in the actual fuck was Alex thinking! Could she not smell it?* Taking another minute to steel my nerves I went downstairs and scoped out a mattress that was similar in size and color. I stepped forward and took a tentative sniff of it. The smell was of typical basement must. I decided that a musty smelling mattress was better than a shit stained mattress. Grabbing it, I hauled it over the mountains of clothes and up the stairs and out of the kitchen to rest on the large porch to air out while I dealt with the other one. Grabbing a garbage bag, I began to throw everything in Alex's room away. Clothes, diapers, papers, underwear, old spilled pop cans that were used as ashtrays but had gone into stages passed molding to decaying. I recognized, then, that some of the damp and crustiness on her bed had to come from some of the rotten food I was finding on paper plates that were hidden at the head of the bed and the wall. When I finished throwing everything away I ran and dumped the bag into the garbage bin outside. I took deep breathes once again trying to compose myself. Before going back inside.

The worst part was yet to come. I would have to touch the mattress in order to move it downstairs and out of Alex's sight where she wouldn't know that I found her mattress so revolting that I wouldn't allow Herbert and Alonzo to sleep on it. If I had the time, I would have burned it. Pulling the mattress downstairs may have been one of the most traumatic things I have ever done in my entire life. The smell of it was right against me as I dragged it out of the room

and down the stairs. The smell was causing vomit to pool in my mouth and I was forced to keep swallowing it down in order not to add to the odor. When I finally made it downstairs I shoved it as far back in the basement as it could go. Once the mattress was safely hidden away I tore my clothes off and started the washer immediately. Then, naked I ran through the house to jump in the hottest shower my skin could bear. The shower was short, only five minutes, but it was all the time I had if I wanted to finish my project before Alex got home or the boys woke up. quickly drying and dressing with clothes from my suitcase I got to work on cleaning up Alex's room. I finished packing the garbage on her dresser and wiped down the walls and window and then vacuumed. I had the bedroom windows open as wide as they would go and doused the room in Febreze fabric and air freshener. When that was all finished I went to the porch and sprayed the musty smelling mattress down as best I could with the Febreze and that dragged it inside. I dumped it onto the box spring and saw that it wasn't an exact size, but it was close enough.

The next few hours were spend washing the blankets, sheets, and pillows and putting together the crib as a toddler bed for Herbert. By the time Alex got home the boys were playing happily in the living room and I told Alex I had a surprise for her. Using the same cheerful voice I used when she needed to learn about how to take care of Alonzo I said that I cleaned her room and set up the crib.

"Thank you, Naomi!" Said Alex. "I'm sure Herbert will love his new bed! Hey, what do you want for dinner?" I was glad that she was pleased and didn't seem to notice that her bed was a slightly different size but told her I wasn't hungry. I wasn't sure how long it would be before my stomach and gag reflex calmed down enough for me to eat.

VIII

I can't say that all my time spent there was one horror cleaning story after another, though there were plenty of instances of it. Most of my time was spent learning how to take care of Herbert and Alonzo. Though I had experience taking care of my little sister while I was a teenager, and in far more difficult circumstances, I was still shocked at the intricacies of everyday life with them. My life became a whirlwind of Google searches.

What happens if my toddler touches a mouse?

“Herbert, come help me with the laundry!” I called out to Herbert who was busy playing with an Elmo toy that was trying to teach him how to use the potty. He got up and happily followed me to the basement. The basement still wasn't anywhere near habitable, but as long as he stayed close to me, the path to the laundry room would be fine. I had taken to throwing the dirty laundry on the basement stairs and then collecting them as I went. I thought it was easier than walking the heavy basket all the way down the stairs.

“Herbert,” I said when we reached the basement. “Stay on that step and throw the clothes to me.” I stood at the bottom of the stairs with the laundry basket and encouraged him to throw the clothes at me. I could have done it easier and faster myself, but an article I read mentioned that getting children used to doing chores would instill them a sense of responsibility early in life. I also thought it was a good way to spend more time with him. If I was going to spend my day cleaning, I could try to hang out with Herbert at the same time. Plus, he was little enough that helping me was the best part of his day.

We laughed as Herbert threw the clothes at me. I made a show of falling down if he threw something that hit my face. The laundry basket was nearly full when I saw something fly towards me that was most definitely not a piece of laundry. It was a mouse. Herbert had thrown a mouse at me. A real. Live. Mouse.

“AAAHHHHHH!” I screamed, trying to swat the mouse away from my face. I dropped the laundry basket in my terror. Both Herbert and I froze for a second as we watched the mouse fall onto the laundry on the stairs. It was only a split second after the mouse landed until it started twitching.

“AAAHHHHHH!!!” I screamed again. This time, Herbert started screaming with me. I jumped over the mouse and laundry and scooped Herbert into my arms as I ran back upstairs. Both of us clung to each other for a few minutes upstairs until I started laughing hysterically. After all this time of being scared of running into a mouse, it was Herbert that threw one at me. Herbert finally began to laugh with me and then made a game of running to look through the bannisters at the mouse and then screaming and running back to me. It took me a bit longer to work up the courage to collect the mouse from the stairs and throw it into the tall grass outside. I figured that the mouse had been hiding in the clothes and that I must have stepped on it on my way to do the laundry. After that I didn't throw the clothes on the stairs anymore. As for what Google says to do about a toddler touching a mouse: wash their hands.

What are some good lullabys?

Putting Alonzo to sleep was a set of strict procedures that couldn't be deviated from. Though I didn't think that his demands were ridiculous, he did like things done a certain way. But from what I read online, that was normal. Babies and children thrive on routine. His bedtime started at his dinner time. He would eat 6oz of a bottle. Once he had eaten that, I would change his diaper and put him into his pajamas. Once his pajamas were on, I let him have a few minutes of tummy time and then a swaddle. Swaddling Alonzo has become an issue with Alex. She couldn't do it. The muscles in her arms and hands wouldn't allow her to make a swaddle to Alonzo's satisfaction.

"I can't do it, Naomi!" Alex cried to me. "He won't stop moving!" I sighed. No matter what I did to teach her it wasn't working. She could make a loose swaddle, one that might have satisfied a different baby, but Alonzo loved a tight swaddle. There were other things that Alex was struggling to do that I know was contributing to her state of mind. We had gone shopping earlier that month to buy her a boppy pillow to help feed Alonzo. She claimed that her arm was the reason that she couldn't support his head. With a boppy pillow under her arm I thought that she would be able to hold him better. It was no use. From that moment, feeding Alonzo had become my responsibility. After the boppy situation she was still struggling to get him dressed. It was at that point that I made sure to only buy zip up pajamas. She still struggled to get him in his onesies. Then dressing him became something that I was taking care of. The same thing happened when she tried to change his diaper. Her frustration and anger that he was "kicking" her and "disrespecting" her made me reach my limit and soon I took over that. I tried to reason with her that all babies kick and squirm. My pleas fell on deaf ears. When the swaddling became another issue she was crying over, I took over that too.

It's not that I didn't sympathize with her, I did. I knew that it had to be difficult when your own body wouldn't listen to your commands. But after 3 months, I thought that she would have made some progress with figuring out how to make parenting work for her. It seemed to me that she was most happy when I was taking care of the children and she got to concentrate on the music in her headphones and making dinner.

The other thing that Alonzo loved, was to be rocked and sung to. I read in an article I found on Google that putting babies to sleep in swings all the time wasn't good for them. That they needed a bed. There was no bed available and I refused to put him on the floor. I figured that the bouncy chair I got him would do just fine since it looked a lot like the bedside bassinets that I kept seeing in the stores. The only difference would be that he was sleeping next to the couch I slept on instead of next to a bed. This was an older arrangement. As soon as I got the swing and the bouncy chair, Alonzo slept with me and it became my job to feed him at night. I didn't mind this arrangement, I liked it, in fact. The only thing I was missing was a song to put him to sleep with. I wanted a song that was simple and not as morbid as the different lullabys about babies falling out of trees. During my Google search to find a song I could sing to him, I remembered a Fallout Boy song I had heard years prior. I googled it and found the lyrics. They were perfect. It was the perfect little song. It was an easy tune to follow and I could sing it again and again with no issue. Alonzo seemed to like it too. It came to be that once I started to sing it, he wanted to cuddle. Soon I would sing this song to him at every naptime and bedtime. I would never forget the lyrics. What Google says for what are some good lullabys? Showing results for what are some good *lullabies*?

Google became my best friend as I battled with their sleeping and eating schedules, the milestones they should be reaching, and what baby products were the best ones to use. my steady use of Google and the problems Alex was having with Alonzo lead to a steady progression of the kids' well-being becoming my responsibility. Not that Alex wasn't helping, she was in her way, but I think she was most comfortable with the arrangement that allowed her to do what she was good at without pushing to become better at the things she struggled with. That's only human. My realization that Alex was giving me control came during a conversation we had one night after I had already laid Alonzo down and was working with Herbert to go to sleep.

“Hey, Naomi?” Alex asked. “Do you think it would be alright for Herbert to eat a brownie before bed?”

Without thinking of the implications of her question, I responded carefully thinking of what Google taught me about children's nutrition and healthy eating habits. “Yes,” I said. “Just this once should be fine. And I'll have to re-brush his teeth.” Though we never openly spoke about it, from that day forward the boys, especially Alonzo, were in my care.

IX

I eventually got a Personal Care Assistant job through a company that Alex worked with and was able to make money by keeping track of which chores I did for her and how many hours I was working. Technically I wasn't supposed to count the hours that I spent taking care of the kids since they weren't my "client" but honestly the most help that she needed was with her kids. Getting up and down the stairs to do laundry was an ordeal that took her all day and didn't allow her to watch the kids during that time. Other than the kids, she needed help with her hair. So that's basically what I did with her. I did the laundry, cleaned the house, took care of the kids, and brushed her hair. In the months I was there I was able to almost completely clean the upstairs and rearrange it so that Alex's chair was able to easily navigate it. We had fallen into a pretty good routine with the kids and the housework when my Uncle came home.

We had been visiting him once a week for the last few months at his treatment center. He had also been calling into the few family court dates that we had regarding Alonzo's injuries. It was looking like, because he didn't obtain any long-term ramifications from his injuries, Family Services just needed the proof that Alex could take care of her kids without further accidents. I took some pride in the fact that I'd done my best to make the house as safe as possible for them. There were now baby gates, child locks, their own beds, and it was finally clean. I was still working on the rodent situation but I decided that it might take a professional to fully take care of that problem. After Uncle came home, we would all just be waiting for the go ahead to get on with our lives. However, Uncle was not so happy about my project with his house.

"What the hell is this?" He grumbled as soon as he walked into the living room.

“Isn’t it nice!” I said excitedly. I was eager to show him the clean carpets, new curtains, and cleared out closets for linens. He wasn’t. He glared at me and threw his bag on the floor. I glanced at Alex, she shrugged.

My Uncle’s sullenness lasted the next couple of weeks. One day I came home from the store only to find he rearranged the entire living room.

“Why did you change it?” I asked him. He stared silently at the t.v. “Uncle, why did you change it?” I asked again. Trying and failing to mask my irritation. It had taken me some time to figure out the perfect configuration for Alex to move around and take care of her kids. He still stared silently at the t.v. “Uncle!” I said, this time not even attempting to mask my irritation. Finally, he snapped at me.

“The T.V was getting glare from the window. Now it won’t” I looked over and he was right, the T.V would no longer have a glare on it. Not that it was that bad in the first place.

“Okay, but now Alex has a harder time getting around the living room to take care of the kids. Uncle only rolled his eyes and continued to watch Netflix. Feeling my anger rise I had the idea that I should just cancel Netflix right this second. It was my Netflix he was watching on the internet that I was paying for since after two months without internet I caved and called the expensive company that had monopolized the entire county to get it set up, and the internet was still crap. I just shook my head and took a breath. It wasn’t a big deal I told myself. Alex would figure it out.

The next couple of weeks were some of the same, I took care of the kids and cleaned the house and Uncle sat sullenly on the couch. The only bright spot was that Alex had finally solved some of her incontinence problems. We’d been going to a specialist in the cities and he was

finally able to prescribe her some medication that should help. The other option was a catheter. Secretly, I voted for the catheter. I didn't want to take any more chances with adult bodily fluids and waste leaking onto my passenger seat and into the laundry that I had to wash. I know Alex did her best to hide it and control it and I know she was embarrassed. But it was still gross.

"You, have no idea, Naomi." She said. "This is going to change everything!" She was excited and I was happy for her.

"I'm glad you have it. I hope it works." I told her. I had heard her and Uncle arguing the other morning about her waking up in her own shit and I really hoped that she and my Uncle wouldn't have to go through that again.

"Me too." She said smiling. When we got home, Uncle was still sitting sullenly on the couch. Even after Alex told him the good news. He just grunted at her "That's great, babe." Uncle's mood never seemed to improve. The only time he smiled was when he was playing with Herbert. He ignored Alonzo altogether. He didn't seem to want anything to do with him. It led to more than one fight between Alex and him. For some reason Uncle would glare at me after their fights, as if it was my fault. It only got worse anytime I told Herbert "No" or made him pick up his toys or put him in time-out. Finally, I asked him what was bothering him.

"You want to know what's bothering me?" He asked sarcastically. I rolled my eyes. Even a small question could set him off.

"Yes, I want to know what your problem is! You've been in a bad mood ever since you came home."

“My problem is that I have my niece here telling me how to raise my kids. My problem is that you and Alex keep glaring at me every time I smoke in my own damn house. My problem is that this doesn’t even feel like my house anymore!”

“It isn’t your house anymore! It is Herbert and Alonzo’s house and you shouldn’t smoke in here and ash your cigarette on to a carpet I spent twenty-four hours washing!”

“It wasn’t your house to clean!” He shouted at me.

“Are you really mad at me for cleaning your house?” I asked incredulously.

“I’m mad because it’s not your house! It’s mine and I like it the way it was!” we were silent for a moment. Staring at each other. I tried to understand him. I tried to understand how he could come home to a beautifully clean house and be angry about it. My Uncle had lived alone for the majority of his life. In this house with no one to bother him about it. He as forty-seven years old and the last year he only had Alex and Herbert here and he still got to live the way he wanted. Then, in the six to eight months that he was gone at treatment I took everything he knew and was comfortable with and turned it upside down. Looking at it that way, I could see why he was upset. I took a moment to figure out how best to talk to him without making him feel hurt again.

“I’m sorry that you feel like this isn’t your home. That wasn’t my intention. I only wanted the kids to be able to stay here. Family services wouldn’t have let them stay if I kept it the way it was.” There were a few more moments of silence as he processed my words.

“I understand, but I still don’t like the way you handle my kids.”

“Ok. Then I’ll defer more to you before I do something with them.”

“Fine.”

For a small time it seemed that we gained some understanding and the house became more peaceful and my Uncle was more likely to joke around with me.

“Oh my god!” I exclaimed. “You need to clip your toenails!” My Uncle’s toes look like no one had bothered to take care of them since he was a child. “Your big toe looks like a velociraptor talon!” It truly did. It was long and curved just like the ones that you see on Jurassic Park. My Uncle laughed. He stepped onto the linoleum in the kitchen and tapped it against the tiles.

“Oh my god! That is so gross!” I squealed. My Uncle laughed harder. Later in the day while I was folding laundry in the living room he came up to me and scratched his velociraptor nail against my shin.

“AHHH!” I dropped the shirt I was folding as shivers of disgust went up my spine. “Don’t do that!” This caused my Uncle great joy and amusement. From that day forward at any moment and without any warning he would make it a point to scratch his toenail on me or tap it on the kitchen floor. I made the mistake one day of falling asleep while the kids took their naps and woke up to his toe scratching my forehead. Needless to say, my Uncle has never seen anything funnier in his life.

Less funny was his ability to take care of Alonzo. I had been respecting his wishes for him to take care of his own children. One particular night, Alonzo was not having anything his dad had to offer him. It was already ten O’clock at night and Alonzo wouldn’t fall asleep no matter how uncle rocked him, tried to feed him, play with him. I could see my Uncle getting more and more upset. Alex was already dead asleep. Her new medication had been making her drowsy and she fell asleep quickly because of it, usually by about 7pm, making me responsible

for putting the kids to bed. I knew what Alonzo needed and had to restrain myself from offering suggestions. Uncle would only take it as an insult. But I knew that Alonzo wanted a new diaper, to be wiped down with a cloth because he was sort of sticky, fuzzy pajamas, to be swaddled, and then fed. I itched to help the poor wailing Alonzo. My Uncle was skipping all the steps but feeding. He didn't know you couldn't feed Alonzo until he was comfortable. I don't know how Herbert was at the same age, but I'm guessing he was a little bit less particular.

Finally, Uncle nearly dropped Alonzo onto my lap and then slammed his hand against the light switch. We were left sitting in total dark in the living room where he and Alex were sleeping since Uncle said that it would make him feel more at home to sleep on a mattress on the living room floor. We didn't argue with him about it. We just let him do it. He would drag the mattress back to the bedroom in the morning. So, in a darkness that was only broken by the moonlight coming through the window, I undressed Alonzo, changed his diaper, wiped him down, put clean fuzzy pajamas on him, swaddled him, and finally fed him. It took all of two minutes before he was quietly eating in my arms and another five before he was sleeping soundly. I could practically feel the anger coming from my Uncle. The room was steeped in it. I ignored it and lay Alonzo down on the lamb bouncy chair next to the couch that I slept on. Feeling a bit snug, I lay down and went to sleep.

X

“This is it!” Alex yelled from the living room. “You guys! You guys! Come here!” I came running up the stairs a load of clean laundry in one arm and Alonzo in the other.

“What is it?” I ask. Uncle is looking away from the T.V. Ready to hear what Alex has to say.

“It’s a letter from the Courthouse! They closed our case! Family Services is officially out of our lives!” My Uncle cheered and he and Alex hugged. I was a little stunned myself. It had only been a few weeks ago when Alex finally admitted what really happened to Alonzo’s head in court. I was still angry and more than a little bit surprised that there weren’t repercussions from her lies. She had maintained for months that Alonzo fell from the couch onto carpet. Later she said we ‘misunderstood’ her. She meant he fell from the *arm* of the couch onto the carpet by the linoleum kitchen floor, but that his head might have hit the linoleum as well. Finally, after a doctor wrote a report saying that Alonzo’s head injuries were inconsistent with what she was saying, she admitted in court that he wasn’t on the couch. That she had been giving him a bath in the kitchen sink and put him, soaking wet and without a towel, onto the kitchen table and left him there while she wheeled to get some clothes and a diaper. When she was coming back, he fell. She said she knew that people were going to blow it out of proportion so she felt that she had to lie.

I couldn’t believe what I heard. No wonder she had been so insistent that he receive the x-ray that the doctor was against in the beginning. He was working with the wrong information and so was I! We thought he’d fallen less than a foot onto a carpeted floor. Not three feet onto

linoleum! It makes a difference! Especially at two weeks old! I was still mad and I was refusing to talk to Alex. I hadn't said more than two words to her in the two weeks since court, until now.

"That's great." I said. "What now?" Alex and Uncle decided to get in the car and go tell their friends on the Rez. I loaded everyone into my car and we drove.

Alex's friends were happy for her. They all sat and talked in the living room while I kept track of Herbert and Alonzo. The house was messy. It wasn't filthy like Alex's house had been, but it wasn't clean either. I was worried the kids might find pills, alcohol, or even needles. These people seemed the type. I wasn't judging. Not really. Just being cautious. I felt something wet touch my ankle. Jumping slightly, I looked down and saw a small black and white puppy.

"A puppy!" I couldn't help my excitement at seeing it. I loved puppies, who doesn't?

"Oh hey!" One of Alex's friends, Kelsey, was coming up the stairs with two more puppies in her arms. Looking over I saw that her sister Kaley was coming inside with two more and handed on to my Uncle who was grinning ear to ear. "That one got away from me. We are trying to find them homes, but they keep running away. One got run over last week."

"Aww!" I said as I picked up the one by my ankle. I wanted a dog so badly. I'd grown up with dogs as a kid and haven't had one since for about ten years. Herbert was giggling in the living room as the puppy my uncle was holding was licking his face. I walked up to them.

"What do you think?" I asked Alex and Uncle. Alex looked skeptical.

"I don't know," She said. "I don't want one shitting in the house."

"It wouldn't shit in the house," Uncle said. Alex looked even more skeptical. The last dog they had shit all over the basement and my Uncle never cleaned it up like he said he would.

"I'm still your PCA, Alex." I said. "I could help take care of it when I come over."

“Come over?”

“Yeah.” I said. “With the case closed I don’t have to live with you guys anymore. I can let you guys live your lives and I can come over three times a week or something to do PCA for you.” I felt a little guilty at the joy I felt that I wouldn’t have to be living there anymore. As much as I loved my Uncle, Herbert, and Alonzo. I was ready to love them from a little bit farther away. Except for maybe Alonzo. I could probably convince them to let me take Alonzo with me for a couple weeks at a time though.

“I guess that’s true.” Said Alex. We played with the puppies a bit more before Alex and Uncle decided that they could take a dog home. I was so happy! A puppy! I could vicariously live my need to have a puppy through them.

“Which ones are girls?” Uncle asked. “I don’t want it to be aggressive towards the boys.” Kelsey and Kaley showed him the three girls they had and Uncle had Herbert pick the one he liked.

“Let’s name it, Sister.” Said Alex. “I’ve been trying to get Herbert to say ‘sister’ for a while now so that he can talk about Natasha, he’ll be able to say it better if he’s saying it all the time for the puppy.” Uncle agreed readily enough. It seemed to me that she was calling Natasha a dog. Though I was sure that her intentions were good, even if she and Natasha had never gotten along.

On our way home, we quickly stopped at the store to get some supplies for the puppy and some food for dinner. I worked with the puppy for the next week, helping him learn how to sit and stay using treats and commands. Uncle thought I was being ridiculous. He used intimidation to get the dog to hid under a shelf. I rolled my eyes at him. No dog was trained by intimidation

alone. Luckily the puppy we got was really sweet. It licked Herbert's face and was gentle with him when I took them outside to play. Sister also knew better than to go anywhere near Alonzo. As gentle as she was with Herbert, Alonzo was only five months old and not crawling so we tried to keep the dog away from him until he was a little bit older. If sister was subdued enough, we would allow her to lay down next to Alonzo while he was making his attempts at crawling, which for the moment was just him rolling around and trying to scoot forward with his arms.

“Alright,” I said. “The car is packed!” I held Alonzo in my arms as I was saying goodbye to the rest of the family. “I’ll be back next week to start on my hours!” I was finally headed back to St. Cloud. I’d moved into a house with my friends and had been paying rent for five months without living there. Now I could finally finish unpacking and really start to live my life! I was more than ready to move out. I was happy that I got to know and love my little cousins more than I ever would have in any other circumstances. In a way, things really worked out. I thought to myself. Alex had agreed that I could take Alonzo with me every other week. She said that she saw how close we were and she liked the idea of getting some one on one time with Herbert since he was used to being an only child. I gave Herbert one last hug and kissed Alonzo until he was giggling. He was finally smiling and laughing after months of trying. He was a hard egg to crack though. He was harder to amuse than Herbert was, but my efforts had finally paid off and I was able to catch his first smiles on my phone.

I went back home sometime around in late October and continued to visit as Alex's PCA and take Alonzo back and forth until my car broke down, some part that would cost me somewhere around \$500 and I wasn't willing to pay for it just yet. I was a little bit relieved that

my car broke down. It gave me an excuse not to go see my Uncle and Alex for a couple of weeks and just hang out with my friends. It was even a little nice not to wake up in the middle of the night to feed a baby. On November 19th, 2015 I decided to go to the movies with some friends. Unbeknownst to us, when we arrived at the theater it was the release date of Mockingjay part 2. We wanted to see the movie and decided to wait for a later showing. Around 10pm I turned off my phone. I enjoyed the movie, a lot more than I thought I would. Afterward we went back home and went to bed. Around 5am I woke up and went to check my phone only to realize that I'd forgotten to turn it back on after the movie. While waiting for it to power up I was smiling to myself. I felt well-rested and happy. I had great friends, the cutest little cousins, and a nice paying job that was fairly easy to do. Life was good.

“What the hell?” I said to myself after my phone turned on. My phone was buzzing repeatedly. I wondered what was wrong with it until I saw that I had at the very least fifty missed calls, 30 voicemails, and around 70 unread Facebook messages. “Holy shit! Who fucking died?” I decided to read my Facebook messages first. The first one was from Alex. *Call me right away.. there was an accident Alonzo is at the hospital.. Ur uncle would like u here if u can get here.* I frantically tried to message her back.

oh my god. what happened>!

are you awake?

i just got your message. what hospital is he at? is he being transfered?

i just tried calling you. where are you guys. what happened????!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

are you online???

But no reply came. Finally, I listened to my voicemail.

“Naomi.” Alex’s voice came through my first voicemail. She sounded blank. “It’s Alonzo.” My blood ran cold. “The dog. It. She. I don’t know what happened. I was asleep. I woke up and the dog. Alonzo. She attacked him.” I was beginning to shake. My knuckles white against the blackness of my phone. My throat was burning. I couldn’t breathe. “He’s being airlifted to Children’s hospital. There’s so much blood...” The voicemail ended. The last words ringing in my head. *There’s so much blood. So much blood. Blood. Blood.*

Section II: Death

I

I couldn't breathe. I could feel my throat beginning to close and my eyes began to go dim. A ring of black was surrounding my vision. I listened to some of the other voicemails. More from Alex "Naomi, please pick up. There is so much blood. It's all over the carpet and the kitchen. The blood in the kitchen is from your Uncle. He cut himself opening some peaches for Herbert. Please, Naomi." From my mom, "Sweetheart, call me. It's important." Alex, "They came and took Sister. They are doing tests on her now." This surprised me. I was sure the moment I heard the dog attacked Alonzo that my Uncle would have thrown it against the wall or snapped its neck on the spot.

I got up as quickly as I could and put on the clothes I'd worn the night before and went to wake up my friend, Allen.

"Allen! Allen! Wake up! Wake UP!" I shook his shoulder and forced him, bleary eyed to look at me.

"What? What do you want?"

"You need to get up! I need a ride. And if you can't give me one I'm going to start walking. Please!" I was ready to beg if I had to.

"What happened?" Allen asked, sitting up.

"Alonzo's been hurt! I'm not exactly sure how yet, but he was airlifted to Children's Hospital. I have to go get Herbert."

"Ok. Wait for me downstairs. I'll be ready in five minutes."

As I waited for him on the couch downstairs I sat completely and utterly still. I wondered if I should be crying. Or screaming. I felt like doing both, but for some reason nothing came to the surface. The only thing I felt was a dull cramping in my stomach. I tried to call Alex again.

No answer. The rest of the house was silent. It was nearly six in the morning. The only time people in this house were awake at such an ungodly hour is if we never went to sleep the night before. I hoped that someone else would wake up. Anyone. I hoped that maybe if I saw someone I would start crying. Feeling something other than a panic so intense that it left me numb. I began to get a headache, and told myself to unclench my jaw, but nothing happened. My jaw stayed firmly shut.

When Allen finally came downstairs and we were driving on our way to get Herbert. Alex answered.

“Are you on your way?” She asked.

“Yea, I’m coming. What the fuck happened, Alex? What the fuck happened!” Alex told me what she could. That she put Uncle in charge of putting the kids to sleep because she took her medication early and was going to bed and that she woke up to Sister licking Alonzo’s face. That she didn’t even see what had happened until she sat up and looked at him and started to scream. The rest of the drive after the phone call was silent. If Allen played any music, I didn’t notice.

As we pulled into the driveway of Alex’s house to pick up Herbert, I was unsure if I was anxious to get inside the house and see that Herbert was ok, or anxious to see the destruction that the voicemail and Alex described. Part of me was completely sure that Alex was exaggerating, needed her to be exaggerating. I needed to know that there couldn’t possibly be as much blood as she described. I was scared. My heart was pounding and I wasn’t sure how much blood was actually too much blood to see on a carpet or if, when I saw the amount of blood, I could tell if Alonzo would live or not. Alex said she already had a ride coming to get her and Uncle to bring

them to the cities to check on Alonzo but needed me to watch Herbert because they didn't want him at the hospital. When the car came to a full stop I jumped out of the car and ran into the house without knocking.

"Alex!" I cried, grabbing the wobbly banister and running up the stairs two at a time. "Alex!" I called out again. Her reply came just as I reached the top of the stairs, but I didn't hear what she said. All I could see was blood. There were pools of blood on three separate spots on the carpet that looked like someone had tried, unsuccessfully, to clean and smears and smaller pools of blood spread around the large ones. There was also a small splash of blood in the kitchen, which I could hear Alex telling me again that it was my Uncle's, that he'd cut his hand opening a can of peaches for Herbert, after the ambulance had taken Alonzo away.

Looking at the blood I could feel my heart pounding underneath my chest and a cold sweat break out on my forehead. *It was too much blood*, I thought. *Too much blood for him to live*. I could feel my throat constricting and my stomach turn as I thought that his tiny five-month-old body couldn't possibly contain so much blood. I felt myself sway on the spot, nauseated.

"Naomi, are you okay?" Allen asked me. At some point he had come inside after parking the car without my noticing.

"I'm fine." I said, shrugging off his hand from my shoulder. It was then that I noticed the state of the rest of the house. The sun shone in from the large picture window, through the curtains that I'd so carefully hanged only a few months ago, only to illuminate the carnage surrounding the pools of blood. There were blankets on the floor where Alex had been sleeping, some of which had blood on them. Dirty diapers were spread throughout the living room, old

food was sitting on the counters and in the sink, the garbage was overflowing, the ashtrays were filled with half smoked cigarettes, and half empty sticky pop cans had even more cigarettes poking out of them. Two weeks was how long I'd been gone, that was it. Two weeks and months of hard work was already falling to ruin. I couldn't help but think that everything I'd done for the last five months, the cleaning, the shopping, taking care of the kids and stopping them from going to a foster home had all been for nothing. Not only was it for nothing, but that it was a mistake to help them. *This is my fault.* I couldn't help but think it. If I had left my uncle and his wife to their own devices, there wouldn't be pools of Alonzo's blood on the carpet right now.

"Where's Herbert?" I asked suddenly. I needed to get out of that house. I needed to leave before I started to scream.

"He's napping right now," Alex said. "Poor little guy was up half the night." I didn't wait for her to finish before going into his room and packing a bag of his clothes, both clean and dirty, and shoving his shoes onto his feet. My only thought was to get Herbert out of that house as soon as possible. I scooped him out of his bed and carried his sleeping body down to the car, his breath puffing against my cheek. My last thoughts while pulling out of the driveway were of the blood. I needed to erase that blood from existence. To scrub it away, to make it like this never happened in the first place.

II

“The doctors said he lost both of his testicles and at least 80-90% of his scrotum. They were able to sew him up, but he’s in a lot of pain.” The words washed over me. To this day I cannot remember who uttered them. Only that I was sure that I wasn’t breathing. My baby. My poor little baby. How could this happen? No matter how I tried to reason it in my head, nothing made sense. Alex told me that Alonzo was asleep in his swing, but that when she woke up he was on the floor on the other side of the living room. How did he get out of his swing? How did the dog get him out of his swing and all the way across the floor without waking her up? Was he sleeping on the floor and she’s lying? Did she not buckle him into his swing like she said she did? Why wasn’t he in any clothing? Where were the pajamas that I’d so painstakingly washed and folded and put away so that they would be ready to use? Why would that sweet little dog do this? It was smaller than Alonzo was. How did it have the strength? No matter how the questions spun through my mind, I couldn’t come up with a single answer. I still can’t.

I was in my room with Herbert back in St. Cloud. My housemates were giving me a wide berth and sympathetic looks. I stayed holed up in my room with Herbert. I couldn’t stand letting him out of my sight. I held him close to me as we slept, terrified that if I let him go something would happen to him too. Poor little boy kept asking for his puppy. I tried to redirect. He wasn’t two yet. He would soon forget that he had a puppy. I couldn’t say to him “Your puppy’s head was chopped off and sent to a science lab so they could check for brain malformations and information that might explain why he mutilated your baby brother.” No, I couldn’t say that. So I just asked if he wanted to watch Dragons or if he wanted a snack. I sometimes worried that Herbert was so okay with everything that was happening around him. He wasn’t upset that he

was with me and not mom and dad. He didn't ask about his brother. I'd seen other children his age grow emotional and show signs that they understood to some extent that something was off in their world. But not Herbert. I had been contemplating if it was too early to tell if someone was autistic or psychotic when he finally showed me that he did understand that something was wrong and that he could empathize.

I was cleaning my room when I got the first phone call from family services. I ignored it and it went to voicemail. When I listened to it they told me that they wanted to meet with me regarding Herbert and Alonzo. I put my phone down and tried not to let panic swallow me whole and failed. I sunk down to the floor next to where Herbert was playing with Buzz Lightyear and wept. I covered my face with my hands as I could feel my chest constrict with the pain of trying to hold it in for too long. Visions of blood swam in my head as did the screams and cries I could only imagine that my poor baby made while he was being mauled. And me. Stupidly at a movie. Too far away from him to help. Happy that I didn't have to live at that house anymore. Stupid, selfish, awful human that I was enjoying the night while my baby was tortured. I wanted to get that stupid dog! I wanted that ideal family picture. Stupid, stupid, stupid, fucking stupid! I berated myself in my head. Coming to the conclusion more and more every second that this was entirely my fault. I brought Alex to get the medication for her toilet issues, I drove the car and wanted them to get the puppy. I didn't go to their house in the last two weeks before the attack because I didn't want to pay so much to get my car fixed. Selfish! My fault! This was all my fault! I cried harder.

Suddenly, a small hand on mine caused me to look up. Herbert was standing in front of me. He moved my hand away from my face so that he could hug me. For a moment, I was

stunned. Stunned that this small boy had offered me a comfort that no one else had. A hug. I cried with him in my arms. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry” I cried into his hair. I knew that he couldn’t possibly understand why I was apologizing, but just holding him in my arms brought me an enormous amount of relief. Somehow, Herbert was able to help me slow and stop my tears. Finally, I gave him a kiss on the forehead and let him go. He simply climbed out of my arms and started playing on the floor again like nothing ever happened. I remembered my mom saying to me at some point that she knew she needed help with her depression when she was taking comfort from her infant daughter, my oldest sister. I didn’t think that applied here. Was I depressed? Probably, but I thought that the shit situation was probably a good enough excuse to take comfort in a toddler. That small moment helped me get through the rest of the evening when we went to see Alonzo for the first time since the attack.

We walked up to the hospital room. I was holding Herbert’s hand

“Now, we have to be really quiet, okay, Herbert?” Herbert looked up at me with his large brown eyes and only blinked. He still wasn’t much of a talker. “Brother is hurt, but he’s gonna be ok. So we have to do our best to be brave for him and try not to hurt him. Maybe you’ll be able to give him a kiss.” The hallway to Alonzo’s room was long. It seemed that it wasn’t only five months ago that we were walking these same hallways when Alonzo’s skull was fractured. What more could he possibly live through? The thought nearly froze me in my tracks. The future looked grim, and the possibilities of horror were endless in my mind. I kept walking.

Alonzo’s room was dimly lit. He was laying covered in cause from head to toe, wires and cords sprouting from him and connecting him to various beeping machines. This time I didn’t need to question a nurse. That was for heartbeat, oxygen, blood pressure, medicine, saline bag,

etc. My Uncle looked up at our entrance. A smile split wide across his face when he saw Herbert. Herbert was overjoyed to see his father and mother, though Alex was on the phone she still gave him a smile and let her whoever she was on the phone with know that Herbert had just arrived. I let them have their happy reunion and went to check on Alonzo. He was laying alone. I was surprised to see that he was awake. I reached down to pat his hair, careful to not disturb any of his wounds. It was difficult. He was nothing but blood and bandages. His arms and legs had apparently been scratched and bit to shreds. He would scar permanently. Once he saw me he began to quietly cry. I saw him attempting to reach out with his hands but was stopped by his pain. A nurse bustled into the room to check him over.

“Am I able to hold him?” I asked. The nurse looked at me and smiled sadly.

“Yes, just be very careful. He has medicine but he’s still in a lot of pain.” Once she left I carefully picked him up. He cried out in pain. It seemed there was nowhere I could touch him without causing him pain. I found if I held him around his shoulder and had a leg on either side of my arm he wasn’t in as much pain. Very slowly I was able to sit down in a rocking chair with him and soothe him until he stopped crying. He snuggled into my arms and seemed to breathe easier. I began to rock and quietly sing to him our lullaby. Around me Herbert and my Uncle chased each other. Finding a small joy in being together even if it was under such horrible circumstances. Alex was still on her phone. I wasn’t sure who she was talking to. I didn’t much care. I knew I shouldn’t feel angry with her, but I did. More than blaming myself, I blamed her. She was right there! She could have stopped this from happening! Yet there we were with a broken and bandaged baby once again. I took deep breathes to calm myself while holding Alonzo. I didn’t want him to feel my anger and sorrow. I only wanted him to feel the love that I

had for him. I made some small talk with my uncle. Asked him if he wanted to hold Alonzo. He only shook his head sadly. I think he was scared. Alex wouldn't even look at us. I doubt she would hold him. She could barely hold him when he wasn't injured.

“Hey, Naomi, look!” My Uncle smiled and came walking toward me wearing only his socks. He stuck up his foot and I could see his velociraptor toe nail through his sock.

“No!” I whispered. I was trapped. Holding Alonzo, he knew I couldn't move and escape his toe. He came over and slowly scratched his toenail against my leg.

“EEEWWWW!” I couldn't raise my voice but he got a lot of joy out of the fact that I couldn't escape. He tortured me with his toe until he started laughing too hard to continue. I laughed with him. It was gross but it was good to laugh. Too soon we had to leave. I slowly and carefully put Alonzo back in his crib and quickly discussed Thanksgiving plans. They were going to stay with Alonzo, but they were fine if I brought Herbert with to Milwaukee in a couple of days. When I left with Herbert I made sure to stop by the nurses' station before I left in order to talk to the nurse behind the desk.

“Is there a way that you can leave Alonzo's door open?” The nurse looked at me blankly. “Alonzo, the baby in that room?” I pointed over to his room. She still looked confused. “It's only that he has a very quiet cry and his mom and dad seem a little too freaked out to really hold him, so can you just be sure to leave the door open so that you can hear if he cries?” The nurse smiled at me wearily.

“Sure, honey. I'll leave the door open.”

“Thank you so much! Really!” I wished her a good night as I left. I hoped that she wasn’t just saying that to me to get me to leave her alone. I hoped she really listened for him. He needed to be protected.

III

Family Services seemed to agree with me about the boys needing to be protected. It was only a couple of days before Thanksgiving when they finally caught up to me. I was feeding Herbert lunch as I listened to their latest voicemail. They wanted to meet so they could check if I would be suitable enough to take the boys while they did another investigation. They wanted me to take the boys? That excited me. If I could take care of the boys while they figured everything out then everything would be ok! I quickly called them back. We made a plan to meet at my house in St. Cloud, but I quickly called and cancelled. Looking around at my house there and the fact that every single one of my roommates would have to be drug tested made me change my mind. We met up at my sister Jessie's house in Little Falls instead. While talking on the phone the woman, Lisa Hueseth made it clear that because it was Jessie's house, Jessie would be the one put on the foster care paperwork and that there would be a drug test for Jessie to take.

On my way to Jessie's house I quickly called and told her the news.

"Fuck, Naomi! I'm not gonna be able to pass a piss test!" I rolled my eyes. Of fucking course she couldn't pass a piss test. I wasn't stupid.

"I know that!" I snapped. "I'll piss for you. Just gotta find something to pee in that will stay warm enough to activate the test." I could hear Jessie yelling at her daughter Jordyn in the background before she answered.

"Fine, Naomi. I'll only do it if you piss for me. I'm not gonna put my kids in danger of being taken away for you. Not even for Herbert and Alonzo." With that cheery send-off, she hung up on me. I shook my head angrily. As is she wasn't the one putting her kids at risk of being taken by constantly snorting pills and doing whatever the fuck else she did. By the time I

arrived at her house, we only had another hour before Lisa would be there to inspect everything and make Jessie take the test. My mom had come over to help Jessie clean up. One thing about Jessie was that, despite her drug use, she put on a pretty good show. Her house was cute and clean. The living room was filled with toys for both her four-year-old daughter, Jordyn, and her five-month-old son, Cedar. Jordyn was sitting on the couch with a string cheese when I walked in. She looked freshly brushed and groomed. Which meant that my mom had already been there for a while.

I set Herbert down to play with Jordyn and went to get Jessie.

“Hey,” I said to get her attention. She was in the kitchen finishing up some last-minute dishes before the social worker got there. She looked up at me.

“Oh, hey. Are you ready to pee?” She asked. I told her that I was and went upstairs with her to the bathroom. I was ready to pee, I’d made sure I had plenty to drink before I left St. Cloud. I knew a little bit about peeing for other people. I’d borrowed it out on occasion to good friends, but this would be the first time I was faking a pee test myself. Luckily it wasn’t my sister’s first rodeo. She pulled a condom out of her pocket and handed it to me.

“What the fuck?” I said.

“You need to pee in the condom. After you’re done I’ll tape it to my leg so it stays warm. Pee needs to be the right temperature in order to activate the test. If it’s too cold, they’ll know it’s not fresh pee.”

“This is so wrong.” I said. I felt a panicked giggle rise in my throat. If I could just take the test myself, this wouldn’t be an issue. But no. I had to pee inside a condom so that Herbert and Alonzo wouldn’t have to go to some strange foster care with people who don’t even care

about them or know them. I would do anything so that didn't happen. I shoed Jessie out of the bathroom and opened the condom.

Once I was done Jessie went into the bathroom and taped the condom to her inner thigh where she said it would stay warm until the social worker got there. Just then, there was a knock at the door. Jessie and I looked at each other before rushing downstairs. Jessie went to the door and I picked up Herbert. My heart was pounding against my chest. I was terrified that this social worker could destroy everything that I held dear. I hugged Herbert tighter and ushered Jordyn and him upstairs to play in her bedroom while we talked downstairs with the social worker.

Her name was Lisa Hueseth. She was a tall, large, brunette woman. She seemed friendly enough. She was smiling and talking with Jessie and my mom when I got back downstairs. Jessie was good at putting on a show for her. She was friendly, charismatic, and funny. She had this ability to make people feel at ease. It was something I always struggled with. I wasn't all that personable or even able to fake that sort of happiness around people. I was told on more than one occasion that people found me odd.

"Hi, I'm Naomi. We spoke on the phone." I said as I sat down. Using that voice I used when trying to sound professional and confident that was just a little too perky and high pitched to be believable.

"Hi, Naomi, My Name is Lisa. I was just explaining to Jessie here that I'm only here for the initial foster licensing process. I'll be able to do an initial report and come again to do a full examination on the home." Lisa smiled broadly at me when she was done talking. I smiled back and didn't respond. It was awkwardly silent for a moment before Jessie started talking again. It took me another moment to realize that she had been waiting for me to say something in return. I

cringed inwardly. God, I looked stupid. Then it was time for the moment of truth. Lisa handed Jessie a cup and sent her upstairs. I waited with bated breath. Lisa was talking to my mom about something I wasn't really paying attention to until I heard my name.

"Naomi?" Lisa was asking. I looked over at her and my mother. It was clear they were expecting some sort of response.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't catch that." My mom looked at me, concerned.

"Lisa was just asking you if you can tell her what happened with Alonzo so she can write it down in her report."

"Oh! Um, ok. Well..." I paused for a minute wondering if it was a trap. If she was going to make me say something that would somehow place blame on myself or my Uncle making it easier for them to remove the children. "I wasn't really there. I all I know is that Alex called me saying that Alonzo got hurt that the dog... the dog..." I began to tear up here. Of all the times to start crying, I have to do it in front of a lady whose sole job it is to judge me and my ability to take care of these children. "I'm sorry, it's just really hard to talk about." I said. Lisa looked at me with a raised eyebrow.

"I think you should probably seek therapy if you start crying when you talk about it." She sneered at me. I was shocked. Maybe her words wouldn't have been bad if her tone and facial expression hadn't tipped me off to the fact that she was looking down on me for crying about Alonzo's injuries. What. A. Bitch.

"Of course I'm crying!" I said strongly. No longer concerned with remaining professional or likable. How dare she say that I needed therapy because I was crying! I would probably need therapy if I wasn't crying. Crying is a perfectly human and healthy way to release emotional

trauma! I was pissed. “Alonzo was hurt. Why wouldn’t that upset me to the point of tears! Anyone would be upset if it happened to them!” I was glaring at Lisa at this point and I could see that she was angry that I dared speak to her in such a way. My mom tried to smooth it over.

“I think what Lisa means is that this was very traumatic for everyone and talking to someone might help.” My mom was patting me on the knee, attempting to help me settle down. I was still pissed. Jessie came down only a few moments after with the pee test in her hand. She handed it over to Lisa.

“I hope I gave you enough,” Jessie said. She was still smiling her big teeth smile at Lisa while I sat fuming in my own chair. Lisa wrote a few things down on a sheet of paper before removing the tape from the cup that would show us the results. I held my breath. I had nothing to fear. I didn’t do drugs, but I was still afraid. It’s the kind of fear you feel when the alarm goes off while you are walking out of Wal-Mart and you know you didn’t steal anything but feel scared and guilty anyway.

“Looks like it’s positive for opioids.” She said. With a swish the test was locked away in her bag and she scooped up the rest of her papers, preparing to leave.

“Wait!” I cried. “What does that mean?” I looked to my mom and Jessie. Who both looked just as shocked as I was.

“It means,” Lisa said slowly as if she was talking to a child. “That there are drugs in this pee and Herbert and Alonzo will be removed from your care today.” She looked smug at the look of horror that crossed my face.

“But...” I wanted to scream that I didn’t do drugs. That I’d never done drugs in my life. But it wasn’t supposed to be my pee. I could hear my mom and Jessie trying to come up with

reasons the pee could have come back positive, that Jessie had been on some painkillers from her surgery. Lisa said that it would be sent to a lab to be tested. There was nothing else to say. She swept towards the door saying that someone would be by to collect Herbert within the next two hours and then she left. I stood at the door and watched her drive away. I could hear my mom trying to say something to me. She maybe even pulled me into the house. I don't remember. The only feeling that I can recall is complete shock. When I was finally sitting on the couch I felt something tickle my cheek. I reached up to brush it off. It was a tear. I was crying. I failed. Again.

IV

Numbly, I got up to go find Herbert. I knew that I had to tell him somehow that he would be leaving me and going with a stranger. I already had his bag packed. It has been packed since I took him from Alex and Uncle. I repacked it once again because we were supposed to leave to Milwaukee later that day for Thanksgiving. Now, we would be leaving without Herbert. I found him upstairs playing dolls with Jordyn. I tried to contain myself. I didn't want him to see me cry again.

"Come here Herbert." I said. He put his doll down and came to me. I had dressed him in a cute Winnie the Pooh outfit that had green and yellow stripes on the polo shirt with Pooh Bear eating out of a jar of honey on the pocket. His shorts were khaki and had a small bumble bee buzzing around the knee. I hugged him tightly. Trying to breath I took him downstairs to sit on the couch.

"Herbert," I said. "I love you so so much. Okay, buddy?" I paused. Unsure of how to tell him that he would be leaving with a stranger. "You are gonna go visit someone for a little bit ok?" Herbert looked at me blankly. He still wasn't much of a talker. "Do you understand. You are going to go on a trip without Mimi ok?" Mimi is what my mother, Uncle, and Alex had begun calling me in hopes that it would be easier for the kids to say than Naomi. "Mimi doesn't want you to be scared ok? I love you." Seeing that my eyes were tearing up, Herbert gave me another hug. I put *How to Train Your Dragon* on the T.V and got him a juice and a small snack. When that was done I went out to my car and grabbed his car seat. I had a brief thought that maybe if I hid the car seat they would forget it and not be able to take him. Maybe I could leave for Milwaukee right now and they wouldn't be able to take him from me. Dumb. Milwaukee

isn't a different country. I'd just be labeled a federal level kidnapper and locked away for the rest of my life. I wish I never even answered the phone call from family services. If I had just avoided them forever, this might not be happening. I took some of the time I had to write a note to his foster parents about who Herbert was and what his specific needs were. It was five pages long when I was finished.

Before I knew it, a car was pulling up and a tall woman with short black hair that was shaved on one side approached me. Her name was Sara.

"I know this is hard," She said to me. I tried to contain myself as I introduced her to my mother, sister, and Herbert. Herbert didn't seem interested at all in what was happening. He didn't know. The thought made holding everything in even harder. I helped Sara pack up his things and install his car seat into her car. She'd brought one with her from the office, but I didn't like the look of it. It didn't look safe enough for Herbert to sit in. When that was done, the inevitable had come. I put Herbert's shoes on his feet and strapped him into his car seat. My mother and Jessie had already said teary goodbyes to him inside the house.

"Ok, Herbert." I said in the cheeriest voice I could manage. "You have to go now. Ok? You be a big boy and look out for your brother when he gets there, ok?" Herbert smiled happily at me. Still not understanding. Standing there with the door opened, my hand holding Herbert's I turned to Sara. "We are working on potty training, ok? He is still in diapers, but if they put him on the potty when they can that should work. And he doesn't like sleeping by himself. He might wake up and wander around looking for someone to snuggle with. Ok? He usually wakes up sometime around midnight to two am. They have to make sure that their house is secure so he doesn't get into anything. His favorite movie is *How to Train Your Dragon*. I packed it in his

bag. Both of the movies are in there. I labeled them with his name. He loves to eat mac. It's his favorite. He doesn't have any allergies, but I would be careful anyway. He has an inhaler he uses sometimes if he's getting breathless. It's in a plastic baggie labeled with detailed instructions. He also has his own toothbrush and floss in there. Make sure he flosses his teeth! I know a lot of people try to skip that step but they should do it with him. He comes from a long line of bad teeth, so they need to be properly taken care of. He also doesn't talk a whole lot either. But if you pay attention you see that he communicates his wants and needs just fine. OH! He's also used to falling asleep with someone next to him. So he might have a hard time falling asleep alone. Especially in a strange place. To go to sleep we usually start with a bath, then lotion. After his bath and he's in his pajama's we'll have a bedtime snack with a movie. When that is over we will brush and floss his teeth and then read a book while he snuggles in bed. Sometimes two books. After that I usually sit next to him and pet his hair until he falls asleep. That's the easiest way to get him to sleep. It's really important that they stick with the bedtime routine. It works wonders. Oh! And his nap is at noon to two."

I paused, looking at Sara. She seemed taken aback by all the information I just threw at her. Maybe she was concerned that she wouldn't remember it all?

"It's ok if you don't remember everything. I wrote a detailed note to the foster parents so they can take proper care of him." I paused again. She still looked a little shocked. "Do you know where he's going?" I asked. Finally, she spoke.

"Yes, I can tell you he's going to a family in Brainerd. They will be picking up Alonzo as soon as the doctors say they can." She seemed relieved to finally have something useful to say.

“Ok.” I said. Knowing it really was time I kissed Herbert one last time and closed the door. I could see that he started to understand that something was different when Sara started to drive away and I wasn’t in the car with him. I watched the car for as long as I could see it. I was lamenting the fact that I didn’t know when I would see Herbert again when a thought struck me. No one has told Uncle and Alex that they took Herbert away. Shit.

V

Telling my Uncle what happened was one of the worst moments of my life. It had somehow gotten mixed up that I called family services myself and *gave* Herbert away. After fighting back and forth he and Alex realized that I didn't have a choice. When they came for Alonzo I was already in Milwaukee with my mom and sisters. Alex and Uncle were escorted off of hospital grounds and weren't allowed to see Alonzo before they took him away. It was the worst Thanksgiving of our lives. I spent most of it in tears. Trying to hide it from my nephews and failing. There was a constant lump in my throat and pounding behind my eyes.

The rest of my time was spent trying to figure out how in the world the test could have come back positive. I thought that maybe some chemical on the condom could have set the test off. When I talked to Jessie she said it couldn't have been the condom. That she's used them before. She's thinking that she might have gotten some drugs into the urine since she crushed up and snorted some Percocet just before Lisa got there.

"Some must have still been on my fingers and my fingers must have touched the cup." Jessie said this with a shrug. As if it wasn't a big deal. We spent the rest of Thanksgiving at each other's throats. She had fucked up the drug test and she was pissed off because she ran out of Percocet while we were in Milwaukee. At one point she threatened to abandon us all at Tala's house in order to go home early to get some. "It's my van! I don't give a fuck what you guys do! I'm taking Jordyn and Cedar and I'm going home!" My mom finally managed to talk her down. I really shouldn't have been surprised. Thanksgiving with Jessie had always been a nightmare. She always ran out of drugs and then threw giant hissy fits about the stupidest things. A few years ago, just after Jordyn was born, there was a huge family fight because she refused to change

Jordyn's diaper. "I don't take care of her because I know one of you are just going to do it for me." She said haughtily. "I'm only like this because you guys let me be. I know I don't have to lift a finger." After she said this she left Tala's house and went on a two hour walk somewhere leaving the rest of us to argue about how to make Jessie do her job as a mother while also making sure that Jordyn was taken care of. It wasn't ever resolved. At some point during the fighting Jordyn's diaper was changed and she and the other children were put to bed. Jessie was on drugs then too, she'd been using since she was about fourteen or even younger. I wasn't sure.

By the time we returned home Jessie and I weren't speaking and Mom was having a hard time not killing the both of us. Alex had been texting me with updates on the boys. There was going to be a court date on Wednesday to discuss Family Service's plan for the boys. I took Alex for her monthly grocery shopping trip, making sure she bought some new clothes for court. We made sure to buy my uncle new pants, shirt, and tie as well. I told Alex that if she looked nice she would be more likely to get the boys back sooner, that a study I'd read once had talked about people's attractiveness being a factor in how they were treated. At any rate, it couldn't hurt.

Then night before court I spent at my Uncle's house. We were all quiet. Not really talking to each other. Lost in our own minds. I had gathered some cleaning supplies when Alex and I were shopping and spent most of the night scrubbing blood out of the carpet. It had hardened in the time since Alonzo's accident. No one had tried to clean it that night. I googled some best ways to get blood out of carpet. One day someone was going to look over my google search history and think that I'd murdered a man. After a few hours of work, the carpet looked a lot better. I went to sleep early. So, did Alex and Uncle. The next day we were all still silent. Silently eating our breakfast, silently getting ready, silently getting into the car. There was

nothing to say to each other and we were all wound so tight that the smallest word might have set any one of us off.

Arriving at the courthouse we saw my Grandpa waiting with some of the Family Service workers. They looked as if they were trying to avoid eye contact. I saw the woman who took Herbert from me. I wanted to talk to her, to see if Herbert and Alonzo were settling in but stayed with my family instead. I told Grandpa what happened with the drug test.

“Why are they drug testing you guys anyway! ICWA says that kids go to family first. Not to drug test family. Goddamit!” My grandpa had a particular way of talking that made people always think he was pissed off. His voice was just grumbly and deep so people were scared even when he was in a good mood.

“I don’t know,” I said. “They said that they have to register me as a foster parent in order to take the boys.”

“I helped write that goddamn law. It says that kids go to family first. It doesn’t say anything about making family foster parents! I should know!” As far as I knew the Indian Child Welfare Act stated that no native child that had to be removed from his home would be placed in a non-native family and that family members would be considered first before placing the child in foster care. This was one of the rare times that my grandpa was truly angry, I’m sure having his own sons taken away from him and placed into a white family had only fueled his determination to understand that particular federal law. Not to mention that my uncle Herb was his first and favorite child and that Herbert, being his namesake, made this a lot more personal for him.

We all filed into the courtroom and one by one announced to the court reporter who we were so she could get it on record. The judge that was presiding was the same one that handled the child protection case the first time. He was a fair enough judge, Native, which was a point in his favor. He wouldn't discriminate against us unfairly. He started the proceedings by stating why we were there and also by announcing that the previous child protection case against Alex would have no bearing on the proceedings of this one. I wondered why that would be. It seemed strange that they wouldn't inform each other but chalked it up to being something like double jeopardy. I don't remember exactly what happened in court that day, only that my Grandfather put his two cents in about the ICWA laws and that the Judge yelled at the family service workers for not being prepared for court, not having the correct documents or anything written up about the child protection case, and not setting up a visitation schedule right away.

"We'll be able to set one up in a week or two." One of them said. I raised my hand before the judge could answer.

"Yes?" He asked me.

"Two weeks won't work." I said. "Herbert's second birthday is on the fifth. He shouldn't spend his birthday with strangers." The court was silent for a moment before the judge spoke.

"You will grant visitation for Herbert and Alonzo in time for Herbert's second birthday. Am I clear?" He spoke directly to Family Services. They seemed cowed by his anger and quickly agreed. With court done and another day set we all filed back into the hallway where the family service worker agreed that they would find a transport worker even though it would be a Saturday.

“You think we care if you have to work on a goddamn Saturday?” my grandpa growled at her. “I don’t want to listen to you fucking complain that you have to work on a goddamn Saturday. It’s part of your job!” The woman quickly agreed and left.

The rest of the day was spent cleaning the house and getting ready for Herbert’s birthday party. We’d already purchased some supplies last month to get ready. He was having a *How to Train Your Dragon* party. I was making the cake for him and Alex would make his favorite dinner, Tomato mac. I went back home after we were done cleaning and got the supplies for Herbert’s cake. It was going to be by tie dye rainbow colored with *How to Train Your Dragon* toys on the top of it. Checking out at the register I thought that I might have gone overboard with all the toys I was buying him but decided it would be fine. Poor kid deserved some toys. In just a few more days I would be able to see him again. I couldn’t wait.

On Saturday, when they finally arrived, I was so excited. I hadn’t seen them since before Thanksgiving.

“They’re here!” I said looking out the window. I ran downstairs to help unload the boys without putting on my shoes or coat. The December air was cold but not biting. Uncle came out with me to grab Herbert. Herbert was screaming happily at seeing his father. To Herbert, his dad was the best thing in the whole world. They were best friends. Alonzo was in a strange baby carrier that I was sure had been provided by family services and I was careful as I went up the stairs with him. He wasn’t on any pain medication but was still really sore and wearing some bandages. There was a towel in between his legs so that the seatbelt from the car seat wouldn’t be too tight against his injured genitals. When I got upstairs I carefully lifted him from his carrier.

“Hello, my little honey-bee. I missed you so so much!” I held him in my arms and kissed him on the forehead. Alex came rolling over to see him but didn’t hold him. My mom came over to hold him and talk to him while I ran to grab the outfit that I bought him. It was a little grey onesie with long sleeves that said “little Gentleman” and had a picture of a mustache under it. We bought Cedar, my nephew a matching one. Cedar was a lot bigger than Alonzo even though they were only one week apart so it was fun to take pictures of them right next to each other. My grandpa had come to the birthday party and we took the time to make sure he got a picture with Alonzo and with Cedar together.

Alonzo was doing really well. I was nervous at first to let him scoot around on the floor, but he did just fine. He was happy. When it came time to change his diaper I hesitated. I was scared of what I might see. It was red and swollen a bit. I could see where he had skin left that was healing over and his penis was uninjured. He was able to urinate without any trouble and it looked a little swollen but nothing terribly bad. I controlled my face as best I could and did my best to talk to him cheerfully through his diaper change. He was a little uncomfortable when I was wiping him down, but with my mom’s encouragement I was able to get it done without any tears. Alex tried to be busy with dinner while I changed his diaper, Uncle looked away. I picked Alonzo up and whispered to him when I was finished.

“It’s ok, baby. There’s nothing wrong with you. Its ok. They’re just scared is all. Its ok.” I held him for as long as I could before putting him back on the floor to play with Cedar. Jessie looked at my sympathetically and made an attempt to distract me by talking to me about how cute Alonzo and Cedar were. As much as we fought and didn’t get along Jessie was still my sister and seeing me in pain caused her pain too.

The rest of the day went normally, Herbert opened his presents and ate cake. We sang him happy birthday and let him get crazy messy in his cake. Sooner than we liked, we had to pack the boys up to leave. We sadly started gathering their stuff together for them to leave. We packed Herbert's favorite toys to send with him so he could have them in the place he was going. We filled his small backpack with cars, books, and wrapped up a stuffed power ranger that he began to call his baby. When it was time for him to leave, Herbert looked confused again. He was unsure of what was happening. He didn't cry this time. He wouldn't start freaking out on visits until about a month later when he knew that packing him up meant that he would have to leave and return from wherever he came from.

I explained to the transporter what all of Herbert's things were, why we packed them, and which were his favorites.

"They just have a really small place." She said to me looking at the growing pile of his things. "There are other children in the house." She stared at me as if I was supposed to start putting his new toys and clothes back into the car and not send them with at all. I stared at her silently before saying.

"It's his birthday. His foster parents should welcome any chance they get in order to make him feel more at home." My voice was low, unfriendly. I didn't care about what she was saying. Whoever these people were would need to accommodate Herbert into their home which meant accommodating the fact that his family loved him enough to continually send him and his brother clothes, toys, and snacks. She seemed a little taken aback by me before getting into her car and driving away with Herbert and Alonzo. When she left, I took a minute to mourn silently by myself before going back inside to help clean up.

VI

The next few months passed. Slowly. Every few weeks we would get another report from Family Services on different things we had to do in order to get the boys back. Alex had to send all her medications into a lab and then Uncle had to send all his medications into a lab. Soon they began to inspect the house again and this time they looked in the basement and declared that it must be clean. It was stranger. Everything was different this time, Family Services caring about things they didn't even bat an eye at the first time around. To clean the basement Alex called Kaley and Kelsey to come over and help me clean. With their help we were able to sort through the basement in a little under eight hours. Most of the stuff we were able to throw away in the garage, some of the other things we drove to throw away in the dumpster that was parked across the road for a house that was being remodeled. Was it illegal? Probably. Did I care? No.

With the basement finally clean, I was able to sleep downstairs whenever I came over instead of on the loveseat in the living room. Still, the boys weren't allowed to come home. I had been filling out mounds of paperwork with Lisa, having to send my fingerprints into the system twice because she was still taking fingerprints by ink and paper rather than a machine. Sometimes I think she was stalling me on purpose. Making me re-do fingerprints, losing my background check paperwork, talking down to me whenever I asked her a question. Our largest confrontation came when I was explaining that my mother said we could stay with her in Little Falls.

"No" She said. Your mother's house is only a two bedroom. It's the policy of Mille Lacs Tribal Family Services that the boys need their own room." She looked triumphant, as if she thought she had won something from me. My sister Jessie was there with me for support. I'd complained to her that Lisa was a bitch to me. That no matter what I said or did she acted as if I

was the scum of the earth. Jessie didn't believe me. "You're just not used to dealing with authority figures, Naomi. She's probably just doing her job." She decided to come with me in order to see for herself what I was talking about.

"They boys would have their own room," I explained. "The second bedroom would be theirs and I would share with my mother." I was trying to remain calm, but the way Lisa kept puffing and looking down her nose at me made me want to scream.

"That would be completely inappropriate!" She said. "The policy states they need their own room and you can't share with your mother."

"Why not! I don't mind sharing with my mom and the boys would have their own room! What's the problem with that?"

"The problem is that we could only assume that your mom had one room and you had the other one since you are both unmarried adults!"

"Fine then." I said. "I'll sleep on the couch."

"Absolutely not. You need to be in a bedroom, not a couch and it's inappropriate to share with your mother since you aren't married."

"So what!" I exploded. "Just because she's my mother we can't share a room? What because I don't have a..." I paused trying to think of the word I needed, "...mate, I can't share a room with someone not my... mate and bring the boys there?" Mate wasn't exactly the word, I was looking for husband or boyfriend, but 'mate' was the only thing my angry and flustered mind could come up with.

"Exactly." She said. She began to sort through the paperwork on her desk ask if the conversation was over. I tried to remain calm.

“There would only be four people in a two-bedroom apartment.” I said. “Fire code states that it is an appropriate number of people to have residing there. We are well within the limits.” I had taken some time to read about suitable living situations for foster children and what they might expect from any house they are residing in. Lisa was not impressed.

“Don’t talk to me about fire code!” she screeched at me. “I know about fire code!”

“If you know about fire code then you know that the boys could live at my mother’s house and we would still fall in the limits!” I was practically yelling at this point.

“We’re done here.” She said. “Obviously I can’t explain to you why it’s inappropriate. Besides, with how close your family is we’re concerned that you would be sneaking them for visits. It’s completely inappropriate.” My jaw dropped. Now it was bad that we were a close family? Everyone in the courtroom had always been very in favor of a large family support system. What the hell!

“What the hell!” I said out loud. “First you all say that it’s great that we have such a close family, but now it’s preventing us from allowing the boys to live with me instead of strangers!” I was fuming. What kind of twisted game were they playing here? Lisa looked smug. As if she’d won some sort of triumph over me.

“Fine,” I said, “I would like your policy book please.” She looked shocked at my request. I didn’t know why she would be. She kept saying that it was the policy of ‘Mille Lacs Tribal Family Services’ anytime I was confused about something. So, I resorted to what I did best. Gathering information. I would read through their entire policy book and set everything up so I could get the boys and it would all fall within their policies. Lisa wasn’t impressed.

“No.” She sniffed. “You can’t have it.”

“Why not?” I was livid. Why couldn’t I have access to all of their policies? That should be public knowledge. I told her as such. She looked a little worried when I said that.

“Here, I can give you our policy books for foster parents.” She turned and started gathering binders together.

“Thanks,” I said, taking the books “but I wasn’t asking about foster care policy, I’m asking for information on department policy. I’d like to see the guidelines that you guys use when placing and removing children from their homes as well as your policies on family placements.”

Lisa looked as if I had struck her in the face. I couldn’t have been the first person who had started asking these questions. I couldn’t be the only one that cared enough about their children to have looked for further information on how to get them back.

“You can find all of that online.” She finally said.

“I already looked there!” I said, rolling my eyes. “They don’t have anything about departmental policy.”

“I’m done here.” Lisa said again. “You need to leave now. I already told you why you can’t bring the boys to your mother’s house. You need to accept that.”

“I WON’T ACCEPT THAT!” She had finally gotten me to yell. In all my life I had never once yelled at someone in authority. Never a teacher, never a cop, never even a babysitter.

“You need to leave now.” She said, standing up.

“FINE!” I yelled at her. “I’ll find the policies myself!” I stood up and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind me. I could hear my sister apologizing for my behavior, which was a weird reversal of roles, before following me out into the parking lot. She silently got into

the car next to me as I careened out of the parking lot, driving only a few miles before pulling over so I could cry. I was so angry! She was making it impossible for me to get the boys back! I wasn't sad. That's not why I was crying. I was crying because I was so angry I didn't know what to do with myself and I getting thrown into jail for assaulting someone wouldn't do the boys any good. My sister was rubbing my back, trying to comfort me.

"I see what you mean, Naomi. You're right. She's not nice to you. When I was trying to get the boys, she was always really polite to me." Jessie had attempted to get the boys but was stopped since she hadn't completed recommendations from a rule 25 drug assessment from a few years ago. I finally calmed down enough to drive home. I would have to wait until the next visit before seeing the boys again. In the meantime, I would still work on getting approved for foster care. Even if Lisa decided she would stand in my way the whole time.

We had a visit with them about once a week. The visits were always wonderful. We would all three fuss around the boys, making sure they were happy and fed. Uncle and Alex would load up Herbert in snacks and new toys whenever he came and I would fret that their nails weren't trimmed and that Alonzo's bottles were too cheap. "You can buy these at a dollar store! What the hell do they think they're doing giving him this to drink from! It could be full of plastic chemicals!"

Sending them back was always the worst part of a visit. Herbert and Alonzo would begin to scream and cry, unwilling to leave and forcing us to carry them kicking into a transporter's car. After they would leave I would close the door softly behind me. I couldn't bear to watch them drive away. Their screams would still be ringing in my head even hours later. Herbert had started screaming when I buckled him into his seat, realizing that this was another goodbye. I

would tell him to be brave, that he had to watch out for his baby brother. He would only scream louder. I would give him a kiss and pry his fingers from my shirt and went to buckle in Alonzo. Alonzo might have known that it was another goodbye too. The way he would scream and cry said that he knew something was happening that he didn't like. It's hard to tell what he might have known at six months old. Tears burned behind my eyes but I always refused to burden them with the knowledge that I was scared and angry too. The social worker had looked at me kindly, understanding that it was hard for us to say goodbye to the kids after only visiting with them for two hours. I hated her kindness. I didn't want her looks of pity or understanding. I wanted her to leave Herbert and Alonzo here with us and then to leave and never return.

After a visit, instead of returning upstairs where I would have to deal the anger and sadness of my Uncle and Alex I would opt for hiding by myself downstairs. They didn't need to be dealing with my negative feelings either. It was a new feeling now that the basement was cleaned up. I could walk through it without climbing over garbage. It was nice. I made my way to the back corner where Jessie had left her couch. The couch was a soft plush brown that I was grateful she had been too lazy to take with her when she moved out two years ago. I fell on it and put in my headphones. I tried to listen to music that would take my mind off of the fact that Herbert and Alonzo were going to Brainerd to a place I didn't know the location of with people who I didn't know were kind or good. I hated this.

The lyrics to the song "Never Grow Up" by Taylor Swift began to play through my headphones before I could stop it. The lyrics tore through me, making my chest ache as she sang about never letting anyone hurt her child if he would just stay little. Tears ran over my cheeks as I thought about all that I couldn't protect Herbert and Alonzo from. All that I failed to protect

them from even though they were both still babies. I would do anything to fix what happened but I couldn't. My hands were tied in the permanence of time and bureaucratic red tape hell. I pressed repeat on my phone and listened to the song until I my tears stopped flowing and my chest stopped aching.

VII

Just before Christmas we learned that we would not be able to spend the day with the boys. We were devastated. They wouldn't make a transport worker work on the holidays. We wouldn't be able to see them until after the new year. I was even more upset when I learned that Natasha, Herbert and Alonzo's sister would be taking them overnight on New Year's Eve. I was so angry. She had abandoned us when everything got tough. Uncle and Alex both asked her if she would step up for the boys and she refused. Now though she somehow gets a privilege no one else was granted. Not even me. In an attempt to distract us all Alex suggested a trip to North Dakota. Her tribe was there and handing out their yearly per capita checks. I agreed to go knowing that it might take my mind off of everything.

We decided to use Jessie's van. My car was still acting up, plus her van was roomier and had a DVD player. Uncle sat in the back most of the way. He still didn't have his driver's license, he lost it almost a year ago after he got into an accident that killed an old lady. I remember picking him up from that accident, we still hadn't learned that a passenger died. He wasn't ever really the same afterward. His anxiety in the car was annoying but understandable. The entire way to North Dakota he kept flinching and unnecessarily telling me to keep my eyes on the road and to use my break. After his accident was when his drug use got a lot worse too. I learned that's why he left Alex before Alonzo was born. The guilt was becoming too much for him.

Our time in North Dakota went ok. We met some of Alex's family and had dinner but didn't feel like staying the night so we left late in the evening. It was the drive back to Minnesota that would become most memorable. We're quiet on our return trip from North Dakota. My

uncle was sitting in the back seat of my sister's van, looking uninterestedly out the window. Alex was next to me in the passenger seat, her headphones in her ears listening to music. We were about 30 miles from home when I felt it.

"Something's wrong with the car." I said, gently pressing on the brake to slow down.

"What?" My uncle asks, not having heard what I said the first time.

"I said, something's wrong with the car." At this point Alex had taken out one ear bud.

"What's wrong with it?" My uncle leaned forward in his seat, as I pulled over.

"I don't know," I said, "It feels like the tire is falling off or something. Can you get out and look?" My uncle pulled on his coat and hopped out of the van. He walked around looking at the tires.

"What one do you think it is?" he asked.

"Front passenger, I think. It just feels like it's falling off." Uncle made his way to the passenger side and bent to inspect the tire. I felt him give it a few good kicks and then saw him crouch to look at it some more.

"It looks all good to me," he said as clamoring back into the car. I believed him without a doubt. My dad and all my uncles were really into fixing cars when they were young, a passion that has never left them. I put the car back in drive and didn't even go ten feet before I pulled over again.

"Nope," I said, shaking my head, "something is definitely wrong. You gotta look while I'm driving, because it feels like the tire is falling off." Uncle rolled his eyes at my dramatics but jumped out to look anyways.

“Okay,” he said when he was about fifteen feet from the car. At his ok I slowly started to drive forward. At first his face was telling me that he didn’t see anything wrong when suddenly he started to yell.

“STOP! STOP! STOP!”

I slammed on the brakes and Uncle ran back to the car.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“The tire is falling off.”

“Are you freaking serious? What do we do?” I looked around at the empty landscape around us.

“There was a town not far behind us,” Said Uncle. “Try turning slowly around and go back that way.” After a moment he added, “Turn on your hazards.” I was nervous, as I began to slowly turn. Jessie had taken us into the ditch with this car not even two days before and I wasn’t anxious to repeat the experience on abandoned roads that screamed ‘serial killer pick up zone’. I only made it about twenty feet going in the other direction before I pulled over again.

“Nope, it’s not happening.” I told them, “we won’t make it to the town.” Quietly we all looked at each other, each of us trying to figure out what our best options were.

“I’m calling mom,” I said picking up my phone. I was able to convince her to come pick us up. Little falls wasn’t that far away. After that, I called a towing company knowing that I only barely have enough money to pay for the tow. We sat in silence a little longer before I turned on the overhead lights. Spying the Jelly Belly factory bag that I’d picked up in Milwaukee at Thanksgiving, I had an idea.

“Hey, you guys, have you ever tried Bertie Botts Every Flavor Beans?” Both Alex and Uncle looked at me confused. I smiled wickedly at them.

Five minutes later we are roaring with laughter as Uncle screwed up his face and spits out his latest bean.

“What the hell did you just give me!” His voice was mad, but his face was happy.

“I think it might have been rotten egg,” I laughed. Alex laughs with me. We had already done a few rounds each. Tasting cherry, lemon, black pepper, earwax, soap, green apple, and now rotten egg.

“Okay,” Uncle says, “I’m done, enough of that.” I agreed with him, putting the remainder of my beans away for another day.

“Hey, English major,” My uncle says, “Put your degree to some use finally, read us some Hemmingway.” He picked up a book from the back pocket of the seat. *To Have and Have Not*, is printed on the cover. Not wanting to admit that I’d never read Hemingway, despite my Bachelor’s degree, I picked up the book and started from the first page. My speech was halting as I was attempting to learn the writing style that he used. Coming across an unfamiliar word, I tried to sound it out, but with authority.

“Ch—een—ah—men...” I didn’t get any further than that before my uncle’s bellows of laughter filled the night air.

“What!” I asked, my cheeks flushing.

“Cheenahmen!” My uncle mocked me. “It’s CHINAMEN!” upon hearing this Alex began to laugh too. Looking down at my book, I saw that he was right. Laughing at my own stupidity I defended myself.

“I’ve never seen it written before!” I laughed. “It just looked weird on the page!” My uncle laughed harder, and so did I. In the middle of our laughing, a moment of sentimentalism struck me. Even though these had been some of the most trying six months of my life, with Alonzo’s head injury, and then his second injury, and then the kids being taken into foster care, I knew that this night, with my uncle, as strained as our relationship might have become, would be one I remembered forever. It would be a moment that I kept close to my heart. I was determined that at my uncle’s funeral, when I would be an old woman, I would remember this moment and tell it to anybody that would listen to me. Not long after my humiliating read of Hemingway my mom showed up along with the tow truck. We spent the night at my mom’s house, happy to be off of the road.

The next day when I dropped off Uncle and Alex at their house I decided to go back to my place in St. Cloud. New Year’s Eve was the next day and I knew we would have a party. I had invited Uncle and Alex to join me but decided to leave them behind. I hadn’t figured out a solution for Alex to use a bathroom since I didn’t think she would be able to use the stairs drunk. I felt guilty for abandoning them and even more so when the night turned out horrible and really weird filled with break ups, marriage proposals, and a strange amount of tape. I was glad when it was over and still angry at the thought that Natasha got to spend it with Herbert and Alonzo.

It was now officially 2016. The thought of a new year was supposed to make people feel happy and hopeful. That the new year would allow them to accomplish things they hadn’t been able to in the previous year. All I could hope for was that it wasn’t the complete shit show that 2015 turned out to be. Turns out. It was worse.

VIII

Another court date after the new year determined that Alex and Uncle would have to take mental health assessments at a place called CORE. I wasn't exactly sure what they were looking for, but it took a few hours. When they got out of the building Uncle and Alex both said they just asked a lot of strange questions. I could tell that Alex was angry, that whatever happened in there wasn't working for her benefit. Uncle seemed more relaxed, as if he had gotten something off of his chest. I'm guessing it might have just felt good for him to discuss how he was feeling about everything that happened lately. A few weeks later during court I found out why Alex was so upset. The assessment described her as a person with 'about average intelligence' with 'narcissistic personality traits' who 'didn't fully understand the extent of Alonzo's injuries'. She was completely livid. She rolled around the house for days in a foul mood. Constantly muttering things about 'unfairness' and 'how dare they'. Uncle, on the other hand, was secretly very pleased with what his said.

"Look, Naomi!" He said pointing to the packet of papers they'd given him. "They say right here how I am. I can't believe how right they are!" My uncle's assessment discussed him being above average intelligence with anger and depression issues that stemmed from abuse he endured as a child. He was weirdly happy about it. I think that it was the first time he really felt validated in himself and his experiences. It also said that his lack of ability to talk about Alonzo's accident was concerning in his ability to later care for him, but that overall, he was a very loving father. He didn't like that part one bit but admitted to me later that he thought that they might be right, especially about Alex. Though I had already experienced some of what was described as

her 'narcissistic tendencies' it would be a few more months before I finally experienced the true extent of it.

Around the same time, testing on the dog came back saying that she had no Pitbull in her, no physical, brain, or blood abnormalities and that no human DNA was found in the contents of her stomach or mouth. The last bit, caught everyone off guard. How was it possible that Alonzo was that torn apart, that there was that much blood, and no DNA was found inside the dog. Then where were his testicles? I cleaned that entire house from top to bottom. I didn't find anything that looked like dried torn apart skin. What. The. Fuck. We'd contemplated it for days. The only explanation that I could come up with is that the dog didn't swallow anything and had eaten enough snow when my uncle threw him outside that it washed the DNA out. I didn't know how DNA and evidence worked but it seemed plausible.

Alex was convinced that something sinister had happened. She pulled me aside one day to discuss it.

"I didn't want to say anything," she said to me. "But just after Alonzo was attacked my uncle called me and told me he had a dream." She paused looking at me. I nodded to let her know I was listening. "In his dream he said that he saw a hand reach down and hurt Alonzo. That it was a male hand." I stared at her. Was she really trying to say that Uncle hurt Alonzo? Was she afraid that if she didn't blame him that someone would blame her. What the actual fuck? My uncle was a lot of things, but a child abuser was not one of them. He'd been babysitting me and my siblings since before I was born. He never even so much as raised a hand threatening to hit one of us. I don't think he had it in him to strike a child let alone mutilate his own son. I was suddenly disgusted with Alex. Disgusted that she would even suggest a thing to me or to anyone.

Out of her and my uncle she is the one I would peg as more likely to hurt Alonzo. She was constantly screaming at him, lamenting that he wasn't more like Herbert, and constantly saying that she hates that he looks more like Uncle than like her. I had decided some time ago that even if she loved Alonzo. She didn't like him. I told her that even if her uncle was some sort of medicine man, he didn't know and see everything. That imaginations can run away with the best of us. I left it at that and hoped never to discuss it again. I swore that I wouldn't tell Uncle what she said. It would only break his heart.

January was slow. I had finished cleaning up the house by setting up the boys' bedroom, following the rule that they had to have a room of their own, and cleaned out the master bedroom for Uncle and Alex to use. I had also ordered wall decals off of Amazon, *How to Train Your Dragon* for Herbert and Alex ordered *Baby Simba* for Alonzo. I switched beds so that now Herbert would have a twin bed to sleep on and Alonzo would sleep in the crib. However, due to Alex's inability to stand up and hold Alonzo at the same time I opted for a bed rail instead of the other crib panel. There were little openings on the side that Alonzo could slip out of, but hopefully it would work anyway. I researched some wheel chair accessible cribs, but I didn't have the money or carpentry ability to make one happen, the bed rail would have to do.

On February 12th all our hard work paid off. The boys were coming home.

IX

It had been three months since Herbert and Alonzo had been home. Three torment filled long months. We had gotten the news earlier in the day and were all anxiously waiting for them to arrive. This news had come completely out of the blue we'd seen them for a visit only two days before and had sent more clothes and toys with them. We learned that they were in a different foster care, that they had been moved since their other foster parents were moving out of range of the tribe. My uncle was pacing back and forth chain smoking, Alex was sitting in her chair listening to music, I sat at the window like an abandoned puppy jumping every time I heard a car on the road. The deal was this, for the boys to come home, I would have to be constantly supervising them. I was not allowed to leave the house even to go to the store for a gallon of milk without bringing the boys with me. We were to be inspected and comply with all the rules of a foster home meaning we would need to go out and buy new fire detectors, fire extinguishers, check the water heater, and have storm radio along with a fully functional first aid kit. None of that mattered. If they told me that I had to stand on the roof every morning and crow like a rooster, I would have done it. No questions asked.

It was almost dark outside by the time the boys arrived. I ran down the stairs with my uncle to help bring them up. They were happy to see us even if they didn't know that they would get to stay. Every time they came home they always thought they were staying so today was no different for them, only for us. When the social worker had carried up the last of the stuff and handed me a list of the things I would need to get in order for the foster care inspection she told us "Alonzo eats about one can of formula a day and still needs feeding at night. His foster mom said he was a particularly difficult child, but then again she had eleven other children in her

home.” I was horrified to hear that Herbert and Alonzo were placed in a home that already had eleven other children. How were they supposed to get the attention they needed in that sort of crowd?

“Is there anything you all need that I can help you with.” She asked us. She was the same woman that took Herbert away from me in November. Looking through the things she brought back, I saw plenty of the birthday toys that looked like they’d never been unpacked and none of Herbert’s clothing or Alonzo’s clothing. There were also no diapers and most notably...

“No formula?” I asked. The social worker looked at me. “You said he eats a can of formula a day, which is ridiculous, and there is no formula here. Does he eat solid food? Google says that by eight months he should be eating solid foods.” I looked at her.

“Well,” she paused. “You can go to the store and buy formula and he’s not eating any solid foods.”

“What about Herbert’s clothes? We just sent new clothes over and these are all labeled 18months. They aren’t his. He didn’t even fit 18month clothes when he was eighteen months old.” Alex and Uncle backed me up. They were upset that the clothes they just bought weren’t with Herbert and Alonzo’s things.

“Foster care policy says that everything they left with and accumulated in their time in foster is supposed to be returned with them.” I know I sounded like a snob but I was tired of the policies being used against me instead of in my favor.

“Well,” She said. “You can just go buy some more stuff. I’ll see you guys later.” With that statement she hurried out the door and left us gaping after her. She expected us to just go buy hundreds of dollars’ worth of formula and clothes tonight? It was 7pm! The only store in

town was closed! Alex had spent all her money on the clothes that she just sent to the boys. I had a couple hundred left. It would have to work even if I didn't pay a bill this month.

"Looks like we're going to Wal-Mart" I said. I called my mom up and told her what was going on while my uncle was calling my grandpa telling him that the kids were home but that they needed clothes, shoes, and food. I hated keeping the kids awake past their eight O'clock bedtime but I wasn't allowed to leave them alone and Alonzo was going to get hungry soon. Packing Alonzo, Herbert, and Alex into the car while my uncle stayed home in order to go shopping was like old times. Despite the dire situation that family services left us in I don't think I could've been happier. The drive to Little Falls was spent singing songs with the boys and alternatively complaining with Alex about family services leaving Alonzo without any food and the crisis it was that they weren't feeding Alonzo any solid food.

"Of course he's going through a can of formula a day!" I exclaimed. "They aren't giving him any other food! My poor baby!"

"I can't believe it either. I'm so pissed right now. I can't believe they sent them back without any of the clothes that I just bought for Hebert!" She said. Herbert was currently wearing 18month clothing, he looked a little bit ridiculous. The pants were mid-way up his calves and his short sleeve shirt showed his belly when he raised his arms. When we got to Wal-Mart we were on a mission. Our first stop was to the formula.

"26.34!" I exclaimed. "For one can! You have got to be kidding me!" Anytime we bought formula before this was through WIC so I never thought about how much it cost. Buying it myself was making me have a small heart attack. "They say he eats one can a day. Jesus Christ!" I counted out ten cans of formula to get us through until we could get out WIC sorted

out. “That’s about \$260. I have about \$150 left to buy them clothes.” We were able to get a few cute outfits at Wal-Mart but decided to not buy everything they needed since my grandpa said he was going shopping tomorrow for them. Instead we bought some food to get us through the next week. I also bought Alonzo a new bottle while we were there along with some first foods and cereal for him. I googled that at his age he should be a master at eating off of a spoon and should be starting to eat real food like soft peas and noodles under strict supervision. By the time we got home the boys were overtired and Alex and I weren’t much better off, but we were happy. That night we all slept in the living room together. Happy in our togetherness. Until two hours later when Alonzo woke us all up demanding a bottle.

X

It turns out Alonzo wasn't sleeping through the night yet and demanded bottles every few hours the same a new born baby would. After a week, it became a point of consternation for all of us. Finally, I asked Alex and Uncle if I could have permission to "sleep train" Alonzo.

"What does that mean?" Asked Uncle. I took a big breath. It took me a while to figure out how to approach them with this. They were very into what google called "attachment parenting" meaning they would give their child what they wanted whenever they wanted it. They, however, were not the ones waking up three times a night with a screaming baby. After that first night, Alonzo moved downstairs with me. My decision to sleep train him had come from one particularly brutal night where no matter what I did I couldn't get him back to sleep.

"Please, Alonzo!" I cried. "Please go back to sleep!" no matter what I did, or what I fed him, he wouldn't go back to sleep. I didn't want to say I was upset that I wasn't sleeping, because I'd rather have him than adequate sleep. In that moment though, sleep was all I needed and I didn't have any help. Finally, I snapped, I wrapped Alonzo in his blanket a little roughly and set him in the pack-n-play by his bed and firmly turned off the lights. I was going to sleep. He wasn't hungry, hurt, or wet. I could sleep. It took only thirty seconds before I became completely horrified with myself. What if I hurt him when I swaddled him? What if I was too rough with him? I immediately sprang out of bed and grabbed the wailing infant.

"I'm so sorry, Alonzo. I'm so sorry!" I cooed to him. Unable to continue standing, after night upon night of no sleep I laid down with him in my bed. I didn't intend to fall asleep with him in my bed, but I did. When I woke up I was horrified to realize that I'd put Alonzo at risk of

being smothered by sleeping with him in my bed but happy to see that he wasn't any worse for wear because of it.

It was at that moment, sleep deprived and filled with anger at myself for how I behaved, that I researched how to sleep train a baby. I found a method that would allow Alonzo become accustomed over a series of nights to not waking up. The first part was to deny him a bottle, and if you had to give him one to only give him water. Google said it made the payoff not worth waking up for. For the first night I would allow him to cry for two minutes before I comforted him. To comfort him I wasn't allowed to pick him up, only pat him on the back. I would do this all night. The next night I would allow him to cry for three minutes, the next night four minutes, until I was allowing him to cry for ten minutes before comforting him. The site went higher than ten minutes but I wasn't comfortable with any more time than that.

Explaining this to Uncle and Alex took some patience and time. They didn't really understand what I was trying to do but decided to go for it since they weren't huge fans of waking up in the middle of the night either. It didn't go well. At the same time, I was sleep training Alonzo, I was also sleep training Herbert. Herbert's sleep training was all about laying in his bed by himself. I started off sitting next to him and stroking his hair back until after a few days I was sitting by the door. My uncle hated every second of it. He thwarted my every attempt to sleep train either boy. He would come downstairs and pluck Alonzo from the pack-n-play before the ten minutes was up and he would call Herbert into the living room during his bedtime. This wouldn't have been such a large bother if he hadn't agreed to sleep training in the first place and if he was consistent with what he wanted. Some nights he slept through Alonzo's cries and didn't bother to get Herbert out of bed, sometimes he made it a point to glare at me for daring to

do this for his children. It was a nightmare and our relationship that we had been building back up was once again in the dumps.

It didn't help that during the day I made it a point to have what I called "baby school" with Alonzo and my Uncle felt that Herbert was left out. I explained to him that I wasn't leaving Herbert out, only that Herbert had different needs than Alonzo for the time being. He didn't buy it and I didn't waste time trying to further explain it to him. Every morning after teaching Alonzo how to eat off of a spoon and before his first nap of the day I would bring him and a bucket of specially picked toys for the day's "lesson" with Alonzo. I was working from what I learned Google said he should be able to do. The first lesson was "sitting". At eight months old Alonzo should have been sitting and even crawling and pulling himself up on objects. I gave Alonzo some leeway considering he wasn't able to move very much after a dog tore him to pieces but was still really concerned at his lack of development.

Once he mastered sitting we were able to move onto fine motor control making sure he was switching toys between his hands, banging toys together, and was able to dump toys out of a bucket and put them back in. Alonzo was a fast learner. It took only a month to master most of those skills before we were moving on to more complicated things like talking, pointing, and playing games. After more work he was able to say "night-night" and wave his hand, though it sounded a bit more like "ni-ni". "Night-night" was Alonzo's first word and I was ecstatic about it. Later Alex would claim that his first word was "mom" but I know it was night-night and I taught it to him.

Alonzo's baby class was one of the highlights of my day. It gave me a chance to be with Alonzo and concentrate only on him. Through the lessons I was able to watch him grow enough

to start sitting, crawling, and even showing me which ball was the blue one, red one, or green one. When I was able to show the social worker what Alonzo could do she was amazed and made sure to mention to the judge the next time we were in front of him that Alonzo and Herbert were flourishing.

Herbert was able to bond with me too. Periodically he would spend the night with me downstairs whispering to me in the dark that he loved me and I would snuggle him close. Happy to have him in what I called our “nest”. Those nights snuggled with Herbert, and Alonzo when he got bigger, surrounded by pillows and blankets were some of my favorites. It felt safe. It felt like a sanctuary from the world that had continually beat us down but in our blanket nest nothing was able to hurt us. Herbert had been spending more nights downstairs with me lately since Uncle and Alex were fighting a lot lately and I suspected that they might be using again since people kept coming to the house who I knew had sold drugs to Jessie at some point. I didn’t say anything. I kept my mouth shut. The sooner we could have this child protection case closed the sooner we could deal with everything ourselves, as a family, without any legal interference.

Unfortunately, as good as my relationship was with Herbert and Alonzo, it was just as bad with my Uncle. I felt like I couldn’t talk to him about anything. He’d grunt at me or not acknowledge my presence at all. My uncle’s bitterness at my presence permeated the house at every corner. It didn’t seem to matter that I was the only thing that was allowing him to see his children on a daily basis. It didn’t seem to matter that I did his laundry and cleaned his house on and took care of his kids on a daily basis. It only mattered, to him, that I was taking over his family.

In a lucid moment my uncle told me exactly what was bothering him about my presence in his life. We were driving to the casino, for what reason I can't remember, only that it was important that we go. We left Alex at home with the boys since it was nap time. I wasn't technically allowed to leave her unsupervised but I was the only one in the home with a car and a license. The restrictions on us by family services sometimes made it impossible to live life. So, in order to make life livable, we sometimes had to break the rules. It was during this twenty-minute car ride to the casino that he told me what was bothering him so badly.

"Do you want to know what's really bothering me?" He asked. I looked over at him, I wasn't sure if this was a trap I was about to fall into, but he seemed sincere. I didn't find any anger in his posture or his voice. He seemed just like my favorite uncle once again.

"I have a theory," I replied. He seemed surprised that I had given our relationship some thought.

"What's your theory?" Again, his voice sounded interested instead of the angry bitterness that I'd grown to know in the past few months. I took a steadying breath and told him what I thought the problem was.

"Well," I said, "I think that you feel like you're being replaced. That you don't have any control over what your kids do or what happens in your own house. You're mad that I have a closer relationship with Alonzo than you do and that it seems, with me being there, that people are constantly accusing you of not being able to take care of your kids. It didn't help that your whole life changed while you were in treatment. That family services and I inserted ourselves into your life while you were away and now, legally, you can't get rid of us. I think you also feel like a stranger in your own house because I changed that while you were gone too." I took

another steady breath, “But mostly I feel like you feel embarrassed that your niece, someone you used to babysit, is taking care of your kids.” I finished my short speech hoping that I didn’t make him too angry. I’d been thinking about our relationship for a long time and had discussed it at length with my best friend, Megan. It killed me inside that my favorite uncle could barely stand to have me in the same room with him. I looked at my uncle and, luckily, he didn’t seem angry.

“No,” he said, “that’s not it.” Something in his posture told me that I was a little bit close, even if he didn’t want to reveal it, or maybe I just search for ways to be right when I’m not. “What really bothers me is your arrogance.” I felt surprise shoot through me. I’d never thought of myself as arrogant before. The thought had never occurred to me that arrogance was something that others would associate with me. I immediately dismissed it. I wasn’t arrogant. I asked him, “What do you mean, arrogant?” I truly did not understand where he was coming from.

“Arrogant!” He spluttered. “You’re always treating me like I’m dumb, like I need you to explain simple concepts of parenting or some other shit to me! I’ve been a parent long before you came around. I know how to do it!” He was moving his arms around frantically as he was talking, but he still wasn’t angry. “You always explain things, stupid things! You talk and you talk even when I tell you that I know what you are talking about! You never listen! You are arrogant and you think you know better than everyone else!” There was silence after he was done talking. He was looking out the window and I was shocked into silence while trying to process what he said. It was true, what he said. I did explain things a lot. I talked a lot too in a voice that

probably suggested to arrogance to all but me because I was just explaining things and not affecting how people feel. I felt the need to apologize.

“I’m sorry, uncle.” I saw his head whip around in the passenger seat to stare at me. I don’t think he was expecting an apology. “I didn’t mean to make you feel like I thought you were dumb. I don’t think you are! I didn’t realize I came off as arrogant.” I paused, trying to figure out what to say next. “I don’t explain things because I think you’re dumb. I’m just really used to talking when people aren’t listening to me. I *know* they’re not listening, and it sucks but I talk anyways because if I stopped talking every time a person got bored with me, I’d be silent forever. Not only that, but being around Keenan and Jessie, I’m sometimes used to having to explain stupid little things to them. I’m sorry though. I’ll try to stop doing it to you.” We were silent the rest of the five minutes it took to get to the casino, but I could tell that he was thinking about what I said.

XI

Things improved for a while. My uncle was communicating more with me and the boys had a set routine down. I had never been one for keeping a strict routine before but Google said that children need set routines in order to thrive. It was something that I took very seriously. When they ate, napped, snacked, and played was all monitored carefully by me. We were still waiting on Family Services to see what more we needed to do in order to have them out of our lives but in the mean time we lived ours the best that we could. On March 2nd, my grandfather called asking us to help him set up his new television. Leaving Alex with the boys, even though I still wasn't supposed to, my uncle and I left to go help my grandpa. While setting up his T.V I noticed that he had gotten a cat since the last time I'd been over.

"Hey!" I said. "Cute cat. When did you get it?" I looked over at my grandpa from behind the T.V that I was setting up.

"The girl wanted a cat so I went and got her a cat a few months ago." My grandpa's wife had taken in one of her granddaughters who had my grandpa completely wrapped around her finger. My grandpa wasn't a cat guy but I guess for that little girl he could learn to be. I wondered what had happened to the dog he had. Last time I was here there was a German Shephard that had been in the yard.

"Did you hear that Tanya got hit and killed by a car." He asked my uncle. My uncle stopped looking at the T.V manual he had been reading. I was confused. My grandpa named his dog Tanya? It was weird considering that was my cousin's name, maybe she'd given the dog to my grandpa and he couldn't be bothered to name it himself. I smiled at the thought. Tanya had just given birth to a baby girl, Starlove. I'd have to go visit her soon.

“Oh shit, really?” My Uncle sounded devastated. I thought it was a little strange considering that he didn’t even really know the dog. It wasn’t until about thirty minutes later standing in the parking lot of a hardware store where we stopped to grab some supplies to anchor my grandpa’s T.V with that it hit me.

“I just can’t believe it about Tanya.” Uncle said. I stopped in my tracks.

“Wait.” I said. “*Tanya Tanya?* My cousin Tanya!” I felt myself grow cold. They couldn’t have been talking about her.

“Yes,” Uncle said to me slowly. “Who did you think we were talking about?”

“I don’t know, I just thought that you were talking about his dog. I didn’t see it.” I could feel tears beginning to form.

“He ties the dog up out back now.” Uncle was looking at me concerned. I had to take a moment to collect myself before continuing to walk. I couldn’t believe it. Tanya was dead. I’d grown up with her. She just had a baby! It couldn’t be more than a few days old!

“Who hit her? When did she die?” I asked.

“They found her this morning.” He said. “They say her boyfriend hit her. We have to get back to the house so I can get a hold of Allen.” Allen was Tanya’s father. Shit. He had to be devastated. Tanya was only 23.

“Yea,” I said. “I should call my mom.” When we were finished at my Grandpa’s house we went home and started to make the phone calls informing the rest of the family. Information started to leak in slowly throughout the day. Where her boyfriend was being held, the fact that he killed her on purpose, who had her kids, and when the funeral would be. We made plans to host people at uncle’s house if they were coming in from out of town. My dad was making the drive

in a couple of days and it would be nice to see him even if the circumstances sucked. I even called Family Services to inform them what happened and to request that another family took Herbert and Alonzo for the duration of the funeral. They said that they would look into it and get back to me. Uncle said that we couldn't bring them to the funeral. He said that to have such young children at a funeral was bad since they were more closely connected with the spirit world. He said that they could still see the spirits and play with them, but that if they did that the spirit could decide to take the babies with them. It was the same reason we didn't carry babies in the dance circles. Carrying one in the dance circle was akin to offering it up to the spirit world for the taking. I'd been at more than one pow-wow in my life where elders yelled at young mothers or fathers who tried to pick up a screaming toddler. If your child threw himself down in a tantrum, you dragged them out of the arena until it was safe to pick them up. No exceptions.

A few days before the funeral, Alonzo had a check up on his healing process with a pediatric urologist in the cities who would also determine when Alonzo would need hormone injections as well as seeing if they could proceed with prosthetic testicles. Alex wasn't happy about any of it.

"I don't see why they need to see him. He's fine!" I took a big breath. We'd been having the conversation for an hour at this point.

"They need to see how he's doing and check to see if there is enough skin left to give him some prosthetics." I explained for the sixth time.

"Why does he need prosthetics! And he's a baby! He doesn't need hormones!" Alex was nearly screaming at the end.

“The prosthetics are to make him look like everyone else. They need to put them in now, while he’s a baby, so his skin stretches and grows with him. As for the hormones, even if he isn’t going through puberty at the moment, there are times during childhood where he should be getting a burst of testosterone. Without it, he won’t develop normally.” I had already explained this to her more than once during the conversation.

“YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND, NAOMI!” Alex screamed at me. “YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND HOW HARD THIS IS FOR ME!” Alex began to hit her chair with her hand with every word she said. I tried to remain calm. I wanted to scream back at her that this wasn’t about her, it was about Alonzo and she needed to get a hold of herself. Instead, I tried to placate her.

“I know this is hard, Alex. But we still have to do it. Alonzo needs to see a doctor.” I knew she could hear the irritation in my voice and it only upset her further.

“NO, NAOMI. YOU DIDN’T HAVE TO WAKE UP AND SEE WHAT HAPPENED. YOU WEREN’T HERE! I WAS. I’M THE ONLY ONE WHO FEELS LIKE THIS!” She kept screaming at me. “EVERYTIME WE HAVE ANOTHER DOCTOR APPOINTMENT I HAVE TO RELIVE WHAT HAPPENED!” Alex cried harder, burying her face in her hands. I felt no sympathy for her. None. She avoided changing Alonzo’s diaper like the plague. She avoided talking about the dog at all. Anytime she did talk about it, it was in terms of how badly she was affected and I was over it. She may have to relive the experience of waking up and seeing Alonzo in a pool of his blood but Alonzo was the one who was mutilated. Alonzo was the one who needed to see a doctor, Alonzo was the one that would need help and support. Still, I couldn’t say any of this to her. It would only set her off further.

“I understand that this is hard for you.” I said instead. “But you can’t get like this every time we have a doctor’s appointment. He’s going to have these appointments for the rest of his life! He can’t see you freaking out like this. Not ever!” I paused a moment to see if she was listening. She seemed to be. “This is the new normal now. He will *never* know anything different. It is our job to make sure that he doesn’t see himself as a freak or disformed. It is our job to make sure he grows up being ok with who he is. Freak out if you have to, just never do it in front of him. Save that for when you are alone.”

“That’s your and your Uncle’s problem! That’s the whole problem in your family! None of you want to show your emotions!” She cried. I shook my head. She still wasn’t getting it. It’s not that we don’t show our emotions. There were just times when it was appropriate to do so and times when it wasn’t. I was able to let Alex calm down enough to leave her, but I was still angry. If she couldn’t contain herself about this how would Alonzo view himself as he got older?

I had been doing a lot of research trying to figure out how hormones worked and how testicular implants worked. Most of the information I’d come across was from adults who had testicular cancer. The cases I found involving younger people were mostly cases of testicular torsion. Everyone agreed that the prosthetic testicles were mostly for show, to make the male anatomy look and feel normal. The hormones, however, were necessary. Without the proper hormones, Alonzo’s body wouldn’t know how to grow in the correct way. His voice wouldn’t change, he wouldn’t get hair in the right places, he wouldn’t gain the proper muscle mass, and would most likely be tall since it was the puberty hormones that affected growth somehow. I even did research on how it might later affect his sex life. I didn’t know if it was weird or not

that I was researching what Alonzo's future sex life might be like, but I wanted to know if he would be able to have normal relationships.

I didn't pretend to understand all that I read but I understood enough that I knew he needed to see a doctor right away. He was supposed to get a dose of testosterone sometime around five months old, so hopefully he was able to get that before the accident. The next dose of it would come sometime around six months to nine years old. I wasn't sure if that meant he'd need a few doses or only one that happened between those ages. The doctor would be able to tell us. I also hoped the doctor could tell us anything about body dysmorphia disorder which I'd also done research about in fear that it might strike Alonzo because he *would* be different than other men. I decided the best way to protect against this was to have a lot of "body positive" attitudes around him, including books that I could read to him. I'd also decided that I would promote the benefits of adoption around Alonzo. He would never be able to have a child of his own and I wanted to head him off before he could grow old enough that the thought that he couldn't have his own children consumed him. I wanted him to have a strong sense of the other possibilities out there for children if he wanted them. I don't know if Alex thought about any of this. I never really talked to her about it since any mention of his accident made her start screaming and crying.

Our appointment with the Pediatric Urologist went well. He informed us that Alonzo had received the needed dose of testosterone before the attack and wouldn't need another one until he was eight years old and had enough skin left to get prosthetics which we would schedule for some time before his second birthday. I'd forgotten to ask about body dysmorphia since I'd just received a call saying that there were no placements for Herbert and Alonzo for respite so that

we could attend Tanya's funeral. The only one they had was a home with nine other children who were all suffering from croup. I balked at the idea. No way would I send my precious Herbert and Alonzo to a home so crowded with children that they all had croup and could infect Herbert and Alonzo. They'd been through enough. Later that night it was decided that we would take turns during the wake. I would go and visit Tanya and the family and when I was done, Uncle and Alex could go. We were breaking the rules again. It sucked but I wasn't about to miss saying goodbye to my cousin. Alex decided that she would be the one to stay home during the actual funeral service. We all agreed.

Tanya's funeral was typical. We burned a fire for three days and had a feast. I removed my glasses to look at her. I didn't know why but all of the elders said that you had to remove your glasses or the spirit wouldn't recognize you. During her service I sat in the front rows with the rest of my family. My auntie, Dana, had decided to bring Tanya's oldest son, who was five years old to the funeral. He was old enough to understand. My uncle Phil was inconsolable. Tanya was his favorite niece and they had been really close. I made it a point to talk to him, to tell him that I loved him. Even though I wasn't his favorite niece, I was still a niece and I hoped that I could bring him a little bit of comfort. My brother, Keenan, told me that Phil had just gotten out of jail and wasn't even technically supposed to be on the reservation. It didn't matter, no one there would turn him in or blame him for attending his niece's funeral.

We buried Tanya in the reservation graveyard. She was placed nearly in the middle of it. I thought it was nice that the sun was able to shine directly on her since no trees were by her. It was even better that a single eagle was flying above us the whole time we were there. It was less nice when we learned that the spring ground was too soggy and wet for the machine they usually

used to cover caskets to get to her gravesite. A hole had already been dug for her but they wouldn't be able to cover her until the ground dried. Hearing this, my dad, uncles, me, and other family members all gathered shovels and we buried her ourselves. Afterward, we lingered a bit talking to family members and making plans to meet for dinner. After she was buried we were able to laugh a little and try to start moving forward. By the time we made it home I was exhausted. Once again, we all slept in the living room together needing that closeness. I was glad that it was over. We would later learn that Tanya was the third death in Minnesota attributed directly to domestic violence that year. In all, there would be 21 deaths attributed directly to domestic violence in Minnesota in 2016. In my personal world, Tanya was the first person to die in 2016, three more would follow her.

XII

I woke the next morning to Alex urgently waking me up and my uncle talking on the phone to someone. I sat up confused. Alex was crying and Herbert was sitting wide eyed on the couch watching his father frantically pace the living room.

“What the hell is happening?” I asked Alex. Alex burst out crying. I took the moment to try and figure out who Uncle was talking with on the phone but what he was saying didn’t make any sense.

“Call him now and see if you can figure out who did it!” Uncle was saying. “Do they know who was with him? Call Devin and ask him!” without context I still couldn’t figure it out. Finally, Alex stopped crying long enough to tell me. My uncle Phil had been found dead that morning. When I heard the news, my heart dropped into my stomach. I tried frantically to remember the last moment I saw him. If I said goodbye. If I gave him one last hug. The last place I saw him was at the graveyard next to Tanya. I didn’t say goodbye to him before we left, certain that I would see him again. They weren’t sure yet what he died from. From the looks of it he had been beaten to death. Uncle was on the phone trying to figure out who was last with him and what the hell happened.

It was another long day of phone calls with information slowly making its way through the family. I called my oldest sister, Tala, to tell her the news. She hadn’t been able to make it to Tanya’s funeral but I had a feeling that two deaths in a row would summon her home. The phone calls made their way around and even more were made to the police and tribal government. My dad was calling me ever thirty minutes asking if I’d seen my brother or sister. I could hear the

fear in his voice that they would be the next to die. We eventually found them and they were as ok as they were going to be under the circumstances.

I tried to keep to Herbert and Alonzo's schedule as much as possible while still fielding phone calls and taking breaks to go outside and breathe. We had barely just lost Tanya and now my uncle was gone too. With everything that happened from Alonzo's head injury and dog attack, to fighting with my uncle, Family Services breathing down my neck, and now two deaths in the family it was getting hard to breathe. My dad arranged to have a sweat lodge. He was convinced that someone had put something bad on our family and he was determined to fix it. A lot of people came but I didn't go inside. I stayed out with Herbert and Alonzo. Jessie was angry that they started without her.

"You would have been here on time if you didn't stop for fucking pills." I told her viciously. She snarled back at me that she wasn't getting pills. I knew better than to believe her and I didn't care if I hurt her feelings by saying so. I was sick and fucking tired of all these drugs destroying our lives.

After a few days it was determined that Phil died from a heroin overdose but that he had been in a fight and abandoned outside while he was overdosing. We buried him right next to Tanya. There was less laughter at his funeral. Less ability to laugh and remember good times with him. Two deaths just days apart was too much. Someone had pointed out another eagle flying overhead while we buried Phil. It didn't become a point of conversation until a second one was seen. With two eagles flying overhead just after two family members died seemed strange. Other family members were happy at the sight. Saying that it meant that Phil and Tanya had found each other in the next world. The medicine man at the sweat lodge had said something

similar. That he'd seen Tanya welcoming uncle. I wanted to believe them. I wanted to think that there could be happiness found in this shit situation. I just couldn't. All I saw was the destruction that wreaked havoc on my family and that there wasn't any way I could fix any of it. The only thing I could manage to do was keep Herbert and Alonzo out of foster care, and even then, I failed to keep them completely safe.

After Phil's funeral, my uncle Herb went downhill. For a minute it seemed like he might pull through this but my hopes were quickly dashed. His drug use increased, his angry behavior toward me heightened, and he and Alex fought almost daily forcing me to retreat to the basement with Herbert and Alonzo for hours at a time. I tried to give him space. He just lost a brother. The only brother he said that understood him. When he and my dad and uncles were young they were placed in foster care. My dad and Uncle Allen lived with one foster family while my uncle Herb and Phil were placed in another. In their separation Herb became closer with Phil than he was with any of his other brothers. Herb and my own father had a long-standing feud that both refused to tell me about. Either way, I knew that my uncle was in a lot of pain. Alex and I walked on eggshells for weeks around him after Phil died. One day, however, his behavior became too much for me to handle.

Uncle had been acting weird all day. Something was off about him. He was being too silly, too unsteady on his feet. A lot of his medication made him sleepy or a bit loopy, but this seemed different. I took Herbert and Alonzo downstairs to take a nap instead of putting them in their room, leaving my uncle upstairs by himself. I figured that whatever it was would be worn off by the time our nap was over. I tucked Alonzo in the pack-n-play in the corner and cuddled Herbert up next to myself.

“Mimi?” Herbert whispered.

“Yes, Sweet Boy?” I whispered back to him.

“I love you, Mimi.” He whispered in response.

“I love you too. Go to sleep ok?” This whispering had become a ritual with us every time we would lay down together. The basement was dark and I think he was a little scared of sleeping in it. But ever since I cleaned it out with those two girls, it was my sanctuary. Even if it was filled with rodents and spiders.

Alonzo’s crying woke me up. I looked at my phone, we slept for a little over 2 hours. I looked to my side. Herbert was gone. I sat up quickly but calmed when I heard Herbert’s laugh coming from upstairs. I grabbed Alonzo out of the pack-n-play and changed his diaper before going to check on Herbert. When I reached the top of the stairs, after unlatching the baby gate, it took me a second to understand what was happening in the scene in front of me.

A pot of water was boiling on the stove, vegetables and potatoes were scattered across the counter and across the floor. Herbert was standing on a stool a sharp knife in his hand attempting to cut a potato while his father stood next to him chopping vegetables telling Herbert “We need a lot of potatoes, Herbert!” Quickly putting Alonzo down, I ran up to Herbert and grabbed the knife out of his hand.

“Uncle!” I shouted. He looked at me and smiled goofily.

“NAOMI!” He boomed. “Great now you can chop the potatoes and we need more vegetable and meat. We’re making lasagna”

“Uncle, Herbert had a knife in his hand! A REAL knife!” My uncle looked confused for a second. Then it dawned on him, toddlers shouldn’t have knives.

“Oh! Herbert, my boy, are you ok?” He went and scooped up Herbert into a hug, swaying on his feet he fell over.

“UNCLE!” I screamed, running over and grabbing Herbert from his arms.

“What is going on out here?” Alex came into the Livingroom. My uncle’s fall shaking the house enough that she came out of the bedroom.

“I fell” My uncle laughed as he struggled to get up.

“Are you ok?” Alex asked him. Her eyes squinted as she was becoming suspicious of his demeanor.

“I’m fine. I’ll be right back.” Uncle opened the baby gate and went downstairs. What he was going down there for I had no idea.

“He’s acting weird.” Alex said when he left.

“I know! He just fell down while he was holding Herbert and he had Herbert helping him chop food, with a REAL knife!”

“What!” Alex said, this time fully taking out her earbuds. She shook her head sadly.

“Maybe he’s using again.”

“Probably, I don’t know why else he would be like this. I’m gonna go see what he’s doing down there.” When I walked downstairs I saw him leaning against the back wall. A sweet smell was permeating the air and thick white smoke puffed up from the piece of tinfoil he was holding. Not wanting him to see me, I quietly walked back upstairs.

“He’s smoking something,” I told Alex.

“I knew it! What’s he smoking.” She asked.

“I don’t know, but it had white smoke, and it smelled sweet.” Me and Alex looked at each other for a long moment.

“The boys can’t stay here.” I finally said. “Not with him like this.” Alex sighed.

“Maybe,” she said, “He’ll pass out. It will be fine.”

“No!” I said more firmly. “I don’t care if he passes out. The boys are not staying here. In fact, when he passes out, we’re leaving. Come with or don’t it’s your choice.” Hearing my uncle making his way back upstairs we quickly dispersed. Me to check on the kids, Alex to check what was boiling on the stove.

Reaching the top of the stairs my uncle struggled to close the baby gate. At least, I thought, he’s aware enough to close the gate so Alonzo doesn’t fall down the stairs. I turned around and bent down to help Herbert with a toy when the crashes of my uncle falling down the stairs shook the house and made Alonzo startle at the loud noise.

“UNCLE!” “HERB” “DADDY” Alex, Herbert, and I screamed at the same time running to the stairs. My uncle had fallen through the baby gate smashing it to pieces and was laying at the bottom of the stairs groaning.

“Daddy!” Herbert’s eyes began to tear up as he looked at his father lying there. Hearing this my uncle propped himself up on his elbows and laughed.

“It’s ok, my boy!” My uncle was smiling and chuckling. “Daddy just fell, I’m ok!” I could see that my uncle was clearly in pain but trying hard not to scare Herbert anymore. Herbert’s tears stopped before they fell and he began laughing too. He looked at me and said excitedly,

“Daddy fell!”

“Yes, he did, Herbert, but he’s okay.” Herbert tried to go down the stairs to his dad but I picked him up and put him in Alex’s lap instead. I made my way down the stairs avoiding the sharp stake-like remains of the baby gate and helped my uncle to his feet. Once he was up he went and talked to Herbert while I cleaned up the mess. At some point while I was cleaning the mess my uncle had thrown everything into the pot and was attempting to cook it. I looked at Alex and she looked back at me, worried.

Quietly I went into the boys’ room and packed a bag. It was easy to pack for them now that I had their room organized. After packing the bag, I snuck it downstairs and packed my own things. By the time I came back upstairs the pot of food was congealing on the stove and my uncle was passed out on the couch. I grabbed Herbert and shoved his feet into shoes and put Alonzo in his car seat. I looked over to Alex, motioning for her to take out her headphones.

“Are you coming or not?” I asked.

“Yes,” she sighed heavily. “I’m just worried about what will happen to him when we’re gone.” I shared her worries but was more concerned about the boys’ safety.

“We’ll call Allen to check on him. Or even Grandpa. But I’m leaving now. Before he wakes up. He’s dangerous. He could have really hurt the boys tonight.” I could feel my anger at the situation coming out at Alex. But if she wanted to stay that was her choice, even if it was a dumb one. I knew I should contact social services. Tell them what was going on, but I had no place to go with the boys that they would accept. Lisa made it clear to me that Little Falls and my mother’s house was not an option. Even though I was taking them there now, it was behind the backs of family services.

Alex nodded and collected her things while I put the boys in the car. When she was ready I helped her into her travel wheelchair and into the car. Stashing her chair in the trunk of the car we took off towards my mom's house. I made a plan to call my sister in the morning and ask her what it was Uncle had been smoking.

XIII

We went back after a few days. My uncle claims he was only smoking his medication. That the effects of the meds are quicker if he smoked it. I didn't care anymore about his excuses. His attitude towards me was shit. When we didn't outright accept his apology, he went right back to treating everyone like dirt and making us walk on eggshells all day long for fear of his outbursts of anger. We had another meeting with the social workers on May 9th. I was excited for it. I was certain that they were going to drop the case against Alex and allow us to move on with our lives. Alex would be able to move away from Uncle and take the boys with her. I would help her. This wasn't a healthy environment and we needed the ability to take care of things by ourselves without the constant fear that the boys were going to be removed again.

The social worker was sitting on the couch and smiling at us when she came.

"Well, I have good news!" She said. "We are going to close the case against you!" I was so relieved at her words I almost sank into the floor. I could feel the weight lift from my shoulders. No more of having to sit here with Uncle! No more having to listen to their fighting! Alex said that she would let the boys stay with me while she found a place to live. Everything would be fine!

"Wait." Said Alex. "I don't think that's a good idea." I felt like I'd been punched in the gut. What did she just say? Why would she say that? What the fuck is she doing! Alex continued. "I don't think it's a good idea because I need to move out and find a new place to live. It isn't healthy here and I needed to say that otherwise I wouldn't be a good mother." There was dead silence following her words. I could see anger and disbelief radiating from my uncle. He couldn't understand why she was saying what she was saying. Neither could I for that matter.

Why couldn't she just keep her mouth shut! We would have been free to do whatever we wanted without intervention! Why was she keeping them in our lives! What the hell was she thinking! I fumed. I had secretly applied to Grad School at St. Cloud State and had gotten accepted. Now it was looking like I wouldn't be able to go because Alex couldn't handle the kids on her own!

"Oh" was all the social worker said. "In that case, you understand that we'll have to keep the case open..." she looked as bewildered as I felt. I couldn't believe that she just freaking did that. "In the meantime, you all will have to stay here until Alex finds a place to live and then we'll have to reevaluate."

"NO!" I heard myself say the word before I even fully comprehended that I said it out loud. Seeing everyone's looks I was forced to talk. "I'm not staying here. I need to leave!" I was almost in tears. We were so close to being done and Alex ripped the rug right out from under us. We could have done everything without having family services involved and Alex had to ruin it! Unable to stop myself I kept talking. "I can't stay here anymore! I'm not welcome here!" I practically screamed looking pointedly at my uncle. My uncle jumped in when I said that.

"I never said you weren't welcome here!"

"You don't have to! It's in every word you speak and, in every word, you don't speak! It's written all over you every time you see my face! You don't want me here and I don't want to be here. You are being such an ASSHOLE! And it's not fair! I don't deserve it! You HATE ME! I KNOW YOU DO! AND I HATE YOU RIGHT BACK! I HATE YOU BECAUSE I'VE LOST TWO UNCLES NOW!!! I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU!" I could feel my anger spinning inside of me as tears cascaded down my face. Everything in the past year had been such utter bullshit and I was done. I couldn't keep it in any longer. I was only sorry that it came out in

front of the social worker. I turned and looked at her. She visibly flinched away from me. "I want to move to Little Falls with my mom." I said. There was silence again. Alonzo came crawling over to me and sat in my lap.

"OK." She said. "We did discuss it in the office since Lisa...left... and decided that you guys could reside in Little Falls if you needed to." I could hear the pause in her voice when she discussed Lisa. I'd heard a rumor going around that she was fired since a bunch of families were banding together and were going to storm the government center in order to get her fired. I guess I wasn't the only one that she pissed off. The social worker kept talking. "Even though its technically out of our area we decided that it's not that far. You realize that if you move to Little Falls then Alex can't live with you, right?"

"That's fine." I said. I could see Alex from the corner of my eye, shock written across her face. I couldn't bring myself to care. What did she think was going to happen? That the boys and I would live in homeless shelters and under bridges with her? Absolutely not! I was almost as done with her as I was with my uncle. She was the one that couldn't just let the case close. She had to go and make it complicated for everyone. The social workers left after I gave them my mom's address in Little Falls. They would be coming by the next couple of day to do an inspection. After they left I quickly packed myself and the boys. I avoided Uncle at all cost. Alex was frantically making phone calls to any friends she had that would come get her since I wasn't bringing her to Little Falls with me. Serves her right. In under thirty minutes I was packed and ready to go. I said goodbye to Alex and told Herbert to say goodbye to his dad. I left without another word. Happy to finally head to Little Falls.

I was exhausted by the time I put the boys to sleep in my mom's spare bedroom. I slumped onto the loveseat in the living room. I had spent the last few months fighting for Herbert and Alonzo to come home. In the process, I ended up fighting with my Uncle even more fiercely. Family services had finally given the go ahead that I could reside in Little Falls and still be a foster mother to Herbert and Alonzo. The stupid rule that I had to live within 30 miles of the reservation held us up for the longest time. I had already applied to school and they accepted. I would be going to St. Cloud State for my graduate degree in only a few months. Living in Onamia or Brainerd was too far away for me to drive every day. Little Falls was perfect. I was happy that my mom agreed to let us all live with her and to help me out while I was in school.

Glancing at the clock I read 9 O'clock pm. I calculated that I could sleep for three hours before waking and beginning to whip the house into shape. It wasn't as bad as my Uncle's house had been. Nowhere near that squalor. This was just small, and because it was small it looked ten times messier than it actually was. If I set my alarm for midnight, then I could get the entire house spotless by four in the morning. Which still left me five hours of sleep before the social worker arrived to inspect. Wait. I had to shower and look presentable. So, four hours of sleep before she arrived. Nothing made me happier than thinking that Lisa was no longer a part of the equation. I snuggled down further into the couch after setting my alarm and began to drift.

"EH HEM!" my mother's noise caught my attention and pulled me back from the edge of oblivion. Irritated I asked her what she wanted.

"I want to know what you think you're doing." My mom asked, sitting on the arm of the couch.

“Resting” I replied, an edge to my voice. I didn’t know what her deal was, but she was putting out hostile vibes that I wasn’t appreciating.

“Don’t you think you should be cleaning the house?”

“I’m *going* to, once I sleep a little bit. Jeeze.” I couldn’t believe she was bothering me about it. It wasn’t even my mess, it was hers. So why was she so damn irritated that I wasn’t cleaning it right at that second. I was tired! My mom looked at me like she wanted to yell but stopped herself.

“Naomi, what are the three traits do you suppose a mother needs?” She tapped my legs indicating me to move so she could sit by me. I sat up and eyed her warily. I smelled a trap. I knew that whatever answer I gave here would be wrong. I gave my answers anyway, trying to pick traits I had seen in her growing up.

“Um, love.” My mother had been an especially loving mother to us. More I think than maybe we deserved at times. My older brother and little sister Jessie especially got the lion’s share of her love and patience. Ah!

“Patience,” I said. My mother was nodding along and I saw a small sly smile at the corner of her lips. I knew that she was waiting to spring her trap on me. I tried to think of something that would stop the inevitable blow from happening. I remembered that in a book I read, a character was asked a similar question in her trials to become a queen. She had a good answer, so I stole from her.

“And nothing. Because everything a mother has, she must give to her children.” I smiled inwardly, it was a good and true answer. I had seen my own mother give up everything she ever had in order to care for us. Including her body, home, and sanity. My mother smiled even wider,

I failed her test. I knew it was a trap. I knew it, and still decided to play her game like the stupid ass that I am.

“Those are all good things to have, Naomi,” I groaned inwardly. Here was the trap. “But I hear that you didn’t mention sacrifice.” WHAT! SACRIFICE?! Didn’t she hear what I just said? Out loud I only said

“Sacrifice?”

“Yes, Naomi, sacrifice. I don’t think you have any idea the sacrifices a mother must make for her children.” I stared at her in disbelief. She didn’t think I knew about sacrifice! What in the fuck did I ever do that made her think that I didn’t know about the sacrifices I’d have to make as a mother to those children! It’s been nearly a year of me constantly sacrificing for those children. Nearly a year since Alonzo hurt his head. Every day since that accident I have spent denying myself everything in order to save them! I didn’t see my friends, destroyed the relationship with my favorite Uncle, was verbally and emotionally abused day in and day out by that same uncle, sacrificed sleep and sanity every day preparing paperwork so that they could come home, I was paying rent in an apartment that I didn’t even use because I kept believing that this shit would be over and I could go back to my own life. I knew what a pipe dream that was. But for my own mother to say that I didn’t know sacrifice after everything I’d done in the last year. What the fuck. How dare she say that to me, HOW DARE SHE!

“*Sacrifice*” I said it again, this time a whisper. My voice a few octaves higher than it normally would be with the stress of trying not to yell. My mother just looked at me smugly. That broke me. “You don’t think I know about SACRIFICE!” I began to yell. I could tell from

my mom's expression that she wasn't expecting me to yell. At 24 years old it had been exactly 10 years since I yelled at her in anger.

“HOW DARE YOU! HOW FUCKING DARE YOU!” This wasn't the way I talked to my mom. One incident at fourteen years and one other at nine years were the only times I can remember ever yelling at my mom this way. The stress and anger and fear that I had been building up to the last year came screaming out of me.

YOU DON'T THINK I KNOW? WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK THAT I'VE BEEN DOING FOR THE LAST FUCKING YEAR!” My mother tried to interrupt me, which only enraged me further. “NO, YOU DON'T GET TO FUCKING TALK ITS MY FUCKING TURN AND YOU WILL LISTEN TO ME!” I let loose on her at that point, I don't remember all that I said, only the ending.

“AND YOU DON'T GET TO SAY ANOTHER WORD TO ME ABOUT SACRIFICE!”

My mother tried to say something again, to get the last word in. I wouldn't allow it

“NO! NOTHING! NO!”

“I just want to say—”

“NO!”

“Nao—”

“NO!”

“I jus—”

“NOT ANOTHER FUCKING WORD! YOU DON'T GET TO TALK!”

“May—”

“NOOO! NO! NO! NOOOO!” I screamed at her until she left the room. At some point I had stood up, realizing this, I sat back down on the couch. My heart was pounding and I had a headache. I was so tired. And so fucking sad. I felt betrayed. I could only hope that my mom was able to see how much she hurt me by saying those things. I lay on the couch for a long time waiting for sleep to come.

A few days later I overheard my mom talking on the phone with my grandma, she was laughing.

“She was screaming at me, mom.” My mom laughed, “All I could think was she’s finally acting like a teenager.” She laughed again. I felt like I’d been punched in the chest.

XIV

Living in Little Falls with Herbert and Alonzo was so much better than living at my Uncle's house. There was no drama, no screaming fights, and no walking on eggshells. We passed the home inspection with flying colors. I was able to clean the whole house in less than three hours and get a decent amount of sleep before they came. After they left, I was able to take care of the boys in the way that I thought was appropriate and have the largest say about their care. It took only a week for Alonzo and Hebert to become fully sleep trained. Without my Uncle's constant interference, we were able to keep up with the sleep schedule until I was able to lay both boys down in bed and simply walk away. No rocking and no lying next to them. Just a story a song and a kiss was all it took.

Alex was in a women's shelter in St. Cloud. We made a point to visit her once a week and have a nightly phone call at 7pm with her so that she could stay in contact with the boys. Uncle, on the other hand, fell deep into a bottle; beer bottle or pill bottle it didn't matter to him. He used, as far as I could tell, indiscriminately. With our new locations I soon was able to set up a new rhythm to our lives. I spent the next few weeks fixing up my mom's spare bedroom into a proper bedroom for the Herbert and Alonzo. I decided I like a pirate theme and spent hours looking for matching bed sets and carpets and a proper bed and crib for Herbert and Alonzo. Feeling settled for the first time since I got back to Minnesota, I was able to spend my summer in relative happiness.

Each day with Herbert and Alonzo was something new. I was teaching Alonzo animal sounds and the alphabet. Every morning we would sing the ABC's together and look through animal books. I bought him a few touch and feel sound books to help him learn. His favorite one

was the little lion roar. He'd giggle uncontrollably every time he pressed the button. He was growing and learning faster than I thought possible. He absorbed everything so quickly I wondered if he might be a gifted. I did a lot of google searches with most of the results saying that all parents think their child is gifted, but from what I could tell Alonzo really was. He knew his colors and most of his ABC's when he sang them. He could do animal noises and had two-word sentences before his first birthday. I thought he was marvelous! Gifted! Exceptional! Which is why when social services sent workers to me to help his "mental retardation" I just about lost my mind.

"What are you assessing exactly?" I asked the worker who had shown up that morning. They'd called about an hour before showing up and I gave them my sister's address in Little Falls instead of my mom's because her apartment was bigger.

"We received reports of both Herbert and Alonzo suffering from some significant mental and physical delays. We're just here to assess how challenged they might be." The lady smiled sweetly at me as her colleague took notes on their laptop.

"Who said they were suffering delays?" I asked. I was trying not to be angry. These women were only doing their jobs but it was difficult not to lash out at them for presuming to think my babies had "challenges".

"The other foster home they were in made some significant notation about their condition." She said.

"To be fair, Alonzo had just been eaten by a dog and was on pain medication." I was a bit snappish when I said this and the lady looked surprised. Maybe she didn't realize what Alonzo

had been through or she was surprised at the way I phrased it. Either way I found referring to it in such a blunt manner helped me deal.

“Well, we’re just going to ask them to do a few different activities to see where they are at. Alright?” She was using that sweet smiling voice at me again. I smiled sweetly back. I decided to withhold my anger until after the assessment. I had been working with Herbert and Alonzo for nearly four months now. Alonzo especially had made significant improvement since he returned home. We would prove these women and those other stupid foster parents wrong.

The activities started simply enough. They wanted Alonzo to put some balls into a bucket. Alonzo looked irritated with the activity. Seeing his irritation and fueling my need to prove them wrong I decided to show off.

“Alonzo,” I asked, “what color ball?” Alonzo, I swear, nearly rolled his eyes before saying clearly for everyone to hear, “green.” Though it sounded a bit more like ‘geen’ it was clear enough. He named each color ball that he put in the bucket after that. “Red. Blue. Green.” I smiled widely at Alonzo and looked at the workers to see them confusedly looking at their notes and flipping through pages. I felt a sense of pride swell inside me. These people had no idea who they were dealing with. Each activity after that went the same. They would ask Herbert or Alonzo to do something simple and I would complicate it for them. They would ask Herbert to sort the colored cards and I would ask him which color had more and which color had the least and to put them in order. They would ask Alonzo to bang two toys together and I would ask him what the names of the toys were. They would ask Herbert to balance on one leg and I told him to hop on one leg. They would ask to see Alonzo crawl and I made him stand and walk with his cruising toy. Even if I didn’t know it then he was only a few days away from walking by himself.

By the time the women were done taking notes they looked completely bewildered. I smiled smugly at them.

“So, what’s the verdict?” I asked sweetly, only mocking them a tiny bit.

“Well,” said one. “As far as I can see, I don’t understand why we were called in to assess these boys. They are quite obviously not challenged in any area. Physical or mental.” The other woman agreed with her.

“When the other foster family gave us the report we were sure that they needed some special services. Now though, I’m not exactly sure what we are doing here.” The whispered to each other for a minute and I was sure they were wondering if they even got the right kids written down in their notes. They left soon after stating that they wouldn’t need to visit us again and that they would put in their system that Herbert and Alonzo are doing exceptionally well. I thanked them politely and as soon as I closed the door I scooped Herbert up into the air.

“WOOHOO!” I yelled! “You did it Herbert!” Herbert had no idea why I was spinning him or why I was so happy he just laughed and thought it was great fun.

“MIMI!” Herbert screamed, “DOWN!” I laughed as I swung Herbert to the ground and he dizzily fell onto his butt. I crawled forward and kissed Alonzo all over his face.

“Brilliant, brilliant boy!” I said kissing him. He annoyedly pushed my face away saying

“EH!” Alonzo scowled at me. He wasn’t nearly as easy to amuse as Herbert was but I knew exactly what he was missing. The women had eaten into our lunch time.

“Oh!” I said in a grumpy voice. “Do we have a Mr. Grumpy Gills here? Are you a Mr. Grumpy Gills?” Alonzo pushed my face away again, this time he was even more irritated.

“EEEHH!” Alonzo’s grumpiness only made me laugh more.

“Okay, okay.” I said. “I’ll get you some lunch.” I quickly went to the kitchen and made up some lunch for the boys. It was remarkable how easily Alonzo was soothed by food and the boy could *eat*. At this point he was eating more than Herbert was at meals. I read that it might just be that Herbert was at an age where he was a pickier eater, but Alonzo could put it away and he was *TINY*. When he would get to be just a bit older, he would be able to eat more pizza than I could in a sitting. I was worried that he had a tapeworm or something and bombarded Google, my mother, and his doctor about it for months until they convinced me that he could just eat a lot and that there was nothing wrong with him.

That afternoon, after the boys had eaten and I lay them down for a late nap I asked Jessie, who had been chilling upstairs with her own kids while the workers were over, if I could host Alonzo’s first birthday at her house. When she agreed I rushed to the store to order his cake. I only had little over a week to put his party together. I ended up choosing Sesame Street as the theme since Alonzo didn’t really have any interest in anything particular at the moment. He never really cared for T.V or any of the programming that I put on for him or Herbert. Herbert loved it but Alonzo couldn’t seem to be bothered. After I ordered his cake as well as a smaller one that was meant for him to destroy by himself, I went on a mission to buy him presents. I was worried that he wouldn’t get any from anyone else. He always took a backseat in Alex and Uncle’s minds and I didn’t have a lot of friends that would want to come to a one-year old’s birthday party. Not that I had a lot of friends anymore anyways. Most of them disappeared after a year of me being so involved with the boys. Not that I blamed them. It took a lot to handle the drama that I was in. Even just hearing about it was tough. It still sucked though.

I bought him a huge number of presents. Anything I thought that he might like at the store, I bought him. I wasn't being too picky either; a drum, mega Legos, stuffed animals, Sesame Street cars, blocks, electronic phone, and books. I didn't want to set up his party only to see that his present table was empty. When I got home later with the boys and the presents my mom said that I was being ridiculous. Maybe I was, but Herbert got a ton of presents at his party, I didn't want Alonzo to think that he'd been forgotten. Even though he wouldn't remember his first birthday, I would. I was determined that I wouldn't fail him. Not again.

XV

The night before Alonzo's party I drove over to Jessie's house to see if she needed any help cleaning up for the party. She kept her house ok enough, but I wanted it to be extra perfect for Alonzo's day. When I got to her house I was surprised to find it full of strangers who were drinking and smoking cigarettes inside the house.

"Jessie," I called, making my way through the smoky living room. I found Jessie in the kitchen with a few of her friends drinking. "What are you doing?" I asked her. "I thought you said you would clean the house tonight to get ready for Alonzo's party!"

"I am, I am." Jessie smiled at me. "Don't worry. They only came over for a little bit. Once they leave I'll clean. Okay? Don't worry about it." Jessie was smiling and leading me towards the door. I didn't trust her completely to keep her word but I trusted her enough that I thought she would probably start cleaning tomorrow when she woke up. I told her to call me if she needed any help after her "guests" left and went home. It wasn't even two hours later when I got a phone call from her friend, Jacey.

"Naomi! You have to come! Jessie is seriously flipping the fuck out. She's screaming and kicking. She's gonna get the fucking cops called on us."

"What the fuck!" I said. "Lock her in her bedroom!" I was already on my feet and shaking my mom awake.

"I did!" she yelled. "But the bitch won't stop screaming!"

"What the fuck is she screaming about?" I asked.

"I don't fucking know, Naomi. She just started getting all mad and up in people's faces saying that they kept trying to fight her but no one was even doing anything!"

“Okay,” I said. “I’m gonna wake my mom up. Call me if anything happens.” I hung up the phone with her and shook my mom harder to wake her up. She jumped when she finally opened her eyes.

“What?” She said sleepily. “What do you want?” I told her about the situation at Jessie’s house and only just finished when Jacey called me back.

“The crazy bitch just jumped out the window!” She screamed when I answered her. “She just fucking jumped! She doesn’t even have any pants on!”

“SHE JUMPED!” I screamed. I wasn’t too worried that she injured herself. She was only on the second floor and it wasn’t that high up but jumping while you’re drunk and naked? That was insane. My mom scrambled out of bed, rushing to throw clothes on and head out the door.

“I tried chasing her, but now I can’t fucking find her, Naomi. I don’t know where the fuck she is.” Jacey said. I could hear her panting over the phone, running outside to find Jessie. It was a good thing that it was mid-June. It would have sucked to go looking for her in January.

“Mom’s on her way to help you look. Okay?” I hung up the phone with her and asked mom to keep me updated on what was happening. About thirty minutes later Jacey came walking through the door.

“Your mom is still looking for her, I think she called the cops.” She said when she sat down.

“Good,” I said. “Anything could happen to her out there! She’s drunk and naked! She could be fucking murdered! Or raped!” I was tired. I was tired of jessie pulling stunts like this, I was tired of being the one to clean up her messes, I was tired of not being able to rely on anyone.

How were we going to have Alonzo's party if Jessie was flying off the deep end? "Where are the kids?" I asked.

"Denise is with them." She said.

"Denise?"

"Yeah, Deanna's sister?" Jacey explained. Deanna had been Jessie's best friend when she was sixteen who died in a drunk driving accident. Jessie had taken over as a surrogate big sister to Deanna's younger sisters, Denise and Danielle.

"OH! Denise! I didn't see her there earlier. Ah man, poor fucking Denise. She doesn't deserve to be around Jessie when she's acting like this." As bad as I felt about Denise being there, I was glad that she was keeping an eye on Jordyn and Cedar. About an hour later and after Jacey went home, Mom called me with the update.

"We found her." She said. "But she's going to jail."

"What! Why?" I asked. She paused before answering me.

"Well the cops found her in one of the other homes over here, some people took her in, but then she started causing a scene over there, telling the kids that she woke up that their dad was a pedophile."

"What the fuck." I groaned. Mom kept going, ignoring my interruption.

"Then when the cops got there, she wouldn't go with them. All she had to do was follow them home but instead she had to fight them."

"NAKED!" I exclaimed.

"No, the dad in the other house gave her some shorts to put on. Anyways, I told the cops that it would take more than one of them to take her down, but they didn't fucking listen to me.

No, they thought I was being dramatic. That, as her mother, I couldn't possibly know more about my daughter than they could." I rolled my eyes at my mom's outburst, luckily, she couldn't see me. "They believed me after she took down two of them by herself, slipped out of the handcuffs they finally got her in, bit one, smashed another one's phone, kept calling them pussies, demanded that they fight like men, and then finally had to be held down by six of them."

"WHAT THE FUCK!" I couldn't believe it. Stupid, stupid Jessie. No wonder she's going to jail. "She'll be lucky if they don't press assault charges against her!" I finally said. I could hear my mom sigh on the other end.

"That's not all, Naomi" She said sadly.

"What is it?"

"The house is completely trashed. It looks like there are drinks spilled everywhere, and something that smells like pee is going all the way down the stairs, and I don't even want to know what happened in the kitchen sink." I could hear my mom inside the house going from room to room. I groaned, my face falling into my hands. I couldn't believe it. Alonzo's party ruined before it even started.

"I'm going to have to go there early tomorrow to clean it." I said.

"I don't know, baby. It's really bad." I could hear the worry in my mom's voice. I knew she thought I was being ridiculous about Alonzo's party but I didn't care. He would have a wonderful birthday even if it killed me. Mom came home not too long after that with Denise, Jordyn, and Cedar. They would stay at our house until we could get things sorted out with Jessie.

True to my word, I woke early the next morning and went to Jessie's house and started to clean. Mom had come over after a while to help. Soon enough, we had the house looking and

smelling decent. I didn't care that Jessie was in jail. She said we could use her house and we did. I set up all the decorations with help from Denise while my mom went to go pick up Alex and my little sister, Randi from St. Cloud. Randi was my dad's youngest daughter at ten years old and thought of my mom as her grandma. Randi's mother had, at one point, been my mom's best friend. Needless to say, they no longer spoke. It turned out that my fears were well founded about the turn out to Alonzo's party. No one came. My grandpa had dropped off his gifts for Alonzo a few days before since he wouldn't be able to make it, my friend, Megan, had decided to stay home, and Krista was four hours late and stayed for only thirty minutes. Natasha, came an hour late and was surprised to find the party as empty as it was. I explained to her that most people dropped out last minute and weren't coming.

I pushed through the lack of attendance and focused on Alonzo. Because of my manic shopping he looked like he had a decent number of present, even though eighty percent of them were from me. I was a little put off by the fact that Alex held Alonzo in her arms while he opened presents but decided not to let it get to me. I had to remind myself that no one thought of me in terms of being Alonzo's caregiver, let alone mother. The best part of the day was watching Alonzo destroy his cake. He was covered from head to toe in red and white frosting and grinning ear to ear. I can still see him sitting there, covered in frosting and thinking that I couldn't imagine a happier kid on this earth. It made everything worth it to see that smile on his face.

XVI

The rest of the summer was mostly ok. Uncle had finally gotten his shit together enough to get a few visits with the boys. They always went really well. He was polite to me, brought the boys toys, and tried especially hard to bond with Alonzo. I think he'd realized how much he was neglecting Alonzo in favor of Herbert. I was happy to see them getting along and made sure to take pictures of them to post on Facebook. It was also during this time that another death rocked my family. My cousin, Kaia, had died unexpectedly. I found my mother one morning crying in the kitchen. When she told me that Kaia had died, I had to sit down. Another cousin gone. Once again, I was trying to think of the last thing I said to her, the last time I saw her. I scavenged Facebook trying to figure it out but only ended up crying when I saw all the R.I.P's posted on her Facebook page. My sister, Tala called me crying. She couldn't believe Kaia was gone. She had been so excited for our family reunion that was less than a month away. She was only 26 when she died. I never actually found out how she died. There was no funeral service, her mother quietly cremated her, and the rest of us mourned.

My grandma was doubly affected by Kaia's death. Kaia was the eldest daughter of her youngest son, my uncle Eric, who died in 2010 in a carbon monoxide accident. She was angry at most everyone in the family. She felt like none of us put in enough effort to include Kaia more than we did in our family since she had only been coming around for a few years after finding her father and getting in touch with all of us. I was always pretty confused as to how things happened with Kaia. The way my mom explained it is that Eric had Kaia when he was a lot younger and her mother took off with her leaving Kaia to find her way back to us when she was old enough. That could be the truth, or it could be the story that my mother told me. I don't know

if I'll ever know what really happened with her birth, life, and death. I only know that losing her was awful even if our relationship consisted mostly in sharing Supernatural memes and wishing each other happy birthday. For our family reunion, that we were having at a beach in Little Falls, we made her a memorial board so that it would be like she was there with us.

The family reunion was also the moment I realized Herbert was officially potty trained. I'd been slowly training him for months and was sick and tired of him having accidents. For months I tried everything from prizes, sticker charts, and leaving him naked all day (which parenting forums assured me would potty train him in three days or less, but only ended up with me scrubbing poop off of my carpet). I never realized before how intensely angry I would get potty training a toddler. Too many days were filled with frustrated yelling on my part, I would scream

“HERBERT, NO! YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO PEE IN THE POTTY!”

“WHY WOULD YOU POOP ON THE FLOOR!”

“STOP!” My temper got so wildly out of control one day that in my yelling, I made Herbert cry.

“HERBERT! YOU KNOW BETTER! HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU!” I screamed at Herbert. “LOOK AT ME WHEN I TALK TO YOU! HERBERT, LOOK AT ME!” When he was finally able to bring himself to look at me, shame flooded me. He had tears in his eyes that he was fighting not to spill. I could tell that I had scared him and felt the need to banish myself to the lowest depths of parenting hell. I was a bad parent. Seeing my little baby in tears caused me to cry as well. I sank to the floor and sobbed.

“I’m so sorry, Herbert! I’m so sorry!” I cried and held my arms out to him, hoping that I didn’t damage our relationship permanently. Luckily, kids are forgiving creatures. He ran into my arms and cried only for a few moments longer.

“Herbert, look at me,” I said, gently this time. “I’m going to try never to yell at you again, ok?” Herbert looked at me with his big brown eyes full of love and trust.

“Ok,” he said as he laid his head on my chest. I kept my promise to him, and never yelled at him over potty training again.

The day I realized he was fully potty trained came only a few weeks after that. We were swimming at a beach in the middle of June. The entire day was spent with my mom’s side of the family cooking hotdogs, playing volleyball, and reminiscing. We had up a poster to memorialize my cousin who died from unknown causes only weeks before. At the end of the day, while getting the kids ready to go, took Herbert off the beach to change him from his little swimmer and swim shorts to his dry clothes.

“Did you have fun today, Herbert?” I asked him, I knew he did and that he would sleep really well that night because of it.

“Yea, I had fun!” Herbert was standing stark naked at the point I turned around to grab his pull up. Suddenly, Herbert yelled,

“MIMI, I HAVE TO GO POTTY!” With his announcement he took off running down the beach to reach the bathrooms on the other side, completely butt ass naked. Stunned, it took me a few seconds to realize my child was waving his parts around a public beach in front of a bunch of strangers. I took off running after him his clothes waving wildly in one hand.

“HERBERT, NO! YOU HAVE TO WAIT!” At this point, my family and the entire beach had noticed us and began to laugh. I continued to yell, but realizing the ridiculousness of the situation, began to laugh as well.

“HERBERT, YOU’RE NAKED!” He only yelled back at me,

“I HAVE TO GO POTTY, MIMI!” By the time I caught up with him he had reached the bathrooms and we ran inside together. All by himself he climbed on to the potty and went pee! A lot. I couldn’t believe it!

“You did it, Herbert! I’m so proud of you!” I gave him a big hug while he was still sitting on the potty. I got him dressed in the bathroom stall and when we left proclaimed him officially potty trained. My mother told me not to get my hopes up, that it could have been a one-time thing. It wasn’t. My baby was potty trained and a whole beach full of strangers was able to witness it in all its naked glory. This incident I’m sure will go down in family history. It’s too funny not to. I wonder if some strangers on that beach will remember the day with humor too, watching a young mother chase her naked toddler across a beach.

It was at this same beach that Herbert had caught a fish with his bare hands earlier that summer. Jessie, Jacey, Denise, and I had all been standing in the water with the kids playing at our feet when Herbert kept saying something no one was paying attention to until Jacey looked down. It turned out Herbert had been saying “Feesh! Feesh! I got feesh!” When Jacey finally looked at him she saw he was holding a dead fish in his hands and was waving it around. Without thinking, Jacey started screaming, which then caused the rest of us to scream when we saw what he had. Jordyn started screaming as did Cedar and Alonzo. It took Herbert a second longer to figure out what we were all screaming about and was so terrified he didn’t know what

to do with the dead fish in his hands. He only stared at it screaming until finally throwing it as far away as he could. We ran out of the lake and fell on the grass laughing. The moment was so ridiculous that I would remember it forever.

Those hot happy days of summer were some of the best in my life. They were filled with love, family, and my babies. I couldn't imagine a better way to spend it. It felt like my life had reached a point of true happiness. Herbert was potty trained, Alonzo was learning his ABC's and was completely healed from his accident with the dog. He didn't know any better than the happy lives we were living. Which is why it came as a little bit of a shock when Alex finally got her own place. She found a place in St. Cloud that was handicap accessible and perfect for her needs. She was really proud of herself for finding it and the shelter she was at helped her get free furniture to fill it with. Jessie and I helped her move in and get settled. It was a bit of a reality check for me. In my happy moments during the summer, I had somehow forgotten that Herbert and Alonzo weren't actually mine to keep.

XVII

A couple weeks after Alex moved into her new apartment, we all went to the Benton County Fair. Uncle was meeting us there in order to take the boys on different rides. I wasn't sure of all the rides that Alonzo could go on, but I knew Herbert would have a good time. He loved seeing his dad. Uncle ended up going on a few different rides with Herbert and Alonzo, He had Herbert's face painted to look like Batman, bought him candy and toys, and made sure that he had the best time possible with them. I was proud of my uncle but I could tell that he was withdrawing from something. He was sweating harder than the heat was making him and he kept shaking. When we finally left the fair and were on our way home I stopped to buy him a coke to drink. It was his favorite. He thanked me but later that night while I was cleaning out my car, I found it unopened. A few days later he drunk called me, telling me that I was being bitch and all other sorts of horrible crap. I hung up on him. I didn't need to put up with that. He left me a few voicemails, which I ignored.

A few days after the fair I got the news that I was going to teach a class at SCSU. I couldn't believe it. They wanted me to teach? No freaking way. I wasn't qualified for that crap! I accepted anyway. I was going to go in a week before school started in order to get trained in, I was upset at first thinking that I would miss pow-wow weekend, but the week of training ended just before pow-wow so I was lucky. I hadn't yet told my uncle that I would be going into grad school let alone that I would be teaching there. I was still angry at him from his phone call, especially after I thought that things were going better between us. Still, I made nice with him when we met during pow-wow so he could hang out with Herbert and Alonzo. I took a lot of pictures of all of them together and was happy to see how happy Herbert and Alonzo were.

Alonzo especially was finally really bonding with his dad. I saw huge smiles on his face that I hadn't really seen Alonzo use with his dad before. Uncle was doing a good job in making up for lost time. He showed Herbert how to play moccasin game, fussed about Alonzo being too cold, and told both Herbert and Alonzo again and again how much he loved them. He didn't say much to me at all and I didn't say anything either. I was still mad about the voicemails and drunk calling.

The Monday after pow-wow, I started grad school. I had made an agreement with Alex that during the week I would stay with her so that she could watch the boys while I was at school. We ran it by Family Services and they were on board. They thought it might be a good way for Alex to start transitioning to have the boys live with her. I agreed, though secretly I wished that they could stay with me forever. Alex lived close enough to the school that I could walk back and forth and wouldn't have to waste money on gas. My first day I was so nervous I didn't even know what to do with myself. I fumbled in my classroom and my voice was shaking. At least it wasn't as bad as some of the horror stories I'd read and heard about other first-time teachers. I decided right then and there that I liked being a student a lot better than I liked being a teacher. Though these teachers didn't seem to be messing around. They explained that they had a pretty strict attendance policy only because every single day was important and that they moved quickly through the subject matter. Most classes were only once a week. Meaning that if I missed two classes it was an automatic fail. I'd never failed anything in my life and I wasn't about to start. With the fear of God put into me I made a promise never to skip class unless someone was dying. I should have known better at this point than to make those sorts of promises to myself.

Sunday night, before my second week of classes we got a call from my uncle Allen saying that Herb had been taken to the hospital in Minneapolis. Most of the family was frantic. I brushed it off. My uncle had been checking himself into the E.R for years and nothing ever happened to him. I always thought that he had a panic disorder and that when he had a panic attack he would make a big deal that he was dying and check himself into the hospital. This was nothing new.

“Are they saying what’s wrong with him?” I asked Alex as I was wrestling Alonzo into his high chair. Alex wheeled over to her stove to stir the contents of the pot.

“No,” Alex answered me, “Allen just called and said he found a note on the table when he got home from work. When he checked at Onamia Hospital, they said the brought him down to the cities. Everyone is going to see him today.”

“Are you going to? I can’t I have to go to school.” I said this, even if the truth was I wasn’t ready to face my uncle after our last fight. I didn’t even tell him I started to go to graduate school and was teaching there. I wanted to be able to throw it in his face if he made a comment about my failed college degree.

“No, I don’t know,” Alex said. “Yea, I’ll go, maybe tomorrow.” We left it at that and finished dinner. Later that night, I got a call from my brother, Keenan. He told me uncle was a little worse for the wear but that he would be alright. That the doctors had a treatment plan in place for his failing liver. He’d been drinking a lot more since me, Alex, and the kids left.

“Yea,” My brother laughed, “He was grumpy that everyone was making a big deal out of it. He said ‘Don’t know why everyone has got to be here! I’m goddamn fine!’ he even flipped me off as I was headed out the door. He’s gonna be fine, but I’m still heading back here

tomorrow.” Relief flooded through me at his words. I relayed to Alex what Keenan said and we both laughed at my uncle. Of course, he would be the one to flip the people off who visited in the hospital.

“I’m going to bed,” Alex said, “Natasha said she’d bring me up there in the morning.” I wished her goodnight and got started some homework. I fell asleep not long after one o’clock that night, only to be woken at three am by Alex crying. Apparently, my uncle had gotten worse during the night and the hospital staff was calling family to be at his bedside. Natasha, my uncle’s oldest daughter, came and picked up Alex while I stayed home with Herbert and Alonzo. We didn’t want to traumatize them by waking them in the middle of the night and going to the hospital. Plus, I had school the next day. I couldn’t go.

The entire time Alex was gone, I was sure that the doctors were making a big deal out of nothing. That my uncle would be fine. He’d been in the hospital so many times throughout his life that the doctors had no idea who they were dealing with. The whole thing was a big waste of time and worrying.

At nine o’clock that morning on August 30th, while the boys were playing with their toys and laughing and being children, my mother called me. My uncle had died. Disbelief and denial ran through me the same moment tears fell from my eyes. My breath caught in my throat. It couldn’t be true! It couldn’t fucking be true! They were fucking with me somehow. It was mean and I didn’t like it. Even as these thoughts circled my head, I knew that they weren’t lying. No one would try to make a joke out of this. My uncle, my favorite uncle, the man who I grew up with making me grilled cheeses, who always took time out to take to me when I was a kid, the man at one point I considered to walk me down the aisle was dead.

“Mimi,” Herbert had walked up to me, “Don’t cry Mimi.” I scooped Herbert up into my arms and squeezed him close. My tears still falling.

“Why cry, Mimi?” Herbert asked me. I didn’t know what to say. How could I tell him? How could I even make him understand what death is? He wasn’t yet three years old and his father was dead. He wouldn’t understand it. I cried harder the moment I realized that there was a good possibility that Herbert wouldn’t even remember his father. My earliest memories were from when I was three years old and Herbert hadn’t even hit that birthday yet. I knew Alonzo would never remember, no matter how many stories we told. He was only one. How could I reveal to them a reality that I was having a hard time grasping myself? I said the words to myself over and over again in my head trying to get used to them and failing. *My uncle is dead. My uncle is dead. My uncle is dead.* In that moment, a sob escaping from my throat, I wished I was too.

Section III: Life

I

My uncle's funeral took place a few days later. We were in the community center where all funerals are held. I stayed with his body most of the night. It's customary to stay with the body of the departed. We are supposed to watch over him and help him guide his spirit by keeping a fire lit for three days. I'd never stayed overnight before. I never felt the need to, but with my uncle, I knew I had to. I brought homework with me in the hopes that it would make the situation a little less morbid. It didn't. The book I had to read was called *Discipline and Punish* and the first chapter was describing the torture of a man. I put it away not caring that I wouldn't get my homework done. I knew I could ask my professors for a few days off and that they might even be understanding enough to give them to me. However, I knew myself well enough that if I took a break I would quit and I would never go back to school. My uncle, for all of his flaws, was actually proud of me that I went to Marquette University and graduated early. He would never say so in front of me, but going back through my Facebook, after he died, I saw how many times he commented on being proud of who I was and what I was accomplishing. I wished that I told him about grad school. I wished that I told him about teaching.

My mom said that she told him about it and that he was proud of me. I don't know if I believed her. It's the kind of sentimental thing she would say to make me feel better. Everyone was saying nice things to me. Saying that he's in a better place, that he was suffering on earth and now he can be with the creator, that he isn't in pain anymore. They lit sage and smudged everything. Others prayed. I hated all of them for it. Praying. Smudging. Believing that there was a God out there that was watching over us. That if I prayed I would feel better? It was all such self-soothing sentimental bullshit that didn't mean anything! My uncle was still dead! He was

lying in a casket, immobile, ready to rot in the ground. How dare they try to tell me to feel better! I was so angry! Even in death my uncle was an ASSHOLE and I was still so ANGRY with him. I could feel a scream in my chest all weekend. Clogged there. I could feel it pressing against my heart and my lungs keeping me from being able to breathe properly. I wanted to be able to mourn like I had in the past. Cry only at the funeral and laugh during the wake. That was what we did. That's what we all did. We'd share stories and food and we would laugh and then we would cry. This time though, I couldn't do it. I could barely force a sound to come out of my mouth.

Family Services had sent their condolences and set Herbert and Alonzo up with proper respite care. I dropped them off myself with a list of instructions on how to take care of them. The respite foster mother was a bit speechless. As if she'd never been handed six pages of child care instructions. I missed them already and wanted to go back and be with them. Alex had told Herbert about his dad, but he didn't understand. He couldn't understand. I made a mental note to go pick him up a children's book that deals with death and loss because even if he didn't understand death, he would still understand that his daddy doesn't come to see him anymore. Eventually, he will notice that it's been too long since he's seen his dad and he will get upset. I just had to be ready for him when that happened.

I could see a few of the Family Services workers in the crowd of people in the community center on the day we buried him. I didn't care to see them there. They didn't understand what I was going through. How could they? They'd only known me and my uncle the last year. The entire year we spent at each other's throats fighting. It wasn't always like that. For most of my life we'd gotten along really well. We'd play cards together and monopoly. I bought him expensive watches and he bought me Samurai swords. We loved the same kinds of books

and movies and had a similar sense of humor. None of them knew that. None of them saw that. None of them ever saw the compassionate man that he was. They only saw the angry sick man that he'd been in his last year of his life and it wasn't fair! I wanted to blame them. If it wasn't for them then Herbert and Alonzo would have never been taken away. If it wasn't for them we wouldn't have been fighting. If it wasn't for them he would still be alive!

The ceremony before we buried him was the worst. It always is when someone dies. An old man, speaking Ojibwe, starts shaking this rattle over the body. I don't know what he says or what the significance of the rattle is, only what I feel when he uses it. For my uncle, the feeling was ten times worse. He brought the rattle out and I lost my mind. The power of it made me double over in my seat, tears streaming from my eyes. Try as I might to hold my sobs in I couldn't. I let a wail loose that filled the entire community center. I felt the people who were sitting beside and behind me begin to hold my hands and rub my back. I didn't know who they were that was trying to comfort me, only that it made no difference. Pain ripped through me and there was no stopping it. I cried loud and hard and for the first time in my life I didn't care that people saw me cry. Nameless, faceless people lined up to have one last look at the body and to give the family hugs. I hated that part most. I couldn't bear to be touched and so many people were touching me, holding me, patting me. One woman pressed a bottle of water into my hand and urged me to drink. I obeyed, but it went down like a rock and only caused my stomach to spasm.

I gained enough control of myself to look up just as they were closing the lid. I caught one last glimpse of his forehead before he was gone forever. I collapsed into a new fit of sobs. By my side I caught a glimpse of Natasha trying her best to remain strong and stoic and I could

see Alex right next to her crying quietly. My grandfather only looked straight ahead, unblinking. We buried him next to my great-grandmother Jennie. A bit away from Phil and Tanya. I didn't know if he would like it or not. He loved his grandmother so probably. What did it matter though? He wouldn't ever know. He was dead.

II

I went back to school the very next Monday. I didn't tell anyone what happened. I barely knew anyone there and I didn't want them to think that I was going to be troublesome and dramatic all semester, even if my life was. It wasn't too long after that when Alex kicked me and the boys out of her house.

"It's just too much for me!" Alex yelled. "I'm taking care of the boys all the time and I just can't handle it right now!" I stood bewildered. I couldn't believe what she was saying. She couldn't handle it? She watched them four hours a day, four days a week. It wasn't that much! I took care of them when I got home, I cleaned the house for Alex, I made sure the boys were bathed and in bed. I woke up in the morning with them all while doing my homework, but the four hours a day I was gone was too much for her? Wasn't she always saying that she could be a mother if Family Services would just give her the right tools? Wasn't four hours a day taking care of her own children a tool to help her get them back? It didn't matter anymore. If she wanted us out, we would leave. She could have the boys on a visit once a week like before. I couldn't do this anymore. Alex had been picking fights with me ever since Uncle died. It was anything from I didn't listen to her enough to I didn't spend any time with her. I tried explaining to her that I wasn't purposefully ignoring her when I was doing my homework at night and that it wasn't that I didn't want to spend time with her. I was just busy. Once the boys were down to sleep I only had a few hours to work on my homework and a lesson plan for the next day not to mention grading anything my students turned in. I didn't have time to sit down for a two-hour heart to heart with her!

That was one thing about Alex. She loved to talk about problems, real or imaginary. It was like her life didn't mean anything if there wasn't a problem for her to try and solve or fight about. It was exhausting. She couldn't just have a normal conversation. Everything had to be heavy conversations about life and solving problems she thought we were having. Which only made her more self-righteous in her anger since she could see that she was at least a little bit right. No, I didn't want to talk to her at night when I got home. Every other day it was "Naomi, I want to talk to you about something when the kids go to bed." Or "Naomi, I can't say right now, but we need to have a discussion." For weeks she was bombarding me with these 'discussions' and I was sick of it. I began to avoid them altogether by forcing her to tell me what she wanted to talk about right away rather than wait for a time we could 'sit down' and talk. They were always really simple things to solve too, it was nothing dire. It was always something like "I want to discuss the way we do timeout." "Okay, how do you want to do it?" "I don't know. I just know that I don't like the way you do it." "Okay, let me know when you figure it out." She'd get angry then, saying we needed to figure it out together. Only there was nothing to figure out because she couldn't even tell me what the problem was in the first place!

If I did actually sit down to discuss things like timeout with her it always turned into the same fight. "What's wrong with the way I do timeout?" "I don't know, but you need to change it" "What do you want me to change about it?" "I just don't like it." "What. Don't. You. Like?" "I don't know, maybe the way he has to sit in a corner." "Okay, would you rather we had a timeout chair?" "No, I don't like that idea." "Okay, what about a timeout room? He can have time in his room or on his bed to calm down." "No, I don't want him on his bed!" "Ok, then what if we do a three-strike warning system before time out?" "No, that won't work either! They need

to listen to me right away.” “OK, Alex. What solutions do you have?” “I don’t know! That’s why we need to discuss it!” These conversations always left me with the feeling that the sweet nothingness of death would be worth it. Luckily, these conversations also made it really easy to move out. I was just bewildered as to her reasoning. Living back at mom’s full time was alright. I was a bit worried about her watching the boys while I was at school since she was getting older and the boys could be a handful, but she seemed to manage just fine even if she was tired at the end of the day.

Since the boys were going to stay in Little Falls all day while I was in school, I decided to register Herbert for Head Start and Alonzo for Early Childhood Education. There was a waitlist about a mile long, however, since the program was need based and Herbert and Alonzo were technically foster children, they went straight to the top of the list and got in. I was in love with their program and their teachers. Alonzo had his very own teacher who came to the house once a week to work with him. I liked her immediately since she could see how brilliant Alonzo was. Sooner than I knew it, the day of Alonzo’s prosthetics surgery came. We all woke up early that morning, I left Alonzo in pajamas and dressed Herbert in comfortable clothes. I wasn’t sure how long the surgery would take so I made sure to pack extra toys and snacks for Herbert. Poor Alonzo wasn’t allowed to eat anything. We picked up Alex on our way to Children’s Hospital and almost ended up being late. When we arrived, I jumped out of the car and grabbed Alonzo and ran up to the surgery floor while my mom parked the car. I got us all checked in and waited nearly 45 minutes before Alex, mom, and Herbert arrived. They were just bringing us back to surgery when they strolled in.

In what would be Alonzo's recovery room we changed Alonzo from his pajamas into a hospital gown and grippy socks. Alonzo still didn't know what was happening, but he clung to my side not liking the changing environment. When the nurse came to collect Alonzo, she asked if someone would like to hold him until he fell asleep. I looked at Alex to see if she wanted to go.

"No," She said. "I can't. It's too painful for me to see Alonzo like that! You wouldn't understand, Naomi. Not until you've had a child of your own!" She gave Alonzo a goodbye hug and kiss. I wanted to hit her. She couldn't deal with the fact that her child had to have surgery so she wouldn't comfort him? I wanted to hit her. Instead I picked up Alonzo and followed the nurse through the confusing twisting halls until we arrived in the O.R. The room was large and well-lit. Over a dozen nurses were already milling around or messing with lights and tools. I gripped Alonzo tighter when I saw all the different wires and instruments they would have them attached to. I wanted to cry out "He's too little!" and run away with him, but I knew that the doctor had specifically said it was best to do this surgery while he was still so small.

I sat down on a stool still holding Alonzo, I could feel him clinging tighter to me when a well-meaning nurse tried to talk to him. Alonzo wasn't usually so shy but the circumstances had him more than a little freaked out. Swallowing around my panic I tried to show Alonzo that it wasn't scary. I talked to the nurses and played clapping and music games with him. Before long, Alonzo was smiling and didn't seem as fearful of the nurses as he was. He even let one of them hold him until the doctor came in. At that point the atmosphere changed and Alonzo wiggled his way back into my arms. We clung to each other as the doctor came over to me and explained in very simple terms what they were going to do to Alonzo. I listened as best I could and tried not

to panic. It wasn't that risky of a surgery. He would be fine. I repeated that in my head, urging my heartbeat to slow down. It didn't work.

“What scent would he like?” Asked a nurse.

“Scent?” I asked.

“In his gas, he'll be able to smell bubble gum, watermelon, or grape.” She smiled sweetly at me and I think she could tell I was freaking out a little bit.

“Grape.” I decided. When I said this, she uncapped a tube that looked a little like Chapstick and rubbed it on the inside of his mask before putting it over his face. Alonzo protested the mask but I was able to calm him down by singing our lullaby. Quickly, with help of the gas, Alonzo fell asleep. I clung to Alonzo and rocked him. The nurses and doctor bustled around us. Alonzo's body was limp against my own when the nurse who had held him earlier came to collect him. For a moment, I hugged him tighter to me. I didn't want to give him to these people to be cut open. I wanted him to stay with me. Slowly, I let loose my grip on Alonzo and let the nurse take him. I gave him one last kiss on the forehead.

“I'll be right there when you wake up. Okay, honeybee? I love you.” When the nurse finally took him from me and lay him down on the operating table, another nurse guided me out of the room. She led me back to the main hallway before leaving me to find my own way back to our room. I took a moment when she left to try and catch my breath. Tears were burning the backs of my eyes. I was so afraid. Gulping big lungfulls of air I was able to hold my panic back enough to stop from crying. I cast all of the horrible things that could happen from my head and went to sit with my family. Alex was on her phone while mom took care of Herbert. The next couple of hours were awful. I couldn't eat. I couldn't sit still. I could barely breathe. When

Alonzo was finally back with us I rushed to his side even though he was still asleep. The doctor came in not too long after Alonzo did to fill us in that the surgery went really well. I took the time to bombard him with every question that had been filling my mind while he was in surgery.

“What if one of them bursts open?” “What sort of liquid is in one of the balls?” “Will it hurt him if it does break?” “No, but what if it *does* break?” “Has one ever broken before?” “What size did you use?” “How long will he be sore?” “How much pain is he in?” “Do you think the anesthesia had a negative effect on him?” “How many infant surgeries have you performed?” “Will he need to have surgery again?” “When will he need replacement prosthetics?” “Is the size going to matter in terms of growth?” “How long do you think he’ll stay asleep for?” I could hear myself become annoying but I couldn’t stop the nervous energy from bubbling over into burning questions that I just *needed* the answers to. To the doctor’s credit, he patiently answered all of my questions before excusing himself.

Alonzo woke less than an hour later and immediately demanded food. The nurse said we were allowed to feed him. Alex kept trying to make Alonzo come snuggle her but he kept refusing. She even went so far as to try and crawl into bed with him. I wanted to scream at her to stay out of his bed! The kid just had surgery! He needed his own space! Alonzo howled in protest that Alex was in his bed until I picked him up and held him just as tenderly as I did when he was in the hospital after the dog attack and sat in the rocking chair that was in the corner of the room. He snuggled himself into my arms and fell asleep holding the bag of teddy grahams that the nurse got for him. I rocked him in the chair long after my arms fell numb. Only happy to have him in my arms again.

Later that evening, when we brought Alonzo home, Alex decided that Alonzo needed his mother and she was coming home with us. This led to one of the biggest fights we had. I refused to let her sleep in Alonzo's bed with him and I refused to make him sleep on the floor so that she could cuddle him.

"He needs his mother, Naomi!" Alex glared at me. Her mouth was half open in this strange twisted way that it always did was she was upset and trying not to yell.

"That's fine, Alex. You're here aren't you? He has you if he needs you but what he needs most of all is rest which he isn't going to get if you are in his bed or he is on the floor." I was firm in this. I didn't care how much she yelled or protested. It. Was. Not. Happening. She began to scream and cry the more I didn't give in until my mom had to help her outside so she could smoke a cigarette. I didn't care that I was making her angry. I didn't care that she felt like I was overstepping my bounds. She couldn't just come in whenever *she* felt like Alonzo needed her since she only stepped up for easy shit. When it came to x-rays, shots, surgeries, or anything remotely difficult or uncomfortable she left me to do the dirty work. She left me to endure watching him go through medical test after medical test as if it wasn't hard for me too. As if it wasn't even harder for Alonzo. No, I wouldn't let her take comfort from him when she didn't do any of the hard work to get him where he was. *A fair weather mother!* I thought viciously to myself. That's what Alex was. A fair weather mother. Only around when the going was good and nowhere to be found during the real challenges of life.

Angrily I grabbed a pillow and a blanket and camped out on the floor of Alonzo's room in case he needed me. When Alex returned and found out what I was doing she threw an all-out fit. I didn't care. I let her rage go right through me. My mother had tried to talk me out of the

room, but I wouldn't let her. Later in the night I could hear both of them discussing how much of a bitch I was. That I would never understand Alex's love for Alonzo. That I wasn't a real mother, only a stupid girl who hasn't learned yet. Tears burned in the back of my eyes to hear my own mother take Alex's side. To say that I wasn't a mother! I didn't know exactly when it happened but I knew they were wrong. In that moment I knew for certain that they were full of shit. I *was* a mother! I was Alonzo's mother.

III

A few months passed with me completely avoiding talking to Alex about what happened during Alonzo's surgery. The only time it was ever brought up was when we had to go in for a checkup and freaked out again about Alonzo's condition. I didn't even try to reason with her again. We'd gone around and around in circles about how she couldn't freak out every time Alonzo had a doctor appointment. She didn't care, she didn't listen. She did whatever she wanted anyway and I was tired of arguing about it. In December my sister, Jessie dropped a bombshell on us. She was giving her kids to their dads because she wasn't ready to quit using and also so she could go and be a water protector out in North Dakota and protest the pipeline. I comforted my mom the best I could when I found her crying in the kitchen.

"I just don't get it, Naomi!" my mom sobbed across the table. "I don't know where I went wrong with her."

"I don't know mom, but she's doing the right thing."

"I just don't understand!" My mother wailed. I sighed. I didn't understand it any more than she did. My little sister had just posted on Facebook that she was giving her kids to their dads. That it was the best thing for them since she didn't want to stop using drugs. I applauded her for sending her kids to their dads. But just because I agreed with her that sending her son and daughter to their dads was the best place for them, didn't mean I had to like the reasoning. I didn't want my sister to do drugs. But I did have to admit, that this was the first time in six years I'd seen her act like a real mother: selflessly.

"She's their mom! How can she do this to them?" My mother continued to cry and I soothed her as best as I could.

When I saw Jessie later that day, I confronted her about leaving.

“I’m proud that you are taking care of your kids in the best way you know how,” I said.

“But do you really have to go out to the camps? Can’t you get sober at home?”

“Don’t you see, Naomi?” She asked. “This is how I’ll get sober. There aren’t any drugs out at the water camps! I’ve already made up my mind. The kids can stay with their dads until I get back.”

“Those camps are dangerous, Jessie! I saw on Facebook that one girl just got her arm blown off! They are spraying people with water cannons when its below zero! You can’t go!”

“I’ll be fine,” She said. “I’m going with a guy named Charles. He’s a chemical dependency councilor. He’ll be able to help me.” Jessie had already packed most of her bags and explained to Jordyn that she was leaving and wouldn’t be back for a while.

“What about court?” I asked. “You have court next month for the shit you pulled the night of Alonzo’s birthday party.” I thought that I had her beat. She couldn’t leave if she had court. She would need to stay.

“I already worked it out with Charles.” She said. “I’ll come back for court and then go right back out there again. I need to help my people protect this land.” I groaned inwardly. Protecting the land was such bullshit. She was running. Again.

The entire family talked about Jessie giving up her kids. I thought that giving up her kids was probably the best thing she ever did for them. Alex disagreed one day while I was driving her to get groceries.

“I know that I might be in the minority but I believe that kids don’t ask to be here and that their mothers should take care of them.” I rolled my eyes at her. She made statements like

this all the time. Proclaiming that a widely held belief was held by her alone. It grew tiresome after a while. However, this time she dropped something on me that I wasn't expecting. "That's why I kept Alonzo, you know." I took my eyes off the road to look at her.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You can't tell anyone, but I never wanted to have Alonzo. When I was pregnant with him I kept asking him 'why are you here?' 'why did you decide to come here?' 'I don't want you'. I said it every day. I kept him though because I'm a good mother. He didn't ask to be here I brought him here and so I have to take care of him no matter what I feel." I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. I couldn't believe that she actually said that out loud. It was one thing to have a passing thought, it was another thing to actively say that you never wanted your child and were only taking care of him out of parental obligation.

"Well," I said carefully. "Sometimes taking care of you children means giving them a better life with someone else. Someone who can take care of them better than you can... that's all that Jessie is doing." I tagged the last part on in an attempt not to be too obvious.

"No, she should take care of her kids. I felt the same way when my sister gave her two kids up for adoption."

"Wasn't she doing a lot of drugs and had no money to take care of them?" I asked.

"Yes, but she still needed to take care of them. Not give them away."

"But she was taking care of them. She was taking care of them by allowing them to live a good life with another family. Aren't her kids the ones in that Christmas picture you showed me? They look really happy and healthy."

“It’s a mother’s job to take care of her children herself no matter what.” Alex said adamantly. I didn’t know what else I could say to convince her. She didn’t even want Alonzo. I realized that my suspicions of her not even liking him were correct.

Jessie left less than a week later and like promised she returned home for her court date. She ended up having to sit time in jail and ended up making one of the worst mistakes of her life. It turned out that Charles had just gotten out of prison for murder. He spent 25 years in prison and only recently got out. He had been out just long enough to make a name for himself on the Mille Lacs Reservation as man who would give young girls drugs for sex. We begged Jessie to get rid of him and instead, while she was in jail, she gave Cedar to him to take to South Dakota. We were frantic. A murderer had Cedar! A murderer took Cedar across state lines! A MURDERER HAD MY NEPHEW! We called every law enforcement agency we could but there was nothing they could do since Jessie was the custodial parent and she had the right to let anyone she wanted watch her child. Cedar’s father was nearly hysterical. He never imagined that Jessie would do such a thing. He was able to get a hold of a lawyer and have an emergency hearing over the weekend which granted him emergency custody over Cedar.

Hearing the news, Charles said he was on his way back to Minnesota and would meet us in Little Falls. When we finally got Cedar back safe and sound in our arms it took everything not to beat the living hell out of Charles. We quickly gave him a bath and put him in proper clothing before going to meet with Dominic, his father. Dominic was grateful to have Cedar with him and swore to us that he would always protect Cedar. I believed him. Dominic wasn’t the most mature guy and he probably wasn’t ready to be a full-time father, but he was a good man and I knew that ready or not, he would live up to his promise.

The rest of December was spent convincing Alex that there was nothing wrong with her apartment. That if she was cold, to put on a sweater. The simplest solutions to her problems weren't good enough. She wanted to move out of her apartment. I decided to help her find a place to live in Little Falls. I could feel the walls closing in around me, the clock ticking me closer to the moment that I would lose the boys to her forever. If she lived in Little Falls near us, then maybe, I could see the boys every day and make sure they were ok. We didn't find a place for her to move until May. However, it was around April that we went to court the last time.

Driving back from the court house I felt numb. I knew that I should be happy for Alex, that that's what was expected of me. I acted happy when everyone crowded out of the courtroom. I gave Alex a hug and told her that her hard work paid off. I could see my grandpa scowling a bit, but he was scowl-y by nature so I didn't pay much attention. I acted happy when the social workers came over to congratulate us. Katie, caught my eye, I knew that she thought the boys should stay with me but that the point of foster care was family reunification. I wished that she had the power to keep them with me. I liked Katie. After all this time of being a mother to these children I should feel happy that I get to be a twenty-something again. But I didn't feel happy.

I didn't know what I felt. The judge just awarded Alex full physical and legal custody. Herbert and Alonzo would go to live with her again. Alex said she wanted some time for the boys to transition back into her care. I made up a schedule with her that showed each week giving her one more day with the boys. I tried to make the schedule so Herbert's school was as uninterrupted as possible. I just felt like all of my hard work was for nothing. The boys would go to live with Alex and they would slip back into running around naked and being screamed at by her. I didn't want that for them. With me they were perfect. They were dressed stylishly, they

were excelling in school, and they were always clean. I didn't want to see them be anything other than the best children anyone had ever laid eyes on. With Alex, they would be sticky, dirty, and not going to school at all.

I scowled at myself. I was being unfair. Alex said that keeping Herbert in school was one of her biggest priorities. But I didn't feel any better that she got to be with the kids everyday while I watched from the sidelines. Nearly two years I kept them and loved them and made them mine and now, suddenly, they were hers. I called my mom to tell her the good news, she seemed excited but questioned if I was ok. Sometimes my mom knows me better than I thought. I told her I was and got off the phone with her. I don't like to lie. A movement from the corner of my eye caused me to look up. I could see that there was an Eagle soaring above me. I hoped that was a good sign. It's supposed to be. Another Eagle soared into my view. Now I just felt like they were mocking me. I sighed and turned my gaze to the road, determined not to look up again.

IV

It didn't happen all at once. Since Alex demanded that she be given time to adjust to full time parenting, we came up with a plan. She would have the boys during the weekend and every week we would add a day. That way the first week was nothing new. I would drop the boys off on Saturday and pick them up on Sunday. The next week however, I would drop them off on Friday and pick up on Sunday. The week after that Thursday, the week after that Wednesday and so on until she finally got the hang of having them full time. It just so happened that in May when she finally moved into her new apartment in Little Falls was the first week that she would have them completely full time. I was devastated. I wanted to rage against the courts. I wanted to fight anyone who would take them away from me. In reality. There was nothing I could do.

When I got home I took a nap with Herbert and Alonzo. I snuggled us all down on one bed and held them close. I didn't want to let them go. I didn't know what I would do when they were gone. Tears fell down my face as I thought about the sort of life they would live without me. Would they feel loved? Would they know that I never wanted to give them away? I didn't know how to tell them, how to make them understand that they were everything in the world to me but that no one else cared about that. Snuggled in our nest of blankets and pillows I relished the feeling of being close to them for as long as possible. The afternoon light filtered through the blanket I'd put over the window casting a lavender hue over all of us. Suddenly, a poem came to me. Out of nowhere completely formed in my mind. I grabbed my phone and typed it out as quickly as I could before the words slipped away.

*Never did I think I'd be
A gardener of flowering seeds
Yet fate pushed and I took the leap
Still I know, flowers don't keep*

*I tend my garden night and day
The fear of failure not at bay
The flowers grow bright and strong
Still I know they won't keep long*

*Others wonder at my relentless toil
Over a garden that has no soil
I carry on and wipe my sweat
There is no time for regret*

*In my garden flowers grew
Battered petals now unique and true
Yet I know they're not mine to own
I will not reap what I've sown*

*Still I work to keep disease away
I cool their petals on fevered days
The price I pay is not cheap
Because I know the flowers won't keep*

*My love for them is of a mother's
I watched them grow, I tended brothers
I know that I fell in too deep
My pain is knowing they're not mine to keep*

I read the poem over, proud of myself. It's true I'm no poet but it felt honest. I decided to keep it. Maybe I'd even share it with people one day.

Dropping off Herbert and Alonzo for the very last time was something straight from my very worst nightmare.

"You got it?" I asked Alex for the third time, as I was standing in the doorway to her new house.

"Yes, I have it. We will be fine. Won't we boys?" She looked over at Herbert and Alonzo who were busy playing with some of their toys.

“Okay,” I said, unsure of myself. It would be the first time that I was leaving them here indefinitely. The transition was over now. It was time for them to stay with her. I swallowed around the lump in my throat.

“Alright, boys,” I said, as cheerily as I could manage. “Come give Mimi hugs goodbye.” The boys came running over to me and gave me hugs. I squeezed them tight, not wanting to let go. I knew that I could come see them whenever I wanted, that I had convinced Alex to move less than a mile away from me. But I still didn’t want to let go. When I did, Herbert went back to playing, and Alonzo went to grab his shoes.

“Help me, Mimi.” He said, holding out his shoes to me. I looked at him sadly.

“No, no, honeybee. You are staying here this time.” Alonzo looked at me confused.

“No,” he said, sitting down and trying to put them on himself.

“Yes, honeybee. Mimi has to leave now. But you have brother here and mom mom too.” I tried to be as gentle as I could, tried to explain to him that he had to stay here, without me.

“Wanna go with MIMI!” Alonzo growled, and threw his shoes against the wall.

“I know, baby, but I will come see you soon, okay?” I gave him one last hug and tried to slip out of the door. He clings to me. Picking him up and prizing his fingers from my shirt I hand him over to Alex. She grips him around his middle and he starts to scream and cry.

“MIMI! MIMI! MIMI!” I have to close the door on his cries but I can still hear him screaming for me as I run to my car. It isn’t until I’m safe inside, driving away, that I allow myself to cry.

V

The next couple of weeks were difficult. I couldn't breathe properly and every time I went to visit them it was harder to leave. Alonzo would scream for me to take him with and I would have to leave him behind. Alex wasn't having a great time either. She began to complain that we never did the transition that we promised we would do. That it was my fault that Herbert and Alonzo weren't listening to her. That somehow, I raised them to throw toys at her and disrespect her. I had no idea what she was talking about Herbert and Alonzo were angels. They didn't throw toys and they listened to what they were told. Alex wouldn't be reasoned with. She was certain that Alonzo hated her and that he would never respect her. I didn't know what to tell her. Only that they listened to me without a problem. It was another circular argument. She knew it was a problem but any solution I offered wasn't one she wanted and she couldn't come up with one by herself. Months passed

Trying to soothe myself I took to hanging my favorite photos of Herbert and Alonzo around the house. I stood back and looked at my handiwork. The photograph of Alonzo hung in the perfect frame on the wall of my living room. He was sitting in a pumpkin patch, dirt on his nose, but a giant smile on his face. I smiled, proud of the most perfect picture of Alonzo ever. In another life, I could have been a photographer. Another print, a smaller one, was waiting for me to put it in a different frame for my desk at school. Already hanging up in my office I had two pieces of artwork from Alonzo, a painting of a carrot made from his footprint and handprint and a painting of a butterfly made from two footprints. I also had a letter Herbert had written to me hanging in my office, it read "To: Naomi—you are the nicest person I know" he signed it with

orange scribbles, the rest having been written with the help of his teacher. These were my favorite things in my office.

I heard the door open and watched my sister Jessie and mother walk through the door. They had been downstairs smoking. Excited to show them the new picture on the wall, I called out to them, “Guys! Come check it out!” My mom came walking over.

“What is it?” she questioned.

“Look!” Beaming, I gestured to the picture of Alonzo on the wall. My mother looked.

“Oh,” she said. My mother’s lackluster response confused me until suddenly I knew why she didn’t seem happy.

“I’m gonna put Herbert’s picture up there too, but I don’t have one I my new phone yet. It has a better camera than my last one and I want the pictures to look nice.” My mother said nothing. “I have a few that I really like of him that I could put up there,” I continued, “but I really want to wait until I’m able to get one in a higher definition. I just have to get him to hold still for more than two seconds!” I laughed. My mother only shook her head and sighed. My smile fell. “What?” I asked, now slightly irritated.

“I just don’t see why you put in the effort to hang a picture on the wall.” My mother looked at me as if her reasoning was obvious. I was still confused.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“It’s useless to put his picture on the wall. I just don’t get it.” My mother shook her head again and began to busy herself with tidying the living room.

“What’s not to get?” I was confused and irritated as to why she was acting this way. The picture of Alonzo was awesome. I had even thought of printing off one for her.

“He’s barely even your blood, Naomi.” At her words, my body fell ice cold and then instantly hot. I felt my cheeks flushing with the heat of anger and my heart begin to pound. As calmly as I could, I responded.

“I took care of him for two years. I love him and Herbert. Of course I want their pictures on my wall.” I spoke slowly, the effort to stay calm effecting my ability to speak normally.

“It’s been months since they went home. You need to let them go.” She spoke in a matter of fact way that was unbelievably rage inducing. I took a large breath and tried to defend myself. My face growing ever hotter, tears beginning to sting behind my eyes.

“They are still my kids.”

“They are not your kids, they’re hers, you didn’t give birth to them.” She shot back instantly. I couldn’t contain myself anymore. My voice rising with every word, I was soon yelling.

“I LOVE them! They are mine to ME! How many times do I have to tell you how much it HURTS me when you say shit like that! I feel like YOU WANT TO HURT ME!”

“The fact is, Naomi, they are not yours.” My mother’s calm response only enraged me further.

“FAMILY DOESN’T END WITH BLOOD!” I screamed in response. “They are mine to me! HOW WOULD YOU FEEL IF I SAID THAT YOU CAN’T FEEL SO SAD ABOUT JORDYN? THAT SHE’S BARELY YOUR BLOOD!”

“That’s different, Jordyn is my granddaughter.” By her tone I could tell that I struck a nerve.

“She’s just as much blood TO YOU as the boys are TO ME!” Unable to look at her anymore, for fear I would spill my tears in front of her, I left and locked myself in the bedroom. Her bedroom, since I didn’t have one of my own. We weren’t able to move into a bigger place when we took the boys in, so I made do with the couch. Sitting on her bed I began to sob. I didn’t understand why she didn’t see me as a mother. What more did I have to do in life to prove to everyone that Herbert and Alonzo were as much my kids as any I might give birth to in the future?

A couple hours later, a timid knock came at the door. Unlocking it from the outside, my mother slinked in. She was carrying a pink rose surrounded by baby’s breath in a vase, her face was one of apology.

“I’m sorry,” She said quietly. “I know that you love the boys and I didn’t mean to diminish your relationship with them. The picture is a great one.” I told her I accepted her apology and she gave me a hug.

“If you don’t mind,” I said, “I’m trying to do homework.” I indicated the open laptop on the bed.

“Oh sure, I’ll leave you alone.” My mother began to inch out of the room. “I’m making spaghetti for dinner tonight.” She looked at me hopefully. I smiled as best I could at her second gesture of apology.

“Thanks, mom.” I smiled long enough for her to leave the room and close the door. Once it shut, my smile fell. I knew that my mom was sorry that she made me cry. But I don’t think she is sorry for what she said. And I don’t want to forgive her for it either.

VI

I could never truly explain to anyone the pain that I felt in their absence. The hours I spent thinking about them. I liked to imagine them older. I pictured these towering young men leaning down to hug me and wipe my tears as I dropped them off for their first day at college. Because of course they would go to college. They would be kind and courageous and generous. They would love all people and stand up and do what they believed was right. Hopefully, they would be these things because I taught them to be these things.

I imagined darker things too. I imagined young men who would tower over people in anger and fear because they grew up being restrained and yelled at. I never wanted them to succumb to the shiftiness of life and begin to rage and lash out against anything and everything in an attempt not to get hurt first. I looked at my cousins, my siblings, and my uncles and saw all of their hurt and I began to wonder if I could see the future of my babies etched into their faces.

I would think of the times I stood in their doorway watching them sleep. The way I would creep forward in order to place my hand on their backs just to make sure they were still breathing. Even just thinking about it I could see their rosy cheeks and hear their little puffs of breath as the air escaped from their lips. I'd read before about mother's watching their children sleep for hours. I never understood how that could be so fascinating that you'd watch it for hours until I had Herbert and Alonzo.

Sitting in their empty room was torture and it was all I was doing. I would sit in their room and imagine that they were still in their beds. Until one day I got a phone call. It was Family Services. They had three children that needed a safe place to live and they were wondering if I would be a foster parent for them. I thought about it. I thought about all the pain

and agony that I'd gone through in almost two years. I thought about the pain of parting with them, the pain of death that I went through with them. I thought about how every happy moment I had with them now caused me agonizing pain that I couldn't escape from. Every remembered smile, every remembered conversation, every remembered smell caused my soul to shout in agony. I could still feel myself raging against the injustice of Herbert and Alonzo being taken away from me to live with Alex who didn't and couldn't ever care for them the way I could. Thinking of those moments with Herbert and Alonzo, those happy ones that caused me so much pain now that they were no longer mine and caused me to sit in an empty children's room, I knew that there was only one possible answer I could give.

“Yes.”