

NO RELATION

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Black
Lawrence
Press

For my mother

ACT I

ALMOST MOTHER

When James calls me, to tell me he has again married, I am already a new woman. I'm living in a new city, with a new job, and new friends, most of whom don't know him or understand that I was almost a mother. I wear zippy clothes—money in my pocket—and frequent all the coffee shops in my neighborhood—time on my hands. But a few days later, when it is his youngest son's 10th birthday, I wonder again how it is I am that new woman.

Where is the other one? She is still here. Sometimes I see her, peeking out, watching me laugh with my new friends. She hovers over my bent head and brushes back the hair from my temple—unsure who else to care for.

Like a ghost that can't cross over she stands beside me in line at the grocery store when I buy Lean Cuisine and blueberries and yogurt. She stands beside me while this girl at the gym explains how her son is wetting the bed. We hold our tongue thinking of the time James and I bought that used washer and dryer because of his oldest son and how we then had to move it from house to house.

COUP DE FOUORE

This is before. It is the summer after my first year of graduate school. I am a student assistant at the Lilly Library, where in the stacks—accessible to staff only—live the letters of Sylvia Plath and the first English edition of *Pinocchio*. My job is to sit in the reading room and keep watch, make sure none of the scholars, who travel here from Philadelphia and U.C. Davis, bend down the corner of a gilded page, pocket a miniature book the size of my thumbnail. Mostly I stare out the windows, past the long green curtains like something from the *The Sound of Music*.

Outside, the hopeful spring leaves of southern Indiana are playing in a warm wind and the smell of sycamore moves through campus. I keep notes with a pencil—pens are not allowed in the reading room—of words that strike me as good sounding in succession. Pink king yellow hat. Tiny icky yucky black.

I am 26. In the slanting sunlight I see dust hovering in the air. Perhaps it is from the manuscripts that once sat on the desk of Gor-

don Lish. I am breathing gold. The world is perched atop my index finger, when into the room walks a man whose sleeves are rolled up and hair is pulled into a ponytail. He is wearing black leather shoes and is skinny like a beanpole. A smile passes between us. We will discuss that smile for years to come. It will become a part of our mythology. I ask him what he is studying and learn he is a young photography professor. His name is James.

A friend will say to me, “Sometimes it is like your heart recognizes someone you are going to spend a lot of time with before you’ve spent any of that time.”

It is weeks before I find out he has children.

NO

James told me he had kids, over the phone, after our first date and I cried. He wanted me to meet them right away. But I said no, I wasn't ready. I wanted to hold onto my fantasy a little longer—the fantasy of young love. They say resistance to what is is the root of all unhappiness. Well, I guess here is where the seed begins to germinate.

OTHER PEOPLE'S KIDS

At the Dairy Queen there are a bunch of kids hanging around. A couple families and a softball team. I have walked over here alone as a treat to myself. Summer is just dawning.

The kids are all doing different things. These two are chasing each other around a table and this one has his face buried in his cone so when he pulls up, his nose is white and dripping—ice cream and snot mixed together. A little girl with blond curly hair is crying and her mother is talking to someone else. The mother's hand is held out towards the little girl, but the little girl doesn't see it and the mother is busy in her conversation.

They are loud. So loud. And I think, "I can't do this."

THE FIRST TIME

The first time I met Caleb and Alex, they hid under their beds.

“I’m not sure what happened to the boys,” their father said, winking as I entered the small house. Each room was painted a bright color: yellow, terracotta red, mint green. After his divorce from the boys’ mother, James had needed some cheer. He looked at me expectantly.

“Where could they be?” I asked. I knew nothing about kids.
“I don’t know?” James pointed to their shared bedroom.

I knew it was my cue to go in and discover them, but I hesitated. I was nervous about the meeting and wished they had just been standing by the door, with their little hands outstretched to shake mine. But here we were playing hide and seek right off the bat.

I inched towards their door and once I stepped inside that was all it took. They burst forth, giggling. Two small boys with sandy

brown hair. They jumped up and down, not getting close enough to touch me, but hovering in my radius. Immediately I was overcome by the smell: milk and cotton and sleep and dirty feet. As a teenager, I babysat for a family with two boys and here was the smell—the exact same smell—that had hung in their bedroom. Little boy potpourri. It was comforting. It reminded me that at one time, at 16, I had felt that I could handle two little boys without a hitch. I was Red Cross Babysitter Certified.

“What’s your favorite color?” Caleb asked.

“Green.” That was his too.

“What’s your favorite food?” he asked.

“Quiche,” I said.

The bounding stopped for a moment. Caleb looked at me skeptically. Then said, “Mine’s pizza.”

Alex was more reluctant, but eventually he began offering me toys to inspect and approve. He carried over a Transformer and set it in my hands then turned to find something else. This was going well, I thought.

That night was the Fourth of July, so we piled into James’s station wagon and headed to the park to watch the fireworks. We found a spot to lay our blanket and began to wait. But, we had miscalculated the evening’s events, arriving an hour after the boy’s bedtime and more than an hour before the fireworks began without water or snacks. Soon the boys appeared to be dying of thirst, Caleb coughing, asking a nearby stranger for water.

By the time we left, without seeing a single firework, Alex had dumped my purse out onto the grass and was calling me “poopy Paula.”

LOVE SONG

We are going to see the bats. We are three, James, his youngest son, and me. The bats will appear at dusk, swooping low among the trees at Bryan Park. They are easy to miss, because at first they look like swallows. But, if you look closely, you'll see that they move differently—less of a glide and more of a dance. I say this to Alex as we walk, thinking he will find it interesting. Alex is looking down into the grass, scouting, and he tells me that his class went on a field trip to a cave filled with thousands and thousands of bats and so he already knows. I look to James and he shakes his head no. Alex is wearing a sleeveless tank top that shows his plump, 4-year-old arms and I am tempted to squeeze them, but it is safer to take James's hand in my own. James leans over and kisses my head. Ahead of us, Alex spies something and calls out, "Dad!" staccato, breathless. James goes to him and squats down and the two of them look at a family of mushrooms growing under a fledgling tree.

When we get to the bench in the middle of the park, James lies down to look at the sky but Alex is restless. He asks me if I'll play tag.

I make a sudden move and he takes off running. His motor skills are still developing and his legs kick out on either side as he runs. I feel silly careening after him, unsure of what I'll do once I catch him. The sky is getting darker, turning purple, and I hear James call to us, "I see one, guys. I see a bat," but we are a ways away now. The lights from the tennis courts pop on, throwing shadows all over the park.

I am close to Alex, only a few feet away, when he turns and says, "I bet you can't kiss me." I am startled but say, "Bet I can." We are moving farther away from James and I wonder if he is worried. I gain on Alex easily and when I am close enough I lift him up into my arms and I can hear him giggling a low, heavy giggle, which vibrates through me like a hymn. I flip him over so he is lying in my arms. He is still giggling when I lean down and carefully kiss his forehead. It is a humid night and his skin is coated in a soft layer of moisture. He smells like the grass. When I raise my head and look at him, he is quiet. He is looking at me hard. He is looking for something. I think to smile, to say something like you would to a small child, but I just stare back. Finally his eyes dart from mine and he points to the sky and says, "Is that one?" And in the next instant James calls to us, "Guys, come here, you're missing it."

WHAT THE BOYS WERE LIKE

We were making cookies and Alex kept eating the cookie dough. His father, trying to be smart, told him it was fine. In fact, he could eat as much of it as he wanted. I nodded, knowing exactly where James was going with this. We sat across from Alex at the secondhand kitchen table and followed every mouthful. Waiting. Alex kept eating. Another bite. A pound at least. He never did get sick. It was a bust. Somehow that kid would always beat the rules.

Caleb, on the other hand, stood on the edge of a brand new playground that had just been completed, right outside the caution tape, while his father and Alex played on the new equipment. James called to him, told him to come on, it was fine. They wouldn't get in trouble. But still, Caleb stood there, watching them swing and slide. He couldn't cross that boundary.

That's just the way they were.

NAPTIME

One day, when we were still getting to know each other, we all four rode our bikes to the farmers market and then over to the football stadium and then back to James's.

When I got back to my own home, I had to take a nap. It was so exhausting. There were so many questions, so many needs and problems that the boys couldn't solve themselves. The littlest thing—a drink of water—was the biggest thing. I just wanted to sit down somewhere with a book.

The truth is, I was a little afraid of them. They could be so loud and unpredictable or manipulative. Also, I was terrified of what it would mean to have them (and their mother) in my life long-term. It was a lot.

I told my therapist about this and she said, “Well, maybe don't move in together anytime soon.” What is soon? How do you better prepare to live with two children who are not your own?

HIS LIFE WITH HER

Each time we go to his ex-wife's house, I recognize something from his life with her. The rugs are the same ancient indigo rugs he has in his house. On the wall is a small painting he has done. A larger one, reminiscent of his style, he assures me was done by a colleague—someone who once was a friend of both of theirs. When I meet these friends, they smile at me. They are glad to see him with someone and they tell him that, sometimes in private, sometimes while I am standing there. But I can see that I confuse them. I am the new woman. I am not the boys' mother. I am young. One woman announces that she asked the boys if they liked me—my motives suspect she goes to the source. She is happy to report they said yes.

The dishes are the same, probably from their wedding, split after the divorce. The albums—Richard Buckner, John Prine. It is eerie. It seems to me—because I did not see them divide—that these duplicate items have just shown up in both of their houses, as if they should be on one of those shows about long-lost twins who when discovered turn out to both be dentists and wear plaid. As if they are each, still, one half of the other.

One day I open up a photo album sitting on her coffee table and am shocked to see a photo of James and her in the delivery room moments after the birth of their second son. They both look so happy.

At night, in bed, I ask God to make me a bigger person.