

Light through the Cracks

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For Jonny

PREFACE

Lucy froze as a low, drawn-out moan rose from the floor in the hallway outside of her room. Her father's steps were heavy and slow and deliberate, and the sound immediately turned her body to stone. She considered for a moment that she imagined the noise, but knew from the way everything in her mind seemed to tilt a little to the left that he was there. She knew he was making his way to her door, creeping like a cat toward an unsuspecting bird.

Lucy was not a bird, and she was not unsuspecting because she was awake and intensely aware of her surroundings. Falling asleep at night was not something that came easily to her. She regularly pulled her covers over her head and read by flashlight long after her mother insisted she went to sleep.

Reading her books carried her through the days, and very slowly and softly eased her into sleep at night. Her father's presence outside her bedroom door terminated this process, and Lucy was immediately at full alert, the stillest and most awake she could possibly be. She wanted him to believe she was sleeping, so did not turn her flashlight off or close her book or roll over into a proper sleeping position because sleeping people did not do that.

She strained to hear the noises in the floor to determine where exactly her father was going in the

middle of the night. It was not uncommon for him to wander the house at all hours, or to raid the pantry, binging on entire loaves of bread and entire jars of jelly and anything else he could get his thick, calloused hands on. He would then often fall asleep wherever he was sitting, usually on the couch in front of the television downstairs.

Lucy did not like it when he slept on the couch, exposed and out in the open. She always recoiled from the sight of his bloated and hairy belly, of his mangy white briefs, and of his hair sticking up all over his head on the mornings after his nighttime gorging forays.

She liked it when her father stayed in her parents' bedroom, or in his home office. These were his designated areas of the house and as long as Lucy did not disturb him, he mostly stayed put, deeply engrossed in whatever it was that he did.

Regardless of his intended destination, the sound of him moving about in the middle of the night was cause for alarm. As Lucy sat perfectly still under her blanket, she heard the soft metallic sound that her door handle made when someone was trying to turn it. She was immediately grateful for her recent insistence on locking her bedroom door.

Her mother told her that she could not keep her door locked because the firemen would not be able to get her out if the house went up in flames. Lucy did not tell her mother that she had more immediate concerns than being trapped inside a burning house.

Her father's steps lingered in the hall. The flimsy lock on her bedroom door delayed his entrance, and also sounded a tiny alarm to warn her he was trying to get to her. Lucy knew he could easily get through her security system, but she also knew that it would be noisy if he did.

The only way he could get her door open without too much clattering was if he went into the bathroom

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across the hall and retrieved the tiny flathead screwdriver that fit perfectly into the groove that sprang the lock on the handle. But this would take at least a full minute.

Earlier that summer, Lucy took to leaning outside of her room through the dormer window after the smoldering sun went down, and observing the predictable life occurring on her suburban street. On each occasion she did this, she removed the window screen, much to her mother's irritation. She initially replaced the screen each time she pulled herself back into her room, but quickly ceased going through all of that trouble and instead left it tossed aside on the roof of the front porch.

This allowed her to open her window and quickly spring from inside her room and out onto the top of the porch without hindrance, which is exactly what she did once she was certain her father was trying to get into her room.

There was a sweet gum tree that grew quite close to the house, and Lucy easily leapt into its waiting branches. She then shimmied down the trunk, unaware that her nightgown kept getting snagged along the way, but distinctly aware of the scratches being scraped into her inner thighs.

Lucy clung to the tree with her toes and fingertips to slow her descent. The moon was bright and the night was still and she fled into it. Her bare feet did not hesitate at the transformation between the end of the grassy yard and the beginning of the wooded area dividing her house from her neighbors'. And although she continued to feel branches and bark scratch her face and arms and legs, the stinging pain made her feel strong.

Lucy ran until she reached the neighbor's side of the woods. Years before they curiously built a small wooden bridge arcing over a shallow ditch that rarely, if ever, channeled any substantial amount of water.

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Lucy liked the bridge – it was just the right distance from her own house that she felt far enough, but not too far, away. These neighbors did not have young children, and on the rare occasions they noticed her in their back yard made no attempt to discourage her from being on their property.

She became quite familiar with the bridge as she grew up. As far as Lucy was aware, her parents never knew she spent so much time beneath it, or if it was even there at all. Although they were neighbors for years, there was never any love lost between the owners of the bridge and the adults in Lucy's house, and therefore no concern over small changes to each other's property.

Lucy felt as though the space below the bridge belonged to her only, and retreated there often. She felt safe there, and that is where she went to escape the madness back in her bedroom.

It did not rain much that summer, and Lucy was pleased to discover that she did not feel any sign of wet mud seeping through her nightgown as she sat down in the ditch and crossed her legs and brought her knees to her chin.

She gingerly felt along the stinging bits of her skin, determining whether or not there were anything other than superficial wounds on her legs, feet, arms, face, chest, and neck. She found and felt nothing alarming, and having caught her breath after her sprint, Lucy again became perfectly still.

She had to sit slightly hunched over in order to fit under the bridge without banging her head, and her back began to ache after a minute or two. Lucy did not move, though, and acknowledged the pain in her back as just another of the discomforts that went along with any standard escape.

She continued holding perfectly still, because as she made her way across the roof, down the tree, through

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the yard, into the woods, and finally under the bridge, she imagined her father close on her heels.

Now she listened for him.

She heard frogs and bugs. She heard mosquitoes buzzing and felt them finding satisfaction by sucking her blood out through the tiny straws on their faces. She heard an occasional soft rustle of the trees as a light breeze passed over their tops. For a few moments, she heard her own heart beating in her ears, but that subsided as she continued to remain still.

Finally confident that her father – or anything else - did not come after her, Lucy scootched her bottom down and leaned back against the curve of the ditch, her face parallel with the underside of the bridge.

The bridge was wooden and old. Over time, parts of it splintered off and dissolved into dust. Other parts were separated by the elements and were in the slow process of falling and dissolving, too. There were even a few nice-sized chunks completely missing from the boards, knocked out and taken by the effects of nature over time.

The earth below the bridge held her firmly and gently. It was cool and dry, and as she rested her eyes on the weathered wood above her head, the tightness in her neck and chest and back fell out of her. Beams of light flowed from the moon and between the cracks of the bridge and onto her upturned face.

CHAPTER ONE

Lucy pulled her head back inside her room. She was leaning out the window, trying to determine if it was too hot to climb out and sit on the roof. It only took her a few seconds to make the determination that it was definitely too hot. It was early in the afternoon, on one of the listless days in the last weeks of summer before her sophomore year of high school.

She left her room and went restlessly down the stairs looking for anything at all that might distract her from the clock's slow ticking. She found her father in his home office.

Lucy said hello to him. He sat at his desk, his silver hair combed straight back toward her, his hulking shoulders hunched forward.

He was working at his computer on only God knew what, and he did not turn in response to his only child's greeting. As a self-proclaimed genius, Lucy's father demanded complete solitude in order to access his brilliance.

He owned a multi-million dollar manufacturing company that he started years before in the garage of that very house. Why his family remained in that very house, rather than upgrade in accordance with the progression of his business, was something beyond Lucy's realm of consideration, as she was not really even aware of how much money her father made.

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When Lucy was in elementary school, he came home early one afternoon, backing a boat trailer – with a boat on it – up the driveway. Granted, Lucy and her parents used the boat quite often to go water skiing on nearby Lake Arbortown, but there was no preliminary discussion of the purchase of a boat.

Lucy's mother was not altogether pleased about it, and although she enjoyed the luxury aspect, resented her husband's lack of consideration of the time and energy it took to maintain a nineteen-foot ski boat. Lucy's mother also resented the fact that he made no effort at all to assist her in doing so.

Over the progression of their marriage, Lucy's mother learned that her husband did what he did when he did it, and that he lived staunchly according to the philosophy of "my way or the highway."

He had a very different relationship with his daughter than he did with his wife in that Lucy always knew only he was in charge. Lucy's mother was petite and beautiful, intelligent and well put together and took pride in the notion of maintaining intellectual independence from her corpulent and wealthy husband. Unfortunately for Lucy, and for her mother, this notion only existed on a superficial level, one that did not penetrate Lucy's father's conscience.

The household was a battleground of constant manipulations, albeit in a very quiet way. The only one of them ever to raise her voice was Lucy, and the immediate response to that was stonewalling by both her mother and her father, a technique that hurt and frustrated Lucy immensely.

Rage became Lucy's friend at a young age, and although she feared physical violence, had no qualms about inflicting it upon herself. Lucy's self-harming behavior began at four years old with a violent tantrum. She pitched herself onto the kitchen floor and beat upon it

so fiercely that her mother picked her up out of fear that Lucy would fracture her forearms.

The bruises lasted for almost three weeks on Lucy's little arms, but her father ended up using the stonewalling technique on his wife for breaking his cardinal rule of giving no heed whatsoever to irrational behavior, even from a four year old.

Lucy never stopped trying to break down her father's stone wall, though. As she entered his office on that morning, she dismissed his dismissal of her greeting, and sat down in a chair behind him. His desk faced the wall, and so he faced the wall, which was quite a difficult space for his wife or daughter to put themselves when they wanted his attention.

"So, what are you working on?" queried Lucy, using her interest in his work as bait, which was generally the best way to go when trying to engage him.

"A new project in Africa. A deal with one of the smaller country's governments." He still did not face her, but continued to stare at the computer screen.

"Which country?" Lucy was genuinely interested in the different places her father travelled in his work. They were primarily unheard of to her, and seemed quite exotic.

"I'm sure you haven't heard of it." Even this monotone, generic shutdown of Lucy's attempt at interaction warranted no eye contact, or even a turn of his head. She walked out of his office and went back to her room.

Lucy loved her room. It was not very big, but the window overlooking the roof of the front porch was one of her favorite places. She recently began to smoke cigarettes, and the roof was a perfect evening spot for this new hobby.

Both of Lucy's parents smoked when she was younger, and she hated it. She learned in school the

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dangers of smoking and how it made your lungs turn black. The thought of her mother's lungs turning black was frightening, but the biggest reason Lucy hated her parents' smoking was the way her fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Winship, flinched in disapproval upon smelling the stale cigarette residue on Lucy's winter coat.

Lucy asked Mrs. Winship for help getting her coat off because the zipper was stuck, and Mrs. Winship took a big breath through her nose in order to muster up the energy to yank the zipper down. She almost immediately recoiled in disgust from Lucy and her jacket.

"Do your parents smoke?" Mrs. Winship asked, in a pretentiously kind and condescending voice as she stepped dramatically away from Lucy and her stinky coat.

"No. They quit smoking before I was born." Lucy did not quite plan the lie, but it pretty much just jumped out of her mouth, and once she said it, she was not going to be taking it back. Besides, she was not going to give Mrs. Winship, the meanest teacher she ever had, the satisfaction of criticizing her parents.

"Lucy, are you lying? Because I think you are lying. Do you know why I think you are lying?" Mrs. Winship spoke out of the side of her mouth, and raised her eyebrows and lifted up a little bit on her tippy toes at the end of each of these questions.

"No." Lucy crossed her arms over her chest, indignation dripping from each of her balled fists.

"Because you smell like cigarettes. Your coat smells like someone smokes cigarettes around it, and I can only presume it is your parents who smoke the cigarettes." Mrs. Winship gave a satisfied little nod to finish off her closing argument.

"Maybe you smell cigarettes because you smoke them. I saw you smoking cigarettes outside in the parking lot bent down next to your car." Lucy was very proud of

this rebuttal, and spoke loudly and clearly to enunciate her confidence, for this part of her argument was true. She forgot her lunch on the school bus one morning, and when she went back out to get it, saw Mrs. Winship crouched beside her car smoking cigarettes.

Lucy expected Mrs. Winship to bow her head in shame and apologize for making such accusations against Lucy's parents when it was, in fact, she who was the cigarette smoker. Mrs. Winship did not do what Lucy expected, but got flustered looking and told the class to get to work on their assignment.

For the rest of the year, Mrs. Winship was not hard on Lucy, but she was not kind, either. Lucy hated her.

Lucy never imagined she would one day be doing something as stupid and dirty as her parents and the frigid Mrs. Winship. Her friend Katie gave her one of her grandmother's cigarettes during a sleepover the previous year, and Lucy was a little surprised she smoked it.

However, she was also strangely excited by the forbidden nature of it.

Lucy loved smoking, and loved having the secrecy of the indulgence. On the roof outside her window, late at night, Lucy loved the solitude of her smoking time, and the slight nod a nicotine buzz gave to her state of mind. Especially in the summer, when the world was dark and soft and warm, and belonged to her, and she to it, and she felt safe.

But it was not night yet, and Lucy had the rest of the blistering summer day to get through before she could wallow in her aloneness.

Her mother was home, and gave Lucy a list of daily chores: clean the hall bathroom, weed the flower garden out front, fold laundry – all mundane, all boring, all supporting Lucy's theory that the only reason her

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mother had a child at all was so that she would someday have free housekeeping services, as she did now.

Lucy actually did not think it was a bad idea, and looked forward to the day when she could have a child old enough to clean her own house.

The inside chores did not bother Lucy so much, but the yard work was earnestly culminating into her personal version of hell. It was stupid and boring, and she had no communion with plants the way some people do.

She also did not have any pride in outdoor work. It was her parents' house, and she gave no consideration to what anyone would think if the grass grew longer than six inches, the length at which a city ordinance deemed "too long." Lucy felt laws dictating how long grass could grow were silly, and she was almost as smothered with disdain for her hometown as she was with the July heat.

Thinking of the word "July" – "Julio" in Spanish - while sweating and freckling in the flower garden, Lucy thought of the time when she was in Junior High and her father said they would all need to learn Spanish, because they were moving to Costa Rica for a year for some business project.

While Costa Rica sounded like a great place to visit, Lucy was not interested in moving anywhere she did not have friends. And as much disdain as she had for Arbortown, it was where her few friends – her refuge – were, and the only place she really knew.

About a week after her father's announcement of the big move, Lucy's mother asked for a timeline, and if they were going to fly out in advance in order to find some place to live. Lucy's father laughed, because he already forgot about the whole thing, and said it was not going to happen.

While she was relieved by the knowledge that she would still be living in Arbortown, Lucy flushed with

embarrassment at the distress she suffered anticipating her going away.

Katie especially was very upset when Lucy told her she was moving for a year, and even began to plan a sit-in on Lucy's driveway so the moving van would not be able to leave. Lucy was touched and heart-broken by Katie's distress, and spent every night crying herself to sleep from fear and the anticipation of missing her friends.

When she heard her father scoff and treat the whole situation like a big joke, Lucy felt very foolish.

It was a common theme in her home, in her life, to be humiliated by her father. It was kind of like a sport to him, and Lucy could only conclude that he had to have some type of hobby. She hated his games, and she was terrified of feeling that humiliation, especially in public, and even more especially at school.

There were a couple of times growing up that she relaxed enough in class to assert herself socially, but felt she was made fun of by one kid or another, and this taught her to just keep her mouth shut and her head in a book. It was a wonder she had any friends at all.

Of course, she could be very social once she got to know people, which was a process further hindered by her tendency to be quite aggressive and intimidating, although these were not qualities of which she was aware. She was aware, instead, of the way people sometimes clammed up after she spoke, and gave her what she felt was the cold shoulder, and assumed this was because they did not like her.

Since she was raised under the prevarication that there were plenty of qualities not to like about her, Lucy did not find this terribly odd, but it was quite lonely at times.

Loneliness was a burden for her to bear, and she accepted it. She knew she was different, that there were

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no others nearby, if any at all, who were like her. It was something she detested and simultaneously cherished; she felt it set her apart from the bland sea of the general public, but she was still very lonely.

Lucy surmised it was the price she paid, though, to keep the balance struck. Her father explained this reasoning to her for as long as she could remember, telling her she was like him in this way, and that they must stick together, because only she could understand him, as only he could understand her, a philosophy that made Lucy feel significant.

Lucy did not cry in elementary school when she was not invited to birthday parties and sleepovers. She had books to entertain her, and the certainty of her specialness to bolster her in such times. She loved to read and spent hours of each day doing so.

She was only three when she learned how to read, and could remember vividly calling out to her mother from the back seat of the car to tell her what each sign, each billboard, each plate-glass window read as they rode by. It was a game for her, but also something she needed. She needed to know what those words meant, how to put the letters together, and then string them all into sentences that told a story and made sense not only to her, but to everyone.

Because not much that made sense to her made sense to everyone, and a lot of things that seemed to make sense to everyone, such as Barbie Dolls and cheerleading, made no sense to Lucy at all. Lucy longed for things that made sense, and she loved to be in the pages of those books, and thereby in those worlds – because that was what kind of reader she was, the kind who starts to read and gets completely lost in the story.

And those worlds, full of simplicity and complexity, of joy and pain, of love and hate, of peace and violence, everything of which those worlds consisted

was fascinating to Lucy primarily because it was not her world.

As the weeding went on and Lucy's mind continued to wander, the sun got a little lower, and the mosquitoes found her ankles and the backs of her knees and her thighs, and she thought she would go insane with each bloody little bite. Although insect repellent was invented long before Lucy was getting eaten alive by mosquitoes, she always, always forgot to spray it on until after she was covered in angry welts.

Many times it was also more important to her to finish whatever it was she was doing before she made the effort of applying the repellent, as it was at this moment when she was almost done with the weeding. Efficiency was important to her when it came to tasks she disliked, and so getting done with the weeding was a priority over her own comfort.

She fantasized about the popsicle she was going to have the minute she was done, and then about the cool, stinging feel of spraying entirely too much insect repellent all over each inch of her exposed flesh, and then of the heavenly feeling of swaying gently in the hammock out back in the shady section of the yard while reading her current novel, and possibly even dozing off for an unguarded moment or two.

Lucy pulled the last of the ugly little bastard plants by its pathetic roots and tossed it into the pile. She stood and grimaced at the feeling of dirt spreading across her face and mingling in with the sweat she was wiping off her forehead.

She knew she now had little mud smudges on her face, but decided they probably made her look as though she was working hard, and it pleased her to know she had something to show for her efforts aside from the dozen or more new mosquito bites.

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Unfortunately, no one passed by at that moment to see this evidence and to appreciate her hard work, so Lucy went in the house via the garage, where she replaced the garden gloves in their proper spot on the metal shelving, and then went inside for the popsicle.

After her delicious and satisfying icy treat, Lucy went upstairs to take a cool shower.

She disrobed in her room, then wrapped a towel around her for the trip across the hall to the bathroom. Once there and safely behind the locked door, she stooped to run the water, and then dropped the towel and glanced momentarily at herself in the mirror.

The stark difference between the tanned and very white skin was what she always noticed first. Her natural skin color was paper-white, and she was not fond of it. Dissatisfaction with her appearance, and with her body as a whole, was not a foreign awareness for Lucy.

She wasted no more than one and a half seconds examining her naked reflection. Lucy was always a little shocked at the differences her body experienced in the last few years, and she could not say she was happy about them.

On the one hand, she was glad she did not look like a child anymore, and felt proud about the rites of passage she went through, because they were the same things other girls her age experienced, too. However, she was not at all comfortable with the idea of herself as a “woman.” She did not even like the word as it did or did not apply to her.

As with the many things in her life over which she had no control, she viewed the maturation of her body as inevitable, and accepted it; but also as with many things in her life, she did not necessarily like it.

In the semi-cool shower, Lucy rinsed the dirt from her face and shampooed and conditioned her hair. She shaved her legs, as she did every day, because there was

always the chance someone might brush up against her and she was mortified at the thought of the feel of her legs being anything but smooth.

Actually, she was mortified by pretty much all body hair, but was too self-conscious to shave anywhere but her legs and under her arms. When she first got the beginnings of the hair between her legs, she mentioned it to her mother, who seemed to need to know such landmarks, though certainly not in any detail – just enough information to determine if Lucy was maturing on course, which she was.

But when Lucy mentioned the hair thing, her mother inexplicably became alarmed, and with a horrified look on her face, lambasted, “You don’t shave there ... do you...?”

Lucy, feeling something akin to a fifty-cent whore, blushed deeply and vehemently denied any such act. Apparently, shaving one’s privates was a disgusting and deplorable thing to do, and even though the gradual covering of that area by that weird, thick, wiry strangeness made her feel dirty, her mother’s look of horror at the thought of shaving it made her feel even dirtier.

So there the hair stayed, and the bikini-brief underwear Lucy wore covered it all up. Out of sight, out of mind.

After her shower, Lucy dried herself, thankful that the mirror was fogged and left only her blurred image exposed, revealing no detail. With the towel, she went over and over the little nicks in her legs around her knees, ankles and shins, where her shaving removed bits of skin.

Lucy literally could not recall a single shaving of her legs that did not include at least one nick to the only part of her body with which she was comfortable. It was maddening, and it seemed as though the slower she went

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and more careful she was with the razor, the deeper and longer the cuts it produced.

Still, her mother's electric shaver did not get her legs nearly as smooth, and her one attempt at a chemical hair remover ended up in hours of agonizing, burning pain. So the razor it was, and so too was the putting up with the little nicks.

After going over them three or four times with the towel, they stopped bleeding. Lucy then generously applied lotion, satisfying the thirst of the raw skin. Her legs were the only part of her body she actually enjoyed taking care of, and she loved to wear very short shorts, even though her father hated them and said she looked like a slut.

After brushing her hair and pulling it straight back wet (it was too hot and too humid to make any effort, and it always ended up being ridiculously frizzy and unruly regardless of the time she put into it), she pulled on her bikini-briefs, strapped the largely unnecessary bra over her practically nonexistent breasts, and put on one of her many pairs of very short cut offs.

After her religiously thorough application of antiperspirant/deodorant, Lucy put on her softball shirt from when she was in elementary school, and it was skin tight, just how she liked, even if she did not have any sort of chest to show off.

She took her novel from the floor beside her bed, which is where she left it the last time she slept at home two or three nights before. Lucy could not keep track of how often she slept in her own bed during the summer because she spent the night out at Katie's house as often as possible.

But now she was eager to get back to the tragic novel and the misery that was not her own. She forgot to bring her book with her on her last leg of overnight visits,

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as she usually did wherever she went, which was the exact reason she carried large handbags.

But this time out, she forgot to pack it, and while she was fine without her book for those few days, the separation made it even sweeter to get her hands on it now.

Lucy went to the screened-in back porch and took the aerosol can of insect repellent and sprayed it liberally all over her. It really, really stung the recently exposed skin on her legs, but it felt good in a weird way, a way that was in accordance with Lucy's belief that the only things worth having were those that hurt you to get to them.

She walked out the screen door, down the cement steps, and into the back yard. She cautiously climbed into the hammock, although she never fell out of it, because it felt so precarious until she got to the exact right spot where the rope would all balance out and hold her securely enough to swing back and forth.

She undid the loose tie of the bit of ski rope she attached to the top of the hammock, with the other end around a nearby tree, so that she could pull it and easily swing herself back and forth until she got so involved in her book that she no longer noticed the lack of movement.

Lucy fell hungrily, yet softly, into her book, and as she did, everything real slipped away.

When she was about seven, her father taught her how to hold her breath for long periods of time under water, and she practiced this religiously. When first submerged, the calm and cool and muffled sound of underwater was very peaceful, and Lucy welcomed it. But the longer she held her breath, and she eventually was able to hold her breath under the water for well over two minutes, the more difficult it became to relax.

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Even as she knew she could easily emerge from under water for more air, she felt her body begin to panic as more time without fresh oxygen went by. With her determination to go as long as possible without taking a breath, Lucy waited until her lungs felt as though they were being crushed before she slowly eased her way out of the water.

That first inhalation of sweet summer air was a freedom from the pressure and the pain and the fear of death by drowning, and this is what Lucy felt when she left her world for whichever one happened to lie between those two covers of a book.

Lucy began the second semester of her sophomore year of high school in the same way she spent the beginning of every second half of every school year she had so far. She was a little excited about seeing her few friends again, and to show off the new clothes and shoes she received for Christmas, but mostly she was disappointed she was back in school.

Lucy actually always was a very good student. She was in mostly gifted classes her freshman year, but dropped them to be in the classes with her friends for her sophomore year.

She enjoyed getting good grades, but not enough to actually study for tests and do the other extra work necessary to pass a gifted class. Passing was the main priority, because it was all she needed to get to the next level, and the closer she was to getting the hell out of that place.

It was strange how much she grew to hate school, because before the second grade with Mrs. Winship, she really loved it. She loved the order and consistency of each day, and how all she was required to do was be quiet and sit still, and she was treated like a princess. It never even occurred to her that school work was in any way

difficult – she always did very well in each of the subjects, and was placed in the highest groups when it came to math, and of course, reading.

She really loved it. However, as she progressed through elementary school, she got angrier, and as she got angrier, she was less likely to sit still and behave as was expected of the good little child she once was.

Lucy's fourth grade teacher really should not have been teaching young children at all, as she was very intolerant, and even somewhat shocked, at any wayward action, such as looking out the window instead of paying attention to what was being presented to the class.

Lucy took an especially high interest in looking out the window for long periods of time, although she sincerely did her best to pay attention.

It simply did not happen – the window, although just a glass-covered foot-wide slit running from the ceiling to the floor, was the porthole to fresh air and no walls. Not that Lucy particularly loved being outside, which she did not when the weather was uncomfortable, or when it was for the purpose of playing any type of sport that involved running.

It was more that she felt so heavy and chained down in the classroom that she longed for the opportunity to breathe in the outside air.

It was during one of these window-staring moments that Lucy was startled by a sharp pain between her neck and shoulder. She was shocked to find her teacher standing over her, pinching her.

Lucy did not even see the teacher coming, she was so wrapped up in her daydream, and was startled terribly. As her teacher continued to pinch, which really hurt, she whispered through clinched teeth that Lucy better pay attention at all times or she would be going to the office.

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Lucy was petrified. She did not really love her fourth grade teacher as she did other teachers, but she never expected to be physically hurt by her, either. Her only response was to stare, stunned, as her teacher released her grip and returned to the front of the room to continue class.

That incident changed Lucy, broke something in her, some fundamental trust of adults, especially the ones who held positions in which they were assumed to protect others. There was a shift in how she thought of school, from it being a place of safety and predictability to one more arena in which she was powerless and at the whim of whoever was in charge.

It was very scary, and in response Lucy began to put up her walls and to take preemptive measures against another sneak attack like that one.

She began to “act out,” according to the school administrator who first called Lucy’s mother in for a conference. Lucy was sitting right outside of the door while they discussed her “defiant behavior,” and could hear every word they were saying, even though the door was closed.

The administrator indicated that Lucy suffered from an “oppositional defiant disorder.” That label fell heavily on Lucy’s shoulders, as if an official diagnosis of “bad kid” was etched onto her. She did not like it, and was shocked once again at the idea of not only being seen as bad, but also defined so succinctly as such.

Lucy’s mother apparently did not think of her daughter as bad, either, but noticed she behaved differently than other children her age. Her mother did not know what to make of her daughter’s strangeness, and when she was told Lucy had a type of disorder, she was actually relieved to have a name to put on whatever it was that made her child so different.

Lucy's mother grasped that diagnosis, and ran with it, and that was where her mind went whenever Lucy did anything disturbing or upsetting.

What Lucy's mother did not know was that Lucy did the same thing.

Her mother was not aware that Lucy overheard that conversation with the administrator, and afterward she never addressed the disorder thing with her daughter. Lucy took that as a cue not to ask about it. However, whenever she was frustrated or feeling as though she had skin made of lead, and needed something – anything – to break the monotony of that deep abyss, Lucy thought of her disorder, and so became defiant.

She defied all kinds of things and people and laws and social norms. She still did not like violence, though, and so stayed primarily under the radar, except when she threw things, and especially except when she threw things in classrooms.

Lucy started throwing things in her eighth grade Social Studies class. She did not like the teacher, was not terribly interested in the subject, and generally found it very difficult to pay attention to her school work or the lecture.

One day, the Social Studies teacher, apparently fed up with Lucy's blatant not-paying-attention behaviors (she was reading a novel in class at the time), spat out Lucy's name in the middle of a sentence. Lucy was again startled, then angry, and then she threw her book at the teacher.

It was only a paperback, and did not hit her, but that teacher was pissed off all the same. And Lucy, who was previously terrified of any conflict or punishment or general negative attention, felt a type of thrill hit her belly when she realized what she did.

She threw a book at a teacher while in class. It was kind of a crazy thing to do, but damn did it feel good.

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All of the irritation that squeaked out of that idiotic teacher's mouth and into Lucy's brain evaporated, and was replaced with a warm, calm sense of power. It was awesome.

What was not awesome was in-school suspension. In-school suspension sucked. However, Lucy found that she was very productive while in ISS, and read entire novels and wrote entire research papers, and did more school work in that condensed period of time than the rest of the year combined.

A pattern emerged in which Lucy would have one of her outbursts and get ISS for three days or so. Following that, she would get A's for a month. The good grades were not really a good trade-off for her isolation though, because of the fact that while she was trapped in a cubicle in the ISS room, everything went on as normal just on the other side of the door.

Her friends, her classes, and pretty much her life went on without her participating in any meaningful way. It took quite a toll on her shell of sanity, and that shell already had a lot of cracks in it.

When she started high school, Lucy consciously reserved the right to throw things at teachers in only the most extreme instances, limiting the time she spent serving in-school suspensions.

She never did anything to warrant an out-of-school suspension. That was a line Lucy was not willing to cross because it would necessitate too much of her parents' involvement, and that was something Lucy attempted to avoid at all possible costs.

Her father usually did not acknowledge much concerning Lucy, good or bad, but when she got into really big trouble, as out-of-school suspension would have inevitably been considered, her mother became overwhelmed and handed Lucy off to him.

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Lucy's father loved punishments. He took great pride in thinking them out, seeing how creative he could be, analyzing what unexpected action might provoke what desired result, and what he could add to his already long résumé of exceptional parenting skills.

He actually believed he was an exceptional parent. He believed so deeply that Lucy believed it, too. As much as she hated and feared him, she loved and revered him, too, and if anyone criticized him to her or even within earshot of her, she became very defensive about it, even if she agreed with the criticism.

But she definitely did not want to be in his line of fire, and by the second half of her sophomore year of high school, Lucy already accumulated the limit of in-school suspensions allowed in a year before she got out-of-school.

Therefore, on the first day of the second semester, she was trying to be on her best behavior, which she was finding difficult during English Lit because she already hated the teacher. He was young and full of promise and wanted to change the world and relate to kids, and was basically a jackass.

There was a new girl in the class, a very small, very cute, very obnoxious-looking girl. Lucy knew immediately she was new because she was in school with the same kids her entire life, and new people, even in a school as big as hers, stood out like sore thumbs.

And this girl definitely stood out. She had a drippy southern drawl that definitely did not originate in Arbortown, Georgia, a town founded forty years before when a bunch of real estate developers from Ohio got together and set up camp.

This new girl also wore very preppy clothes, a lot of makeup, and seemed to flirt just by breathing. Lucy decided she hated her. However, when the class broke for

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lunch, the new girl walked straight up to Lucy, who was sitting alone, and sat down.

Her name was Darla. Lucy initially thought the girl was making that name up, but Darla pulled out her Mississippi Driver's License, which she already had because fifteen was the legal driving age over there, and showed it to Lucy, who promptly burst out laughing.

Darla was not fazed in the least. Lucy was impressed, and intrigued. She never before met anyone even remotely resembling a real Southern Belle, and here was one right in front of her. A ballsy one, too.

Since there was not another soul in their English class Lucy wished to have anything to do with, she decided she was going to break the mold and be nice to the new girl for a change.

Lucy and Darla had a very contentious relationship. Darla drove Lucy insane. She was very pig-headed and feminine, and had very deeply rooted beliefs about manners and other things of that nature. She was critical, but did not blink a single curled eyelash when Lucy told her to fuck off, which was often.

Lucy appreciated this, as she tended to run people over pretty easily with her straightforward, too-honest approach to conversation. It did not yet occur to Lucy to make a stab at acquiring some tact, and she figured there were just very few people in the world who could handle being friends with her.

Darla could definitely handle it, on top of the fact that she was more entertaining than any television show Lucy ever saw. Lucy supposed it evened out, although she found herself almost daily questioning why or how she could possibly be friends with someone who fit much more closely into the stereotype of people Lucy hated: normal people; flouncy, bubbly, sporty, cheerleading normal people.

For example, Darla was the “manager” of the football team. Lucy had absolutely no idea what the hell that meant, but it kept Darla occupied on a regular basis after school, so she and Lucy’s relationship primarily consisted of English Lit and lunch, although they did exchange phone numbers.

Darla’s only free day of the week was Sunday. She was involved in so many activities at school, Lucy did not know how she could possibly maintain her sanity. Lucy’s only day of the week when she was not free was Sunday.

This was because she did not participate in any school activities (unless smoking cigarettes in the parking lot counted), and because she was routinely forced by her parents to attend their church’s Sunday morning service, and the Youth Group gatherings on Sunday evenings as well. Her parents both taught adult church classes on Sunday nights, and so it seemed they spent all day and all evening every Sunday at church, which was one more thing Lucy hated about her life.

Lucy did not always hate church – well, she did always hate Sunday school, because all of the other kids seemed to have some sort of standard uniform of frilly dresses and pseudo-suits they wore every week, and Lucy had only bland and conservative clothes her mother picked out for her.

The other kids also naturally distanced themselves from her, as was the practice in elementary school, but they did not all go to the same junior high or high school as Lucy, and therefore never realized she became a sort of legend because of the whole throwing-things-at-teachers thing. Having missed out on that reputation-changing event, the church kids maintained their disinterest.

She did not mind youth group, though. She started attending the youth group meetings for high school-aged

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kids when she was fourteen, and she was very fond of the youth pastor.

His name was Joe, and he was about ten years younger than her parents. He was hired by the church to start the youth group program a couple years before, and singled Lucy out before she was even in high school. He approached her one night at a dinner type of church gathering, and said,

“You’re Lucy, right?”

She was very flattered that he knew her name, as she truly believed she was one of the plainest wall flowers that existed in that group of beautifully adorned and shoe-shined kids. He was very straight forward, and also was immediately and completely non-threatening, and Lucy felt very comfortable around him almost right away.

The night he singled her out, he only introduced himself, said he looked forward to seeing her at the youth group meetings the following year, and moved on. But he still remembered her name when she did get into the youth group program, and he picked her regularly to participate in the very goofy and entertaining activities he conducted at each of the meetings on Sunday evenings.

Under his wing, Lucy began to feel confident about herself in a group of people for the first time without having to do something shocking and that would get her in trouble.

It was a strange situation to Lucy, but she thrived in that group. The other kids often made her uncomfortable, but with her newfound acceptance of herself, she was able to interact and relax, and generally have fun. She never laughed more than she did at those meetings, and even enjoyed the occasions on which Joe played his guitar for sing-a-longs because he was so goofy about it, and the music he chose was from a collection of old rock songs that Lucy loved.

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The youth group thrived with Joe as their leader, and they took ski trips and went hiking, and did things Lucy really enjoyed.

And she cherished being a part of Joe's inner circle, one of the core groups of kids in the program. Joe also somehow knew when Lucy was not doing so well at home, and it was on those occasions that he would take her aside and ask if she was okay.

She never spoke with him about any of her worries or concerns, but was comforted nonetheless, because he told her he would be there if she needed him, and she believed him when he said it.

After her freshman year, though, Joe tried to become more involved with Lucy's family. She did not realize how easily he recognized that her home life was not so great, because she herself did not realize it. She simply believed her parents were stricter than most, especially her father, and that being unhappy was a normal part of childhood.

Her father was not wildly violent; he was always very controlled and calm and methodical in carrying out the physical elements of his punishments, and rarely, if ever, left any marks on her body. Her mother was not doped up or drunk all the time, either, so Lucy had no cause to believe there was anything exceptionally wrong in her home.

Joe believed there was something exceptionally wrong in her home. He came over for dinner one night, and after the meal, stayed to speak with Lucy's parents.

This was not unusual in her house – often men from church came by to see her father. He successfully portrayed himself as some sort of sage, and glowed when men from the church came to seek his counsel about their wives or children or jobs. It was not unusual for him to sit around the kitchen table with these men, sometimes talking for hours.

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But it was unusual for her mother to start screaming in the middle of one of these sit-down sessions.

Lucy said goodnight to Joe and retired to her room to read before going to sleep, and was comforted by the thought that he might become close to her father, and maybe be around more. She did not anticipate that her father would threaten Joe with a baseball bat while insisting vehemently that he get out of their house, which was the scene she arrived at upon running down the stairs after her mother started screaming.

Joe looked shocked and hurt, and was asking Lucy's father to please just talk to him, and that he was not trying to hurt anyone.

Joe and Lucy's father were about the same build, which was big and thick, and Lucy was terrified of what her father might do to Joe with the unfair advantage of that bat. But Joe quickly saw that Lucy's father was not going to be doing any more sitting down and talking that night, and he backed away, and left through the front door, looking very sad.

He did not see Lucy crouching at the top of the stairs on his way out.

Not long after that, Lucy and her parents left that church.

They actually triggered quite a split in the congregation, because Lucy's mother and father somehow accumulated a loyal following, although neither held any official church position. Lucy suffered the fallout of this split whenever she saw anyone around town that remained with the original church.

She deeply resented the accusatory looks, as if she had anything whatsoever to do with what happened, which she may have, but not in any way she could be blamed for. It was her asshole father's fault, and she knew that better than she knew her own name.

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Nonetheless, Lucy was heartbroken. She loved Joe and the normalcy he brought to her life and to her view of who she was, and his ability to make her laugh and laugh and laugh. As with the incident in fourth grade with the teacher hurting her shoulder, this broke something in her, and Lucy hardened up a little more.

Ever since she was a small child, there were occasions when Lucy would try to go to sleep at night, but instead would cry and cry and cry. She never really knew why she was crying, only that it needed to come out, and after the incident between her father and Joe, these occasions increased in frequency.

A large number of the members of the congregation that split, led again by Lucy's parents, joined up with a small, budding church and made it big, too.

In response to the rapid growth, the new church moved to a new building that would hold the larger numbers of people, who on Sundays passed around brand new brass-plated platters that would hold the larger amounts of bills in the weekly offering.

Joe's success at Lucy's old church inspired a kind of youth-group revolution, and the programs were being started in most, if not all, of the other big churches in town.

Lucy's new church hired a youth pastor, who was a complete dork, and Lucy tried to give him some benefit of the doubt, but it did not hold. And she really, really did not like going to church, or to youth group, or to anything else that had to do with being good and learning how most of her thoughts and actions were sins.

One Sunday night at the church, Lucy's parents hosted some sort of event in order to accomplish something Lucy had no interest in, but was stuck being there anyway. She sneaked into the church office to call Darla, since it was Sunday, and Darla's free day.

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Lucy was initially just looking for something to do, and figured talking on the phone to someone interesting would pass the time, but when Darla answered the phone, Lucy was surprised to hear Darla was trying to track her down.

Darla, being the “manager” of the football team, made some pretty strong acquaintances with the players. One of those players was at her house at that very moment, and had one of his friends with him. Darla’s parents were out of town, and she was looking for someone to hang out with the football player’s friend so the football player could turn all of his attention to her. Lucy asked who the friend was, and it turned out he was someone she knew, an older guy from her old church.

Lucy was immediately intrigued, because this guy was very cute, and being a few years older, very exciting. Lucy turned the wheels in her head and figured out a story for her parents, as she knew they would not knowingly allow her to go hang out with boys at someone’s house unsupervised.

Her parents ended up being busy enough with their own function to not pay too much attention to what Lucy was doing anyway, and her mom agreed to let her go as long as she was home by nine that night.

The guy came to the church to pick Lucy up. Darla was not with him, and this made Lucy a little nervous. The way he smelled like beer and then drove through the field next to the church trying to find his way back to the road made her nervous, too.

Lucy shrieked at him to stop the car mere inches away from a ditch. She authoritatively told him to let her drive, and although she did not have her driver’s license, was irritated and scared enough to let that slide in order to further her self-preservation.

Lucy was surprised at how easily the guy acquiesced. She did not yet have much experience with

alcohol, and in fact was embarrassed to be the only one of her small group of friends to have never gotten drunk, but she knew enough to know right away this guy was shit-faced.

Lucy took the wheel and very cautiously drove to Darla's house at the slurred and inefficient direction of the guy. She was aware that all of her senses were screaming at her to just go home, but this guy really was cute.

She actually even had a little crush on him from afar, and now she was going to get to hang out with him by herself, an opportunity she was not willing to give up easily. Besides, she did not want the guy to ridicule her should she immediately demand he take her (let her drive his car) to her own home. It was important to her that he see her as calm and mature and collected.

So when they arrived at Darla's house, Lucy ignored her gut feelings and went in.

The first thing Lucy did was try to find Darla, and accomplished this when she knocked on the locked door of what she assumed was the master bedroom. Darla answered the door wearing a red negligee type deal, with the football player in her parents' bed in the background.

Lucy realized at that moment that she was in way over her head. She hardly made out with a boy before, let alone had sex with one, and she was not about to lose her virginity to some drunk guy she just met, never mind how cute and exciting he appeared to be.

Darla directed Lucy to take the guy into a different bedroom, and just sit there and watch TV with him. The guy followed Lucy up the stairs, so that is what they did. Lucy immediately informed the guy she was not having sex with him. He laughed. She reiterated. He shrugged.

They watched TV for a while, and then the guy leaned over and began to kiss her. Lucy almost threw up

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from fear, but tried to just go with it. The guy got up and locked the door, took his shirt off, and got back onto the bed next to Lucy.

She told him she did not want to. He did anyway.

Darla was still in the master bedroom with the football player at 8:50 p.m., and Lucy started to panic about getting home. She finally asked the guy to take her; he seemed to have sobered up quite a bit by then.

He was pissed off, though, because she put up quite a fight in the bedroom upstairs, and he showed his irritation by refusing to give her a ride. As the minutes crept by, Lucy almost started crying with fear at the possible punishments her father would come up with for not being on time. The guy finally said he would take her home.

Once in the car, neither of them said anything, and when she got to her house, Lucy simply got out of the car and went inside.

Her parents were not home yet, and Lucy was so thankful for that miracle. They would have been so incredibly angry if they knew what she just did with this guy. They made it very clear how bad sex was, and if they ever found out she was having it, or anything close to it, she would be kicked out of the house.

At fifteen, this was a formidable prospect, and Lucy did not consider for a moment that her parents would be in any way sympathetic to her plight, not even her mother.

Lucy went upstairs and started a hot bath. She was not in too much pain, but there was some burning, and her underwear was spotted with blood from her torn skin. She got into the bath, wincing as she sunk in, and stayed until the water got cold.

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Then she got out, toweled off, put on her pajamas, turned all of the lights off, locked her door, lay down in her bed, and stared and stared into the infinite darkness.

Shortly after, her parents returned home. Her mother came up and knocked on the door, and left when Lucy yelled out that she was sleeping. Lucy did not know when she actually went to sleep, or if she did at all. She got out of bed when her alarm clock went off, took a very careful shower – she was terribly sore, but no longer bleeding at all, and got ready for school.

When Lucy got to English Lit class, she sat down next to Darla and asked her why she left her alone with that guy. Darla did not have an answer, and after that, she did not seem so interesting to Lucy any more.

A few months after that thing with that guy (this is how Lucy defined it in her mind – she tried not to define it at all, or to even acknowledge that it happened, but it kept coming back to her, and so she needed to define it somehow, or it was going to make her brain melt), Lucy was going through the lunch line, trying to figure out what she was going to be able to eat out of everything displayed before her.

She did not eat pork, so the ham was out; she did not eat anything that came out of any body of water, so the fish sticks were out; she did not eat salad, so the salad bar was out. Lucy usually could find something to eat from the three daily options, but sometimes the three were all pre-exempted from her limited range of acceptable food.

She decided she would pick some sides from the salad bar, and as she was heading down to spoon out some cottage cheese, she happened to look up and make eye contact with a blond guy she recognized as a junior at their school. He was going in the opposite direction as

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she, and they held each other's gaze for longer than would be considered indifferent.

As Lucy turned away, she allowed a little smile to sneak out of the corner of her mouth, and then it was back to the business of food.

Lucy was always what could be described as a "picky eater." As a child, she was the kid who required peanut butter and jelly sandwiches specially made by the kitchen staff in fancy restaurants, or she would just starve.

Starving was not such a bad option to Lucy, and certainly was her choice over any food she did not recognize, or not already approved through previous experience. Although her menu grew some as she got older, it was still very limited, and very strict.

When Lucy was a child, her mother refused, at times, to back off when it came to what Lucy ate, or more often did not eat, for dinner. She knew Lucy hated lima beans, but for some inexplicable reason, regularly made them and added them as a side to hot dogs and macaroni and cheese. On these nights, Lucy refused to eat the lima beans, and her mother refused to let Lucy leave the table until they were gone.

Lucy would usually make some sort of attempt to eat the lima beans, but literally gagged as the disgusting, dry paste hit the back of her tongue. Although this became standard fare for lima bean nights, Lucy's mother would gape in horror and surprise anew each time Lucy spat the rejects out of her mouth and back onto her plate.

Lucy would then be condemned to her seat at the table until every last lima bean was gone. Sometimes Lucy could manage to get all of the beans completely ingested during dinner, but more often it came down to when the kitchen was cleaned and the lights were turned off and her parents were in the next room watching TV,

and still Lucy would be sitting at the table with the lima beans.

To end this torturous marathon battle with her mother, Lucy would finally put all of the lima beans in her mouth at one time, tuck half into one cheek and half into the other, then announce to her mother through pursed lips that she needed to go to the bathroom.

Of course, her mother allowed this, and as soon as Lucy locked the door, she would grab a wad of toilet paper and spit the remains of the lima beans into it. She would then tuck the wad way in the back of the cabinet under the sink, being very careful not to allow any noise when she closed the cabinet door.

After waiting the appropriate amount of time it would have taken her to pee, Lucy flushed the toilet, washed her hands, and returned to the kitchen.

Lucy would wait five minutes exactly (as timed on the kitchen clock), and then announce that she was done with the lima beans. Her mother would come in the kitchen to inspect her plate, and would then tell Lucy to clear her dishes and go to bed.

Lucy did not understand why in the world her mother would try to make her eat those damned lima beans time and time again. It was not as if she would be developing a taste for them, as amply demonstrated by the gagging, which was not feigned. Lucy, for whatever reason, had a legitimately difficult time eating them. It was traumatic.

Because she possessed such specific standards for what she would eat, and because those standards were not typically met in the school cafeteria, Lucy preferred to prepare her lunch and bring it with her.

However, when it came down to ten more minutes of sleep or preparing her lunch, Lucy always chose to hit the snooze button one more time, and then be in a mad rush to get to school, thereby leaving no time for

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anything but grabbing lunch money from her mother's wallet. Once lunchtime came around, Lucy was kicking herself for not getting up earlier and making her own lunch.

It would occur to her at this time that she should just prepare her lunch the night before, but by the time she got home forgot the whole issue, and in doing so, perpetuated the vicious cycle.

Her mind was in the midst of this madness the following day when she saw the blond boy again at the salad bar. By some fluke, the other two lunch choices were pork chops and tuna salad (two days in a row of pork and fish – what the hell?), and Lucy was back picking at the cottage cheese. She added a spoon of chocolate pudding to her tray, and she and the blond boy did a replay of the previous day.

But this time, he smiled at her. And she smiled back. And then she turned and went on her way to her usual spot to eat her lunch. This time, however, she did not get caught up in her discomfort with making it through the meal because her mind stayed on the blond boy. She thought of the day before, when they made eye contact – he had kind of a stunned look on his face, as though he was caught doing something he should not have been.

Lucy knew that when a boy looked at another girl that way, and the girl was very pretty, it was because he was stuck thinking about how pretty she was, and not how he might look staring with his mouth open.

But that was when a boy was looking at another girl, not at her. It occurred to her this may have been what happened when this boy looked at her, but dismissed that thought as improbable. Lucy did not consider herself pretty, but also did not consider herself ugly – mostly she just did not consider herself. She assumed the stare was

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because he thought she was some kind of a freak, which, for all intents and purposes, she fully believed she was.

Lucy then considered the look from today – he smiled. That definitely meant he did not think she was too much of a freak. Her mind began to direct her toward the possibility that he was laughing at her, but that smile was a little too blatant to be discounted on that note. And when she smiled back, he looked very pleased. She went ahead and allowed herself to consider that he liked her.

When Lucy was younger, her mother would very occasionally take her shopping at the big indoor mall close to Atlanta, taking back roads instead of the interstate. There was one spot on one road that rose rapidly into a little hill, and then dropped suddenly back down on the other side.

Lucy loved it – the motion made her belly drop and spin and would take her breath away for just a moment.

That is the feeling she got in her stomach when she thought about the possibility that the blond boy could like her. For the rest of the school day, her mind would go back to that smile, and her stomach would do the big dip thing, and she would smile a little, and allow a little light to shine in her heart.

The blond boy's name was Will, and it turned out he lived across the street from Katie's boyfriend. Katie's boyfriend lived within walking distance of Lucy's house.

One Friday night (when Lucy's father was out of town) Katie arranged to spend the night at Lucy's. Before it got too dark out, they walked over to Katie's boyfriend's house. He was a pretty nice guy, and when he asked Lucy if she would like him to introduce her to Will, he was completely serious, and not at all teasing or taunting.

Lucy was okay with that. So was Will.

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They spoke back and forth on the phone for several nights, and met briefly after school in the parking lot. On the fifth night after first being introduced to Will, he asked Lucy if she would like for him to give her a ride home from school the next day. His friend would let him borrow his car, if she would like him to do that.

Lucy's heart swelled a little at how awkward he was, and told him that it would be very nice if he gave her a ride home, which is just what he did the next afternoon.

Lucy met Will in the parking lot as usual, but instead of hanging out for a little while with their friends, he immediately asked her if she was ready to go. She was. She got into the older, boat-like sedan that belonged to Will's best friend, and Will began to drive her home.

They made light chit-chat type of conversation, and about half way to Lucy's house, the car stalled. Will, immediately alarmed, started shouting startled and panicked obscenities, from which Lucy gathered the car was out of gas.

As he was squeaking out his agitated diatribe, Will managed to get the coasting car aimed at a gas station, which was thankfully very close by. He steered it into a space by a pump, fortunately on the correct side of the car's gas tank.

Lucy, although concerned about Will's distress, found the situation pretty funny, and considering their luck at being right by the gas station as the car stalled, and then rolling right in there like the whole thing was staged, she began to giggle.

Will, allowing some relief to sink in that they made it not only to a gas station on a completely empty tank, but to an actual gas pump, looked over at Lucy and turned a very lovely shade of pink.

He was angry with his friend, and a little freaked out about stalling in the middle of the road, and

embarrassed that this was all during his first encounter alone with Lucy, but as he kept looking at her, and she kept giggling, he could not maintain his ill humor. While not yet seeing anything quite comedic about the situation, he let out a sigh of pent up breath, and gave Lucy a big smile, and leaned in toward her.

Lucy initially felt a jolt of panic, and a blur of nausea. She was not prepared at all for Will's physical advance. But when she saw him pause inches from her face, and wait for her to decide whether or not the kiss was going to happen, she relaxed.

And she leaned the rest of the way to remove the space between their lips, and stayed for a moment. Lucy felt the surge of excitement in her belly creep warmly downward, and then pulled her mouth softly away. Will smiled at her again, and got out of the car to fill the tank.

With Will, Lucy experienced a fairytale of interactions that lived up to every one of her expectations of what it would be like to have a nice boyfriend.

A month after that first kiss, Lucy turned sixteen, and Will met her in the parking lot before school with a small bouquet from his mother's garden, and a card with a picture he drew, and the words, "Happy Sweet Sixteen."

Lucy did not even think about the sweet part of turning sixteen, especially since her father already told her she would not be getting her driver's license, but Will's home-picked bouquet and handmade card made it the sweetest birthday ever.

Will was very patient, concerned and considerate about the issue of having sex. Lucy was very sketchy about it, and Will believed it was because she had never had sex before. Lucy allowed this misconception to persist because she could not bear to associate that thing that happened with that guy with losing her virginity, and

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she certainly was not going to tell Will – or anyone else – anything about it.

Darla knew what happened that night at her house, because Lucy slapped her in the face with it that day at school when Darla could not come up with an answer for leaving Lucy alone with the guy. They did not discuss it, except for Lucy to instruct Darla to never tell anyone what happened.

Lucy and Will came close to having sex on several different occasions, but he asked her each time if she wanted to go farther. When she said she was still scared, he told her that it was okay with him to stop, and she believed him.

And then the time came when she said okay.

And they were off to the races.

Anytime and anywhere, they had sex, and more sex, as only teenagers are physically capable of doing. It was not necessarily great sex, but they did not know that, and it was just fine with both of them, and so they did it. And it was fun, and each time they were having sex, Lucy was not thinking about anything except how much she loved Will, and that he wanted her.

After about six months, though, Lucy began to wonder if they were going to do anything other than have sex all the time. They began to hang out as a couple with Katie and her boyfriend, and with another of Lucy's friends, Malcolm. Malcolm had a girlfriend named Brittany, and she began to hang out with them, too.

By that summer, they were a regular group. Being with her friends was the only time Lucy and Will ever just hung out. The only thing they ever did when they were alone, the only reason they were ever alone, was to have sex. And Lucy felt it was getting old.

Not that she wanted to stop seeing Will, because just the idea upset her greatly. She imagined they would

get married one day, because she could not conceive of not being with him.

Her life changed so dramatically since he came into it, and she kept hoping and trying to get back to those first few months of simple amazement with each other, but Will did not seem to go along with that.

Lucy knew his close friends, but she never hung out with them the way he did with hers. She did not think it was wrong for him to hang out with his friends, but she was resentful that he did not want her to hang out with his friends as he did with hers.

Although Lucy would occasionally hang out with her friends without Will there, he was still a part of that group. It was very frustrating, and really very frightening, to analyze too much.

Lucy did not want to rock the boat with Will, and if he primarily wanted to just have sex with her, she felt she would do what she needed to do and make the best of it. It was difficult, though, because when she was hanging out with her friends without him, all she could think about was what he was doing and wishing he was with her.

And then one day Malcolm announced that his brother was moving back to Arbortown.

Lucy met Kieran, Malcolm's brother, once before, during a thrilling episode of sneaking out of Katie's parents' house in the middle of a summer night. She did not remember much about Kieran, but still, the memory of that night brought back warm feelings, and she was pleased to know he was coming back.

She tried to remember exactly what he looked like, but could only vaguely recall his face. It was, after all, pretty dark out that night, but she did remember that he was beautiful.

Her memory served her well, for when Lucy was reacquainted with Kieran, she saw that he was indeed

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beautiful. No taller than she, but with much more to his build than her too-thin frame, Kieran was very nice on the eyes. Not in a way that made Lucy uncomfortable - as she felt around boys who were just too precise, too pretty- but in a way that she could look at him and drink the sight of him right up.

His hair was long, and he kept it tied at the nape of his neck. He was a skateboarder, just as Malcolm was, and he was fascinating to watch. He possessed a fearlessness and comfortable ease in his movements that Lucy found very foreign, but that intrigued her. Kieran almost always wore his big, pearly smile, and Lucy could not help but smile back every time.

Lucy considered Kieran to be a friend, and as she spent more time with him, regardless of whether or not Will was around, she considered him a very close friend. He was terribly easy to talk to, and there was an intimacy between them, however platonic, that did not exist in her relationship with Will.

Will did not seem to mind that Lucy was friends with Kieran, and in fact, appeared to enjoy the fact that Lucy had someone else on whom to focus her attention. Will knew that Lucy would not cheat on him, and in that confidence, her friendship with Kieran aroused no threat.

Will, however, was not too fond of Kieran. It was not that he did not like him, for there was very little not to like. Kieran was easygoing and friendly, and although Will could not pin down what it was that bothered him about Kieran, he could not deny he did not like the guy.

Kieran was much more of a diffuser than an instigator when it came to verbal or physical confrontation, except where Malcolm was concerned. Lucy, and every other one of the people in that core group, was astounded the first time they witnessed Kieran taunt Malcolm to the point of violence. No one Malcolm knew in Arbortown, and many people he did not know,

would dare to provoke him. He exuded anger and violence just beneath his charming and easygoing manner, and could be extremely intimidating.

Malcolm was not in many actual physical altercations at their school, because his reputation preceded him. That reputation was established early on by one or two bouts, and he was a fierce fighter hand to hand.

And Kieran? Well, he just was not viewed in that manner, and it did not even occur to anyone to consider the idea of him as violent.

Kieran was Malcolm's older brother, though, and Lucy saw and heard things from people who had siblings that it could be an endless battle in those homes. Kieran prodded and goaded and poked and teased until Malcolm could no longer physically contain himself, and he would hurl himself at Kieran with all the ferocity of a gladiator. Kieran would simply smile his smile, and within seconds, have Malcolm in a headlock.

Then he would taunt and tease Malcolm some more. It was fascinating.

But in the end, after Malcolm's ego was dented, Kieran would offer up something, some gesture or word that would serve as balm for Malcolm's wounds, and anyone could see that Kieran loved his brother.

As for the girls in the group, including Lucy, Kieran clearly struck a balance between masculine and feminine in that he did not fear at all displaying a soft, sensitive, and intuitive part of who he was. Because this was a rarity in most of the boys Lucy and her friends were ever around, they all found Kieran very endearing, and irresistible. While Lucy maintained her loyalty to Will, all of her friends found themselves pining for Kieran.

Kieran would occasionally hook up with some girl or another outside of their circle, but should he ever

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attempt to bring the peripheral girl near their core group, she was shunned heavily. Lucy at least tried to be nice, but even though she was not willing to admit it, she was also jealous that Kieran's attention was drawn somewhere other than to her.

She did not believe she was trying to be vicious, but also did not recognize her feelings about him with any other girl as anything other than uncomfortable, and she was much happier when he was single.

One afternoon late in the summer, Lucy called Kieran and asked him to meet her at the pool hall, which was where they frequently hung out in the evenings. Lucy was upset and needed company, substantial company, and as Will was working, Kieran was her first choice among her friends to spend some time with. She felt he would be safe and soothing after her horrific experience from the night before.

Lucy got her driver's license about a month prior, and was driving the family car with her parents aboard. They were on their way into Atlanta for dinner at one of her father's favorite restaurants. Lucy and her mother picked him up from his office, which was on the way, and he insisted they take back roads into the city rather than get on the interstate.

He directed Lucy which way to go, and even though she was not familiar with the area, could see clearly that it was a much less prosperous neighborhood than her own in Arbortown. The houses were quite small, though many were very pretty and quaint. Lucy was not able to take in as much of her surroundings as she wished, because she needed to pay attention to where she was driving, and driving with her father in the car always made her terribly nervous.

It was also getting darker as they drove, and therefore more difficult for Lucy to see much more than the road before her.

As the family car approached the end of one of the small neighborhood roads, Lucy was startled to see a boy about ten years old jump in front of the car, waving wildly and yelling for them to stop. Lucy, acting instinctively, slammed on the brakes. The child just stood there waving his hands and shaking his head back and forth, “No! No! No!”

“Keep moving.” It was a very clear and crisp order from her father. She turned to him incredulously.

“There is a kid in the middle of the road. I think something’s wrong.” Lucy spoke the obvious to her father, as he apparently was not aware of what was clearly happening.

“Keep moving.” More sternly this time, but not louder, because he never yelled, only inflected more hate into his words as he escalated the severity of his statements.

“Dad, there’s something wrong, it’s just a little boy, I think...” Before she could finish, her father caught her with eyes of pure rage. She always believed he would like to kill her when he was looking at her like that, and she was frightened.

He told her to drive around the boy.

Under the fearful spell of her father, Lucy moved the car forward. As she advanced and the headlights took more of the scene in, Lucy was horrified to spot a medium sized dog lying in the middle of the road. She again slammed on the brakes, but her father persisted, demanding that she keep moving.

“There’s a dog! There’s a dog!” She was getting hysterical, and still her father locked his great white shark eyes on her, intimating what cold and calculated bodily harm would come to her if she did not keep going.

Her mother yelled his name, but as far as he was concerned, there was no one in that car except for him

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and Lucy, and there was a battle going on that he was going to win.

And win it he did.

The only thing Lucy remembered about what happened next was the sick, dull thud of the injured dog's body going under first the front driver's side tires, then the rear, and her father's satisfied smirk as he sat back in his seat like a throned imp being chauffeured through his allotment of hell.

Lucy made it a few more blocks before her foot slipped off the gas pedal, and her mother shook her from the back seat and screamed for her to stop the car.

Lucy got out of the car and into the back seat, and her mother continued the drive. Lucy sat in the back seat, feeling over and over again the weight of that dog under the tires, and seeing over and over again the face of that poor little boy, his pain and horror so vividly channeled from his heart to hers, and it was her fault.

It was all her fault. That little boy's dog was dead.

He tried so hard to protect his pet, his beloved companion, but the strangers in the large car seemed to come out of nowhere specifically to run over and kill what he was trying so hard to protect. Lucy imagined the blows that little boy felt to his heart and his head, and she felt the blows to her heart and her head, because she was the one who did it.

It was her fault, and she did not blame that poor, dusty, tear-streaked little boy for hating her and her father and his big car and his money one single bit, because it was what she hated, too.

At that moment, she could not hate anything more.

Lucy did not remember the dinner at the restaurant, did not even know if she ate. She did not remember the trip home. She did not remember going to bed, but only that she was there again, in her bed, staring

and staring once more into the infinite darkness, and crying and crying and crying, and even though she was aware of what happened with the little boy and the dog, she could not quite connect it to why she was crying so.

Lucy was very alone and very frightened.

When she woke late the next morning, her mind went to Kieran, and the thought of him comforted her. She consciously made the assumption in her mind that she did not first think of Will because she knew he would be working.

She called Kieran and asked if he would meet her at the pool hall, and he said he would. Lucy dug a few dollars in quarters out of the jar beside her parents' bed (she was, at that moment, far beyond weighing the ethics of stealing their money), tried her best to fix her puffy face with her powder compact, got into her mother's car, and left.

Lucy arrived at the pool hall first, and as it was the middle of a weekday, was the only patron. She went to the counter to retrieve her pool cue, and then directly to a back corner of the empty hall and set up camp. Lucy got out her cigarettes and lit one, and placed it in one of the clear glass ashtrays situated along the shelf-type counter that ran along the entire wall of the room filled with quarter-slot pool tables.

She counted out four quarters from her change purse, arranged them in the slot, and applied the precise amount of pressure needed to push the quarters in and engage the release of the pool balls. Lucy continued to lean down by the slot, angling her head forward, and felt the rumbling and listened to the satisfying sound of an entire rack of pool balls dropping and rolling into the end of the table for her to grab.

She pulled the chipped and broken, yet still functional, plastic triangle out of its slot under the table,

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and loaded the balls with precise and consistent movements.

Following this set-up of the table, Lucy chalked the end of her cue using the same precise and consistent movements, then leaned it against the wall, and sat down with her cigarette.

She loved the pool hall in the middle of the day, especially in the summer when the air conditioning immediately stripped the damp lengths of heat off her body as she stepped through the door from outside. She loved that there was no competition to get a table, and no sleazy men her father's age ogling her as though she did not have eyes to see them staring.

Lucy dragged on her cigarette, held the smoke in her lungs for a moment before letting it out slowly, and caught Kieran out of the corner of her eye. He wore his beautiful smile on his beautiful face. It made her feel so good to know for sure it was just for her, as evidenced by the fact that no one else was around.

As he got closer to her, though, his smile faded, and he approached her with concern.

"Have you been crying?" His voice had a slight edge that did not typically accompany his calm tone.

She smiled at him, not only out of appreciation for his concern, but because he could tell she was upset, had been upset, until that moment.

"Yeah. My dad." It was all the explanation that was needed, as Kieran nodded in understanding and lit his own cigarette.

Lucy was hit again with how right it felt to reach out to him instead of any of her other friends. Of course they would come to be at her side in her time of need, as she would for them, but for some reason they were very intrigued by the tiny details of the events at her home.

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Kieran just seemed to accept that it sucked, and that was enough for him. Lucy was grateful, and she looked at him again, and smiled.

“So, are you ready for me to kick your ass again?” Kieran threw out the challenge nonchalantly, yet happily, because he knew he was very good at eight ball, knew she knew he was very good at eight ball, and knew, too, that she would do her damndest to beat him anyway.

He also knew he could make her laugh, and that her laughter would, if not erase, then at least ease, the pain behind her eyes. And it made him happy to do that for her.

Lucy first got drunk shortly before she started dating Will, but really started seeking out alcohol after they got together.

There were two reasons for this: one, she felt much more comfortable on the rare occasions they were with his friends when she was drinking, and two, sex was a lot more fun when she was drunk.

Lucy did not spend too much time with Will's friends, but whenever anyone's parents were out of town, that is where they would all go. Will and his friends, and really, Lucy's friends as well, all smoked pot, but Lucy had not tried it before, and was not nearly as afraid to drink alcohol as she was to smoke pot, so that is usually what she did on these parentless occasions.

The only problem was that she and all of her friends were well below the legal age to buy alcohol, and there was not always an older brother or sister, or even the occasional mom, to get Lucy her booze. Marijuana, however, was readily available to anyone of any age who did not act too much like a narc and had the money to buy it.

So, one night when Lucy was unable to get her hands on any alcohol, and she and Will were at a party

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with a bunch of people Lucy did not know very well, she made the split second decision to hit a joint that was passed to her, instead of just passing it along as she always previously did.

Will was not in the circle of pot smokers at the time Lucy made this decision, and she was surprised that he was upset – even hurt – that she smoked for her first time without him. He really enjoyed smoking pot, to the point that he believed it had spiritual connotations, and apparently looked forward to sharing Lucy's first experience with her.

Lucy had no way of knowing this, but felt guilty all the same. She told Will she did not really feel anything anyway, and he told her that sometimes happened the first time one smoked pot, and this appeased him somewhat. He asked her to wait until he was with her until she smoked again.

And so he was. It was about two weeks after the first time she tried smoking pot, and Will went all out to plan a special time alone for them in which they could get high and just hang out. Lucy was happy to just hang out with Will on any occasion, so she went along with it.

She was a little nervous about what her physical and mental reaction would be to smoking, but she felt safe with Will, and knew the effects did not last any longer than a few hours, and they had at least five hours before Lucy needed to be home for the night.

They were at Will's house, and his parents were out for the evening. On the screened in back porch, Will packed a bowl for Lucy and showed her how to use it. They shared one bowl, and then Will packed another. After about five hits, Lucy began to feel way too woozy and thick, and a little nauseous, and so passed on the rest of the second bowl. Will finished it off, and then they sat back.

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Will obviously was having a good time, but Lucy did not like the sensation at all. She felt as though she could hear her heart beating, and her mouth felt as if she was sucking on a dead animal, and she had to keep reminding herself that they were safe from any parents or police walking in. She told Will all of this and he got her some water. It was the most delicious water Lucy ever tasted. She and Will went into his room where he turned on some cartoons.

With the light-hearted and senseless distraction of the cartoons, Lucy began to relax. After about an hour she started to feel a little less like her brain was being absorbed by cotton balls, and a little more coherent. She and Will talked and talked and talked about absolutely nothing, and it was all very deep and special and hilarious.

As the effects of the marijuana began to fade, Will packed another bowl, and Lucy quickly declined. She just got to the point of feeling more comfortable, and she did not want to go through the whole fuzzy, paranoid thing again.

After that night, Lucy would smoke pot when it was available, although she still really enjoyed drinking alcohol more, and drank when she had the opportunity. Pot was simply more convenient, though. It was easier to come by, and she was able to go home at the end of the night relatively sober, and not reeking of alcohol really made it a lot easier for her to get away with. Also, Will really liked having that bond with her.

Will thought having sex while high was amazing, but there again, Lucy preferred alcohol. Where being drunk enabled her to relax and be freer with her physical intimacy, pot made her spaced out and anxious, and her mind would wander often to the point that she would forget she was supposed to be having sex. It just was not that great for her. But again, she mostly just liked being

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with Will, and he really liked being with her when he was high.

As Lucy neared the end of her junior year of high school, and Will got ready to graduate, things between them began to get less than good enough. Lucy did not like it when it seemed that all Will wanted to do when they were alone was have sex, and now it seemed to her that all Will wanted to do when they were alone was get high and have sex.

Since Lucy really did not like smoking pot, especially because of the paranoia, which was increasingly more intense, it was very difficult for her to even pretend she was enjoying herself. Lucy began to tire of her and Will's routine.

However, when she spoke to him about just spending time together without getting high or having sex, he was offended that she felt it was all he wanted from her. Lucy felt bad, but she really did feel that was all he wanted from her.

She knew that he cared for her, even loved her, but she overheard him speaking to his friends about college, and they all talked about how great it was going to be to have an entirely new pool of girls to hook up with, and how easy it was going to be to get laid without anyone's parents being around all the time.

Additionally, the drinking and smoking would be much easier to get away with, and therefore, become much more frequent.

While Lucy got to a point at which she could not imagine life without Will, she sensed he was envious of his single friends and the freedom they would have when it came to meeting all of these new girls in college. Will began to spend much more time with his friends, even standing Lucy up on his birthday.

She made him a cake, and got him presents, and was ready for him to arrive at the previously-agreed upon

time of 5:00 p.m. She was excited about having the opportunity to lavish him with gifts and love and attention, and to celebrate that he was born.

She waited, patiently at first, but then as hours passed, with growing anger and fear. He did not come over to her house until midnight. He was out canoeing on the lake with his friends, and was indignant at Lucy's anger because it was his birthday, and if he wanted to hang out with his friends, she should not have any problem with that.

Shortly after that, Lucy told him she felt he did not want to continue their relationship when he started college, and that she thought he wanted to be free to see whomever he chose once he left her behind. It was very difficult for her to confront him about this, because she knew it was true. But she also was getting tired of being treated badly, and while she loved Will, she hated feeling jealous and afraid that he would want to be with other girls.

Will did admit he felt that way, and when Lucy suggested they break up so that he could go off to college and do what he wanted, he agreed. They cried, and had sex, and then cried some more. For the next couple of weeks, they would stay away from each other as much as possible, and then run desperately to each other to have sex one more time.

Finally, Lucy could not stand it any longer, and began taking advantage of other opportunities she had at parties to make out with other guys when she was drunk. It did not really matter who it was, just so long as it was not Will.

One of these parties was at Kieran and Malcolm's parents' house (their parents being out of town, of course), and after Lucy got nice and drunk, she set her friend Katie's hair on fire.

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Lucy found it hysterically funny, but Katie just got hysterical. After the fire was out, Katie turned in outrage toward Lucy, but as they were both wasted, and both looking forward to staying out all night, they quickly recovered from their little tiff. Besides, only a little chunk of Katie's hair was singed, and after she trimmed off those bits, no one could tell any difference.

It was about this time, though, that Will showed up with his friends. Lucy was furious. She pulled him aside and demanded to know what he was doing there. He knew she would be there – it was one of her best friends' houses, for fuck's sake. What the hell was he trying to do? She broke up with him, just as he wanted. He was free to go be with whomever he chose at college. Why could he not just leave her alone?

Will left the party then, before his friends even noticed he was gone, and then they, too, left to go in search of him. Lucy remained, and found a random guy to make out with in the hot tub.

Kieran, who exited the house to have a cigarette, saw her. He jumped up on the deck along the hot tub, and yanked on her arm to separate her from the random guy. Lucy, again, was furious, and the random guy was not that happy, either. Kieran did not give a shit, and since he was the most sober of the three, and also furious, was able to pull Lucy from the hot tub, push the protesting random guy back in, and wrap a towel around Lucy and escort her upstairs.

Kieran gave her one of his T-shirts and a pair of boxer shorts, and she dried off and put them on, then got into Kieran's bed and cried and cried and cried. He stayed with Lucy until she was asleep, and then left her in his bed.

Upon leaving his room, he locked the door from the inside so that she could get out, but no other drunken assholes could get in, and he went on with his evening.

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Lucy knew Kieran did not like Will, for he could see how Will treated her toward the end of their relationship. But Kieran was not there at the beginning, and while he may have been justified in his anger at Will, he had no idea that Will's heart was broken into as many thousands of pieces as Lucy's.

At one time in her life, Lucy created a set of standards for herself, and as she got older, lowered them. Actually, she took the standards her parents and their church set, and lowered those.

For example, Lucy knew she would never have sex until she was married; one standard shot to hell. Other examples were that she would never smoke cigarettes, she would never drink alcohol, and she would never do drugs; shot to hell, shot to hell, shot to hell. Or, more accurately, she reached a crossroads at which she said, "FUCK IT," when it came to each of these standards.

Not long after Lucy and Will broke up, the time came to move from pot onto bigger and better things. Lucy, who'd scoffed at the idea of marijuana as a "gateway" to other drugs, started to use other drugs.

The first new drug she came across was acid, also known as LSD. She was "dating" this guy, and he loved to do acid, so she thought, "fuck it," and decided she would try it out. This, despite the fact that she did not really know this guy, let alone have any reason to trust him, and also did not really know if she even liked him.

He was just another guy she acquired after having sex. It was how she began to establish relationships. She would be at some party, and then hang out with some guy she found relatively attractive (relatively to whomever else was there), and then end up having sex with him.

Since she did not like to be sleeping with more than one guy over any period of time, she remained

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monogamous with whichever guy she was with until she was done with his bullshit (because they were ALL assholes), and then moved on.

She happened to meet the acid guy when they rode in the same car with a group of friends down to someone's apartment at some college (Lucy really did not remember exactly where it was, or even if it was in Georgia or not). In accordance with her modus operandi, Lucy got wasted, and while doing so, did the mating dance with this guy, and they had sex.

Then he stuck around, making them a "couple." A "couple" who did acid.

Lucy's first acid trip was not fun. All of her other acid trips were not fun, either, but the first was memorable because, well, it was the first one.

The "boyfriend" quelled her concerns about experiencing hallucinations and whatnot by assuring her that he would be with her the whole time, and that he would keep her safe. Lucy was not really sure what the hell that meant, but her safety was in the hands of lesser people before, so she went for it.

The boyfriend gave her a little piece of square, cardboard type paper, kind of like he ripped the corner off the top of a box of cereal. He told her to put it in her mouth and leave it in there, and that is what she did. This all happened at eight o'clock on a night Lucy needed to be home by midnight.

Having much previous experience with acid, the "boyfriend" could have considered that four hours after taking one's first hit of acid was not really a good time to go hang out with the folks, but he did not.

Lucy really did not like acid. She felt like she was in a very bad dream that she could not wake up from, and after this effect kicked in, the "boyfriend" told her it lasted about eight hours, a span of time Lucy was not able to comprehend at that moment.

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She expected nice, happy, hippy, trippy hallucinations, like floating through a field of flowers, but the only visual hallucinations she experienced occurred when she stared at her hand for a long time, and her skin looked to be moving and breathing, which scared the shit out of her.

After a few hours of experiencing these not-so-pleasant sensations, Lucy realized she needed to be home soon. She reminded the “boyfriend” that he was going to have to get her home. He was very confident about driving her, even though he was tripping, too, and Lucy was too fucked up and too worried about being late to care. Once she arrived home, she went straight to her room, very grateful that her parents were already asleep.

She climbed into bed, laid down, and kept seeing things she knew were not really there flying around in the dark. She managed to keep herself calm by telling herself over and over that she was home, what was going on was not real, and that it would be over soon.

She also realized that having the light on, even the small bedside lamp, was much better than sitting in the dark. Lucy tried to read, but the letters and words kept moving around on the pages. She finally got a notepad and found she could write as long as she did not try to read what she wrote. Lucy began writing in very tiny lettering really mean things about the “boyfriend.”

Lucy was pretty pissed at him for giving her the acid so late in the evening, knowing full well that she would still be tripping balls when she would have to go home. She filled up exactly one piece of notebook paper with little phrases expressing how much she hated him, and about an hour or two after the sun rose, she was finally able to sleep.

Of course, this incident did not keep Lucy from doing acid again, or from continuing to see the

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“boyfriend” until she could not stand to be around him any longer.

Lucy’s senior year of high school was not stellar. While she certainly possessed the capacity to make very good grades, she had absolutely no motivation to make it happen. After Will, she closed her heart and opened her legs to pretty much any boy who came along, especially the ones who came along with alcohol. If she was drunk, she did not care about anything, and that was pretty much the theme of her senior career.

Her mother knew Lucy was not staying the weekends at her girlfriends’ houses many of the times she said she was, but found it much easier to believe what Lucy told her than to confront her with the truth.

Lucy’s father did not care what she did, and preferred her to be out of the house any time he was there. He found out about a year before that Lucy was sexually active – she wrote a letter to a friend on her father’s computer in which she mentioned sex, and although she deleted it after printing it, she did not know her father routinely searched and retrieved and read the deleted files after she used his computer.

After acquiring knowledge of his daughter’s sexual activity, he dismissed his only child with a look of disgust and one word thrown into her face:

“Whore.”

Lucy did not know how he found out about her sexual activity, and was terribly frightened at what he would do to her as punishment. She did not expect, though, to be dismissed from his mind and his heart (assuming he actually had a heart beating in his chest), with such curt and final disdain. The pain she felt from this would not be evident to her for years to come, and so at the time, she felt more relief than anything that he was no longer attempting to keep tabs on her.

Lucy's mother also had very certain standards, though, that she would not tolerate being broken. For example, Lucy was required to be home by ten each school night, and if she was not staying over at one of her friend's (or at least saying she was staying at one of her friend's), her curfew on Fridays and Saturdays was midnight.

Additionally, Lucy's mother expected her to attend school every day, and at least make some sort of pretense at completing homework, papers, and projects. Studying for exams was also a plus.

Lucy did not find her mother's standards so difficult by which to abide, and additionally found that when she did so, her life was much easier. Lucy reserved her weekend time for drinking, although she was not opposed to an afternoon joint at one of the more secluded parks in Arbortown when she knew she had at least two hours before she needed to get home.

The two hour rule started after Lucy got home only an hour after smoking, and being pretty stoned, went straight upstairs and got into bed. Her mother came into her room about ten minutes later to see if she was okay, and after Lucy assured her there was no problem, her mother tilted her head to the side and quizzically asked,

“Have you been smoking?”

Lucy's heart raced, and she felt a cold spike of panic. Her brain was moving much too slowly, and she absent-mindedly grabbed a strand of her hair to twist around her finger, and as she pulled it across her face, just under her nose, she realized how strongly she smelled of cigarettes. She breathed a huge sigh of relief, and said,

“OH! You mean cigarettes?”

Her confused mother nodded yes, and Lucy happily confessed to her cigarette habit, pulled her covers

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up to her neck, told her mother good night, and went straight to sleep.

She did not hear from her mother about the incident, except for when there was an article about the dangers of smoking printed in any type of periodical, which Lucy's mother would clip out and leave on Lucy's bed. Whenever Lucy saw one of those clippings, her first reaction was irritation, but then the slow sinking of pure sadness at how much she knew her mother loved her, and how hurt her mother would be if she only knew how very insignificant cigarettes were compared to the other activities in which Lucy participated.

But then Lucy would allow the irritation to build up again, a little burp from the molten river running through her blood, and she would crumple the article and toss it into her trashcan. But then envisioning her mother taking the care to cut it out and place it on her bed, Lucy would retrieve the article and put it in the same desk drawer that held all of the other articles, and consider what a vast collection of anti-smoking propaganda she was collecting.

This ritual was usually followed by a very strong desire to smoke – a cigarette – and Lucy would go out onto her roof and do so.

Lucy called on the rage within her frequently, because it was what got her out of bed, through each horribly boring day of school, through awkward social situations, through breaking off each of her very shallow relationships with various boys, and basically, through her life. She was not aware, though, how others could see this in her, and that people who knew and loved her became afraid of her.

Although Lucy managed to maintain friendships with Katie, Brittany, Malcolm and Kieran, she unwittingly came to alienate herself from pretty much the rest of the school population. Familiar people would nod

or wave in the hallways, but rarely did anyone go out of their way to interact with Lucy, and she just added this onto her pile of proof that she was a freak.

Her rage was a salve over the raw spots of loneliness on her soul, and it became increasingly easier to cut herself off more and more from those around her.

She saw no light in herself that might draw others in, and no one else saw any light they might be drawn to, because in Lucy, what little light was left was painted over black with hate. What others did see, aside from darkness, was a very pale, very thin, painfully beautiful girl who could rip their hearts out and do with them whatever she pleased.

On one of the ridiculously useless days of that year, Lucy opened her locker to find her lunch was stolen. She was very pissed off, not only because someone stole from her, but because she was starving, and made a very enjoyable lunch for herself the night before, which was rare, and she even purchased a bottle of dark cherry sparkling water to enjoy with her meal. She ended up having to scrounge up change from her classmates to purchase yet another of the disgusting school lunches.

A few days after this incident, Brittany was telling her about a girl she knew, and how she always stole lunches from people who did not have locks on their lockers, because if they were not going to take the time to lock up their valuables, they did not deserve to have them.

Lucy thought this was stupid, because even for all of her illegal activity and disdain for society at large, pretty much all of her destructive behaviors were aimed at herself, and she did not believe in stealing from anyone other than her parents. Lucy was considering this when Brittany mentioned that the girl was very happy to have

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gotten her hands on a lunch with a bottle of black cherry sparkling water.

“What did you just say?” Lucy’s voice was taut with surprise and outrage, and Brittany froze, because she did not know about Lucy’s lunch being stolen, and had no idea what she said that made Lucy mad, so she simply repeated the last thing she said, which was the statement regarding the black cherry sparkling water.

Lucy told Brittany the lunch with the black cherry sparkling water was hers, and was very adamant about Brittany telling her who stole it, as she felt due some sort of restitution. Brittany assured Lucy she would speak to the girl about it the next day, and Lucy was quite shocked – and even offended – when Brittany came back with the news that the girl began to cry when she found out it was Lucy’s lunch she stole, and that Lucy knew who she was.

“Why?” Lucy could think of no other response to this news.

“Because she’s scared you’re going to kick her ass.” Brittany stated this matter-of-factly, as if it was an accepted bit of knowledge at their school that Lucy went around kicking people’s asses. She found the whole thing ludicrous.

“Just tell her to pay me for the lunch. For fuck’s sake.” Lucy left the conversation at that, because she was not comfortable at all with the idea of people having an expectation of physical violence associated with her.

She was surprised to find, though, that she had no desire to dispel this notion, and in fact was somewhat comforted by the idea that people were afraid of her, even if she did not really believe they were. She assumed it was obvious to everyone that she was more frightened than any of them.

Two weeks before Lucy was to graduate, the guidance counselor summoned her to the office. It

appeared as though Lucy would not pass gym class, and that she would have to go to summer school.

Upon hearing this information, Lucy felt like she was punched in the stomach. She hated school, violently so, for many years, and the only reason she even applied herself was so that she could get out. And now someone was telling her it was not going to happen because of a gym class.

Lucy walked out of the counselor's office, straight to the gym, where she confronted her gym teacher. He was an older man whose own children long ago graduated from high school, and who also happened to hate being forced to teach girls to do things only boys should be doing. Especially girls like the one before him, who reeked of cigarette smoke and complained every other week that she had menstrual cramps, and therefore could not participate in class.

Needless to say, he was not sympathetic to Lucy's plight, and even made it clear that if she was in his summer school class, she would be working harder than anyone else if she wanted to graduate before the next year started.

Lucy was surprised by her response to this man. She felt the bubble of her righteous indignation hiss and deflate, and her shoulders dropped about four inches, and she just felt very, very heavy. She looked at her gym teacher and told him in a tone lacking any life at all,

“Go fuck yourself.”

She turned and walked back to her class, gathered her personal items, left her books, and went home.

Lucy's mother was on the phone attempting to straighten out something or another with their health insurance provider when she saw her daughter pull in the driveway three hours before she was supposed to be

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home from school. She hung up the phone and went to meet Lucy.

Lucy told her mother what happened, omitting only the part about telling the gym teacher to go fuck himself. Her mother responded exactly how Lucy anticipated, which was to state in no uncertain terms that Lucy was to finish out the school year, and then complete summer school, and then graduate.

Lucy responded in a way her mother did not expect at all, which was to simply state that she was not going to summer school, and was in fact not ever going to any school ever again.

Her mother took one look at Lucy's face, saw the dark there, the dark that began seeping into her daughter's eyes ... when? She could not remember exactly, only that she was so, so happy when Lucy was born, and delighted with her beautiful, happy, bubbly baby girl, and then how she tried so hard not to see as that darkness entered her from such an early age.

And now here it was all but consuming her child and she knew it was too late to do anything at all.

And so Lucy's mother did nothing at all.

CHAPTER TWO

Although Lucy's mother was distressed about the fact that her daughter was a high school dropout, she was able to re-group enough to set down a new set of standards. She told Lucy that if she was not going to be in school, she would have to get a full-time job.

Lucy already figured this, and because she could not tolerate the idea of having to be at home all the time, or even with the idea of having to ask her parents for money, she really wanted to have a job. Lucy enjoyed working, especially when it was not for her father.

Lucy got her first job when she was nine years old. She asked her father for a backpack for school, and he said if she wanted one, she would have to buy it herself. After informing him that nine years old was too young to legally get a job, he told her that was not necessarily true, and that Saturday, brought her to his manufacturing plant and told her that her new job was to clean the bathrooms, vacuum and dust the office spaces, and empty all of the trashcans.

She would be paid one dollar per hour.

Being nine years old, Lucy was excited about her hourly pay rate. The only thing she could compare it to was when her father made her do inventory in the warehouse, which consisted of taking row after row of slender cardboard boxes filled with tiny little electrical components and counting them.

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For each box, Lucy would write the amount of parts on a small, colored circle sticker, and then place it on the box. There were about thirty stickers per sheet, and whenever she got through one of those sheets of stickers, she would be paid another dollar.

Lucy was also delighted about her pay because she had to do all of the same types of cleaning chores at home, and was not paid at all for that. While Lucy appreciated the perks of her new job (the hourly pay of one dollar), she really did not enjoy the work.

Her first week on the job she did all of the work her father assigned, and it took her nine hours – but she made nine dollars! The backpack she wanted only cost twenty-one dollars, and after one day on the job, she was nearly half-way there!

She was also, though, so exhausted that her mother actually let her sleep in rather than go to church the next morning.

Lucy spent that entire Sunday moving gingerly about because her muscles were so sore. After that, she rotated her cleaning among the sections of her father's office according to a schedule her mother helped her plan out, so that she only spent three hours on each Saturday working, and the only thing she did every single week was take out the trash, which was the easiest of the tasks.

Lucy was a little disappointed that her savings were only going to accumulate at one-third her original estimated rate, but was very happy about only having to spend three hours of her Saturdays scrubbing toilets instead of nine. And after five weeks, which really did not seem that long of a time after it already passed, Lucy's father took her to the mall to get her backpack.

It was a proud moment for her, although she did not account for sales tax, which her father agreed to pay after making it clear it would be deducted from her future pay.

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At the age of twelve, Lucy learned one of her classmate's mothers did the same type of job full time, and when Lucy insisted on knowing how much this woman was paid per hour, found out that her father was ripping her off. She demanded a raise, which was minimal, as she did not have much leverage, being an illegal child worker and all.

After hearing her logically presented argument, her dad doubled her pay, and then doubled it again two years later, but only because she was fourteen, and could have gone to work at McDonald's with her parent's signed permission.

Lucy would never work at McDonald's because she was traumatized by the acne on the faces of every employee she saw on the rare occasions she dined there. Her parents did not know this, though, and she kept her mouth shut about that because, finally, she had some leverage.

So, at fourteen, Lucy was getting paid four dollars an hour, which was comparable to minimum wage at that time. However, Lucy was well aware her father was still ripping her off, as she pared down her working time to two hours per Saturday (she was much more efficient after doing the same thing over and over again for five years), and eight dollars per week for cleaning services in an office was an obscenely cheap rate, especially considering it was the owner's daughter doing all of the cleaning.

On Lucy's fifteenth birthday, though, she told her father she was not working for him anymore, and promptly went and got a job bussing tables at a relatively nice establishment (where none of the employees had bad acne).

Lucy was horrible at this job. It was the first and last time she would work in a restaurant, because it turned out Lucy did not get along well at all with glass, or

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anything else easily breakable. She was constantly dropping things, and knocking things over, and when she was supposed to go around giving people refills, she regularly poured scalding coffee or freezing ice water onto the customers themselves (accidentally, of course).

She really did try her best, though, so that when the restaurant owner yelled at her in front of the entire dining room about a napkin that was left on the floor, she indignantly stormed out.

Lucy felt no remorse at quitting her job in such a manner, and she was sick of her boss patting her ass whenever he walked by anyway. After that, Lucy picked up babysitting jobs here and there in order to pay for clothes her parents refused to buy, and for cigarettes and alcohol, both of which she began to regularly consume.

Once Lucy started to date Will, working was no longer really a priority. Will had a job and bought her cigarettes, and her odd babysitting jobs covered her booze, and she never needed to pay for pot, because she never sought it out, just smoked Will's if it was there.

She did not have a car of her own, but her parents were not going to allow her to get her driver's license until she was seventeen anyway, and that seemed so far away. She did not feel any urgency to save any money, even though she already knew she would have to buy her own car. Although her parents could afford to buy a car for her, they explained it was better for her to buy it herself so that she could learn the value of a dollar, as if she did not already accomplish this when she was nine years old and it was her hourly wage.

After Lucy quit school, though, her next big goal was to get the hell out of her parents' house, and since she was not quite eighteen, knew she would have to stay there for a while longer before she would be old enough to get a place of her own.

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So she got a job at a dry cleaner's, and got rides from her mother, or friends, or if it came down to it, just walked. Her new boss loved her, because she was smart and pretty, and also because she was old enough to legally work. He apparently came from the same school of thought as Lucy's father, because many of his employees were girls too young to work legally.

He had to keep them in the back, though, so as not to arouse suspicion, and they were the ones who did all of the terribly hot work, as a dry cleaner's is one hot establishment.

Lucy got to work the front of the store, taking in people's dirty laundry, and then their money when their clean clothes were returned to them. Lucy did not hate the work, and she stayed busy the whole time she was there. It was also physically involved enough for her to feel good about how hard she worked, but not so much that she felt as though she was being tortured.

The job also worked out well with her social schedule, as she did not have to be there until one in the afternoon, and got off at eight at night. This left plenty of time for drinking when she had the opportunity, and then for sleeping in the next morning.

Although Lucy continued to hang out with her same crowd, her behavior grew very callous, and when her friends started expressing concern for her drinking and promiscuity, she began the process of alienating herself from them. Malcolm, then Katie, then Brittany, and finally, even Kieran, left her circle, and she was left with whoever was around. Since Lucy also lowered her standards about with whom she would associate, there was always someone around after her shift ended.

Lucy did not like her boss at all, though, and felt he really ripped his customers off. He also had an affinity for smacking asses, but reserved this practice for the young girls in the back, who did not have much say in the

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matter, since they were – as Lucy once was –underage, and were afraid of losing their jobs.

Another reason he stayed away from Lucy's ass was that the first time he smacked it, she looked at him as though her very brainwaves could freeze his heart and kill him instantly. As in school, Lucy was not aware of the intensity of her rage, and how it intimidated others, even dirty old men, but she was glad her new boss left her ass alone.

She did hate him all the more for taking advantage of the girls in the back, and within days of buying her own car, she took her lunch break and never came back. The owner of the dry cleaner's was furious about the mess Lucy left him in, but she did not care. She felt bad about leaving the other girls to pick up her slack, but ran into one of them not long afterward, who told her how much joy they all got from seeing the bastard running around hysterically.

Once Lucy had her car, she was one step closer to getting out on her own. Her mother insisted she at least get her G.E.D., and even drove her to the facility and paid for it, and seeing as Lucy was so smart, and nearly graduated anyway, she passed the exams with flying colors, and bam – she was no longer just a high school drop-out. She had papers.

This Lucy was grateful for once she turned eighteen, because just being old enough to work at a lot more places did not open as many doors as having that diploma.

Lucy got on with a staffing agency, which placed her at one of the local factories. Her job was to inspect circuit boards, and it was horrifically boring, although she was never paid better. She worked the three to eleven afternoon shifts, again very compatible with her social schedule.

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One evening, on her dinner break, one of the guys in her new circle of “friends” met up with her in the parking lot, which was where she ate her evening meals. Most of the other women at the factory were much older than she was, and had children, and therefore very little in common with Lucy, and so she usually dined alone.

On this night, though, she was complaining to the guy about how painfully boring her job was, because it really was – it was boring to the point that Lucy felt actual pain, and then could hardly hold her eyes open.

The guy told her he had some speed, and asked her if she wanted any to help get her through her shift. And here Lucy met another crossroads: on one side, she was someone who did drugs, but not anything too hardcore, and certainly not anything she had to snort up her nose to get into her body; on the other side, if she snorted speed she would not be sleepy throughout her shift.

Lucy only had ten minutes before she needed to get back inside, and the thought of going back there to resume her boredom pushed her down the road upon which she snorted speed.

Lucy agreed to the guy’s offer, and he smiled. He pulled a CD case off the back seat of her car, pulled out what looked like a corner of a plastic baggie containing chunky, yellowish powder, and retrieved a small, rectangular razor blade from his wallet.

Lucy glanced around the lot – she was pretty nervous, and really had no desire to get busted with this shit in her car. When she looked back down at the CD case in the guy’s lap, she saw that he took some of the powder out and formed a little line. He handed the CD case to her, and then got a dollar out of his wallet and rolled it up, and then handed that to her, too.

Lucy took the rolled-up dollar, and asked the guy exactly what to do. He knew she was a novice, and since

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it was something at which he was very skilled, he had no trouble directing her.

The first thing Lucy experienced when she snorted up the chunky powder was an excruciating burning up her nose and at the back of her throat, and a smell she could relate only to burning hair. Additionally, her nose felt congested, and as she sniffled, she cleared a chunk of the powder out and down the back of her throat, producing a taste in her mouth that literally made her gag.

The guy laughed at what Lucy believed were the undoubtedly cartoonish contortions of her face, and then asked if she was okay. It was at that precise moment Lucy suddenly felt a gush of excitement course through her veins.

It was awesome. She never felt better in her life. She told the guy, yeah, she was okay, and asked how long it would last. He told her about four to six hours, maybe more since she never did it before. Lucy, now eager to return to work, thanked the guy, shooed him out of her car and back into his own, and went back into the factory.

Lucy then experienced the most productive shift of her entire life, and as an added bonus, had a lot of fun doing what just hours before bored her to the point of pain.

As her shift neared an end, Lucy actually felt disappointed, but when she punched out at the time clock and went to her car, she began to pick up the little bits of trash about the floorboards. After about fifteen minutes of attempting to get every speck of dirt out by hand – still in the parking lot of her job – Lucy realized she needed a vacuum cleaner. Not just any vacuum cleaner, but the big, powerful, industrial ones at the self-service car wash.

So that is where she went. In order to fund her vacuuming, which was very precise and time-consuming, Lucy went to the gas station next to the car wash four times to get more change. It was only when she ran out of

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cash that she stopped vacuuming, and by that time it was about two o'clock in the morning.

She realized her mother was probably very worried about her, as Lucy usually at least let her know if she was going to be staying out or coming home. Since she did not have anywhere to stay, Lucy went on home.

Her mother was already in bed, but her father was up working on his computer. As she passed the doorway to his office, she paused and he acknowledged her with a slight glance over his shoulder.

Lucy felt rage boil up inside of her, and pictured in her mind picking up his computer monitor and throwing it through the window. Instead, she went up to her room, where she found more bits of trash to focus on.

A few minutes later, Lucy's mother came to the door and knocked. Lucy opened it for her, and saw anger and concern on her mother's face. Lucy apologized, and then closed the door, and resumed focusing on bits of trash.

Lucy heard her father come upstairs and go to bed about an hour after that. She finished picking up the bits of trash by that time, and commenced to dusting every single crack in everything in her room, and by the time the sun was up, her room was sparkling, and she was finally tired.

She lied down in her bed and quickly found she could not keep her eyelids closed, and wondered if it was too early to go out and find the guy who gave her the line and get more.

Lucy became very productive at work, and began to volunteer for overtime, making her paychecks even bigger. She and the guy who first gave her speed established a pretty regular routine, and so Lucy was in regular supply of a drug she swore she would never do, but now that she did, loved so much.

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It changed her life. She did not feel scared all the time anymore, or lazy, or incompetent. She felt instead like she could take on the world, and began staying out all night with others who did not sleep.

After that first time she did speed and came home so late, Lucy's mother told her she would have to be in by midnight or not come home at all. Lucy was okay with that.

A couple of the people with whom she became newly acquainted had their own places, and did not mind her hanging out there. They played cards a lot, and played A LOT of video games. Because Lucy did not like to play video games, she began to carry a sketchbook and would draw tiny, intricate pictures of nothing in particular, but took hours to complete.

Lucy went home only to sleep, which was about every three days. A few of the people she was hanging out with could stay awake for over a week at a time, and did just that on a regular basis, but Lucy did not like how she had to keep doing more and more speed – and spending more and more money – just to stay awake so she could work.

She soon developed a cycle, which worked out for her, for a little while at least. She would use before a shift at work, stay up that entire night, use more to keep it going for the next day and throughout that night, and by the third day, would have to snort that shit every couple of hours just to keep her eyes open.

Then Lucy would go home, lock her bedroom door, and go to sleep, hard and fast. She would sleep until it was time to get up to return to work again, and the cycle would begin anew. Whenever her sleep time fell on a weekend, Lucy would simply sleep for those days, and then continue on. She rarely, if ever, saw her parents and did not care to.

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It was not easy to find other people who stayed up for such long periods of time on a regular basis, and so Lucy's group of acquaintances was small. When they were all gathered at the same time, there were no more than six or seven of them.

Lucy did not particularly like anyone in this core group of consistent users, and preferred to be around the ones who came in every once in a while, the ones who only used for a day or two, then went on with their lives for months at a time without it - the ones who had color in their cheeks, meat on their bones, and life in their eyes.

It was nice for Lucy when these people would join her, the ones who were not dead in their souls yet. Lucy even came across Brittany once. They felt weird around each other, but acted like they did not.

Lucy hated the idea of Brittany seeing who she was now and comparing it to who she was then, before she and Will broke up, before she quit school, before she started doing speed. And Brittany reminded Lucy of Will.

Lucy did not believe the pain of ending her relationship with Will was what caused her to begin down this dark road, even though it was terribly painful, but when it was added to all of her other pain, she could no longer hold herself up.

And she fell, and liked the falling, because she had been fighting it her whole life, and was so tired of fighting.

And so it was a relief to give in, to care nothing about anything.

Examining the process of the sun setting and rising and setting again, over and over, with no reprieve of sleep brought on a special kind of crazy, and surviving it required a special kind of world in which to exist.

Sometimes when Lucy would glance up from her drawing and see that first streak of light coming across

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the sky, she would remember what it was like to wake up that early, and how clean and innocent and new the day was, because it was just beginning.

She remembered how fortunate she felt to be a part of it, before all of the other people woke up and began to move around, polluting it, just generally fucking it up, because that is what happens when people are added to the perfect newness of a day – it gets fucked up.

But when she did not go to sleep, these new rays of light coming across the sky scared her. It was another opportunity to start over gone, and the day was already fucked up, because she was already in it, left over from the one previous.

Then she would have to think about what would be expected of her from society in that new day, as she was still a member of society – a reluctant one, but one still – and there were hoops through which she had to jump in order to keep from falling out of the world completely.

For as much as Lucy hated society, the happy people, the bouncy, normal, boring people that compiled it, she was terrified of being completely removed from it. It all made Lucy so very, very tired.

But now that she was on this ship, she did not know how to get off, and the thought of jumping overboard was more terrifying than the thought of staying, but not too much more...and anyway, what the hell would she do if not continue this way?

And so she continued that way. Her mother eventually told her she was not allowed to come home anymore at all, and Lucy gathered what was most important to her and moved it all into her car. She intended to find a place of her own, but even without ever sleeping, she just could not find the time.

She managed, though, crashing on someone or another's couch, or just sleeping in her car – the factory

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where she worked scheduled shifts all around the clock, and so she sometimes just parked there among the other cars and went to sleep.

She did not sleep well, though, because in her car, she was always afraid the cops would bust her, or someone would break a window to get at her.

When it came to someone or another's couch, she did not feel much safer. As much time as she spent around the people she spent time with, she did not trust them. They were desperate and mean and deceitful, and would lie to Jesus himself if it meant they would get more speed out of it.

She knew there were beds that were available to her, but did not want to share those beds with the people already in them and did not want things to come to that yet.

The lack of sleep really began to take a toll, and Lucy began to feel crazier and crazier. She was not even able to enjoy speed anymore, because she could not sleep enough to regain the energy to produce the desired effect. Otherwise, it just helped keep her awake so she could function.

She began to hallucinate when she was awake, and she knew it was because she was so tired. She also began to feel like her mind was slipping, like there was something in her that was about to snap, and she became more and more afraid.

The more Lucy realized how afraid she was, the harder she tried to figure out what it was she feared. Since she could not really pinpoint any tangible thing, aside from the threat of insanity, Lucy began to wonder if she really was insane.

She began to obsess about finding a safe place to sleep, and also began carrying all of her money around with her, rather than leave it deposited in the bank.

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She felt like she needed to be prepared at all times to purchase speed – any type of speed, even the stupid little white pills at the gas station, although they did nothing but make her scalp feel like bugs were crawling on it. Still, those were better than nothing at all, because nothing at all and nowhere to sleep, Lucy knew, would kill her.

And so she had the cash always at the ready, but that, too, became something else to be afraid of – not that someone would hurt her in order to get to her cash, but just that someone would get her cash, leaving her with no way to get more speed.

Lucy was at her wit's end. She so desperately just wanted to sleep, to stop thinking, to stop being afraid, to stop the not knowing what she was afraid of, and really, just to stop being awake. She came to hate the sight of the sun rising, as it symbolized nothing but defeat for her, and the cheerful sounds of the birds first thing in the morning seemed to be a cartoon movie that Lucy could not get out of.

Everywhere Lucy went, it appeared as though people were mocking her, judging her, looking down on her. Every person who looked her way seemed to know exactly what she was doing, and that she was a dirty, horrible person who had no business whatsoever being among the beautiful people of suburbia. She had to keep herself from screaming that she was born there, that she always lived there, that it was her town, and she had a right to be there.

She settled instead for glaring at everyone with whom she came into contact. It was one hell of a lonely existence.

One night after her shift at the factory, Lucy filled up her gas tank, found a state highway, and drove south. Atlanta was to the north, and there was nothing but people between Arbortown and Atlanta. The only thing to

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the south that Lucy was aware of was Florida, and all Lucy knew of anything else in that direction was that there was a lot of country.

It was October, and the air was finally starting to turn cool and remain that way for more than a day or two at a time. As Lucy drove into the night, she opened all of the windows in her car, and drove faster and faster so that she could feel the cold wind as intensely as possible. The cold brushing her face, whipping her hair into her eyes, chilling her fingers on the wheel, became the only proof she had that she was alive, and so she drove and drove and drove.

Eventually, she came upon the interstate, and went faster and farther south. As she approached signs for a rest stop, it occurred to her that she really needed to go to the bathroom. She pulled off at the rest stop, and after doing her business - and carefully avoiding her pocked, scabbed, and gaunt face in the mirror in the restroom - Lucy sat back down in her car.

She was beginning to become very uncomfortable with the cold, and since her car did not have a working heater, she rolled up all of the windows, and then turned to the back seat to get a blanket from among her belongings. She paused before turning back around, because that back seat looked so inviting.

Lucy hated sleeping in cars, always did. Whenever she went on road trips with her family, her father insisted on driving straight through to wherever they were going, and since he and her mother were both from Ohio, this was usually the destination on their once or twice yearly excursions.

It took a long time to drive to Ohio. Lucy's father would not drink any fluids for three hours prior to their departure, and would not allow Lucy or her mother to drink anything, either, so as to limit bathroom stops.

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He even dry swallowed his blood pressure medication on these occasions, making a ridiculous face as he did so, a face that would have been silly had it been anyone's other than his. Instead it was simply grotesque, and Lucy always felt a stab of hatred whenever he did this. The hatred felt good to her, and the anger, but then she would remember that this man was her father – she once was his little baby that he held in his large, rough hands.

She would think of how on Sundays during church, she would lean her head on his shoulder, and his shoulder was always very still. He could sit for hours without moving a muscle, and since church was only an hour or so long, he easily remained stone.

Lucy was always sleepy in church, and since her father never protested when she leaned her head against his shoulder, she always did just that. She would be able to smell his suit next to her nose, and feel the slightly scratchy material against her cheek, feel how after a while it irritated her skin to the point that it stung a little, but she did not move because he was still and she could depend on him at that time and it was the only time she felt safe with him, surrounded by all of those people for whom he displayed his best behavior, and in his church-trance, not moving, not eyeing her disdainfully.

She treasured those moments, because during them she could believe her father loved her. Thinking of this, Lucy would feel ashamed at what a horrible daughter she was, what a horrible person she was.

On those long car trips, Lucy would have the entire back seat to herself, but she could never get comfortable. Her mother would insist she keep her seatbelt on, severely limiting the possibility of finding a comfortable spot, and even with a pillow, Lucy always ended up with a very painful crick in her neck.

But her back seat at that rest stop on that night that she was running and running and running looked so nice and cozy with her blanket and pillows from home sitting there.

Lucy rolled up each of the windows, then locked each of the doors, sealing herself in, and hardly got the last lock down when she collapsed onto her pillow in the back seat of her car and slept the heaviest sleep she ever slept.

Lucy came out of a foggy, foggy haze and sat up and looked around, reorienting herself with the rest stop parking lot.

It was still dark out. She opened the side door and re-visited the bathroom. As soon as she returned to her car, she fell right back asleep.

The next time she awoke, it was still night, but close to dawn, as little wisps of light were starting to peak out of the sky.

This time, Lucy was awakened by a fierce hunger. It had been a long time since she felt hungry like that, and she went to the vending machine and got a sticky bun, some peanut butter crackers (for their nutritional value), and some potato chips. She also got a cherry soda.

She then went back to her car, back into the back seat, ate her meal, and decided she would just have a quick little nap and nodded off again.

When Lucy woke up after that, it was dark again, and after another bathroom break, it occurred to her that she was supposed to be at work. Suddenly feeling panicked, she chose a pay phone from the bank at the rest stop, and called her supervisor to let her know she slept in.

Lucy received quite a jolt when her supervisor angrily asked her where she had been for the past three

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days, and that they assumed she quit, and she no longer had a job.

Three days! This was the fourth night her car was parked in the same spot and with her inside of it!

Lucy hung up the phone without a word and went back to her car, but this time to the front seat. She started it up, and headed back north to Arbortown, because she did not know what else to do.

After Lucy lost her job, she kind of lost her mind, too. It was not a violent kind of losing her mind, or a messy kind, or a dramatic kind, or any other of the kinds of losing her mind she envisioned would happen one day. It was much more of nothingness – no real thoughts, definitely no feelings, but also no fear and she kind of floated around this way.

One night while hanging out with the regular group of speed freaks, a guy she recognized from high school came through the door of the apartment they were all at.

His name was Rodney, and on that day he looked as if he had stepped out of a heavy metal music video. He sported the standard goatee and his head was shaved completely bald. He was not terribly tall, but his blatant disregard for social niceties swelled his presence into something larger than his physical size.

What Lucy remembered of Rodney was that he always seemed to be angrily pushing through the halls of their school, not interacting with anyone. She knew he was a couple of years older than she was, and was an angry, preppy guy, and for some reason, Lucy found that attractive.

She thought nothing of him after that until the day he showed up where she was staying.

It turned out Rodney was the supplier for Lucy's group of acquaintances, and stopped by to do some of his

regular business with the guy Lucy usually bought from. After completing his transactions, and being introduced to Lucy, Rodney decided to hang out for a while, too.

Lucy just spent the last of her money on some of his product, and he offered her a line from his own supply. Lucy had not done any speed since her big sleep fest, and she accepted.

The people with whom Lucy was crashing were not too keen on her staying for so long without contributing – monetarily or otherwise – and she became aware she outwore her welcome. Not that she was offended at all, for there were no real friendships there, just the common bond of the insanity of their habit. When Rodney arrived on the scene, he provided a number of things Lucy found welcoming.

One of those things was, of course, speed. His supplier was the manufacturer, and he was never in need of more product. He managed to not put all of his profits back up his nose, no small feat, and so established a fairly large and fairly steady income, which led to the next thing Lucy found welcoming: a decent apartment he shared with no one.

The third thing Lucy found welcoming was Rodney's straightforward manner, which was a refreshing change from the bullshit to which she grew accustomed among her current acquaintances.

They were all addicts of course, and an inherent part of being an addict is bullshit. Bullshitting others was a large part of it, but it was the ability to self-bullshit that really set addicts apart from the rest of the population. Well, that and the drugs.

But in order to self-inflict the type of damage to her own body that her lifestyle entailed, denial – the quintessential art of self-bullshitting – was crucial. Lucy had a peripheral awareness of her own denial, but she

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could not very well examine that too deeply, as self-examination would be the opposite of self-bullshitting.

But Lucy knew what she was putting into her body, and the extent of damage she was probably doing to herself physically. It was not ignorance of those effects that allowed her to continue to ingest the poison.

She went to elementary school when Ronald Regan was in office, and Nancy taught her how to “Just Say No.” There were drug-savvy grown-ups who came to speak each year at her school, and she heard the story about the man who did so much cocaine, it was possible to stick a handkerchief up one side of his nose and pull it out the other.

Lucy knew she was physically addicted to speed. She heard those stories in school, too, about how once someone started to do drugs, they just could not stop, no matter how hard they tried, and the body grew to be dependent on whatever drug that was going into it.

When she first started getting into speed, when she still had people who actually cared about her, and who tried to intervene, who came to her and asked her why she was doing this, she spewed the bullshit about how she was not that into it, and it was not that bad, and that she could handle it, and fuck off, if you please.

But Lucy did not believe those things she was saying, even if she wanted to, because she knew the only answer, really the only reason she did those things to herself, to her own body, and allowed others to do things to her body, was because she did not care.

It was no simpler or more complicated than that. She did not care, not about her body, not about her life, and not about the world. After starting her speed habit, she did not care about anyone else, either.

Rodney also did not care about himself or anyone else, but instead of playing the bullshit game, was very straightforward about it.

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He did not give a fuck, just like the rest of them, but he put it right out there. He did not put on any pretense of giving a shit about himself or anyone else, and for this reason, he did not have many friends at all. Lucy, tired and really quite insane, found this attractive, and she let Rodney make his moves on her, and she let him use her, and she used him right back.

She moved into his apartment, and took hot showers in his bathroom that she kept spotlessly clean, and washed what little clothing she possessed in his washing machine, and watched his cable television, and when she needed that sleep, she slept and slept in his bed. She did the other things in his bed, the things that really were necessary to be with him, that he demanded, again, without pretense, and she gave them to him because that is what it took.

That is what it came down to, and Lucy looked for things to justify why she was with him that did not point to the real reasons she was there. Rodney was generally not nice to her, and treated her very badly, but Lucy was not nice to him, either, so in this way, she balanced that aspect of the relationship out.

Rodney was only physically violent when he was drunk, and this was rare, as he preferred the uppers as did Lucy. But when he was drunk and pushed her around or made ridiculous attempts to swing at her, Lucy was racing and raging, because she did not like alcohol in those days, and did all of those things right back to him, too.

He was no match in his drunken lack of coordination for her twisted and tweaked brain, and she thrilled at the opportunity to hurt him, to push him back, and to laugh at his clown-like fighting maneuvers. And so, in this way, she balanced things out in her mind as well.

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But the biggest thing that kept her from seeing the true reason she was with him was that he told her he loved her, and she told him she loved him right back, and she did not stray from the small part of her mind in which she could believe this was true.

When the first pregnancy test came back positive, Lucy did not believe it was accurate.

This was partly because, at eighteen years old, her mind went to the natural disbelief that something like that could happen to her, but it was also because she did not think she was physically capable of getting pregnant. She never experienced any problems with her menstrual cycle, or anything like that, but she was pretty sure her body was not in the best condition to conceive a child.

She was five foot five and weighed, according to the scale in Rodney's bathroom, only ninety-three pounds. She did not really know why she weighed herself, because it certainly was not for health reasons, and she knew damn well she was not fat.

She just felt drawn to whatever that number was. It was not anything she felt proud about, and she did not share her weight with anyone, but she was disconcerted when she stepped on that scale and saw how the little pointer bounced to a stop more and more to the left of that center line of one hundred.

Her weight loss was one of the things that actually caused her to stop and contemplate what she had become, and how different she was from how she used to be. She did not feel regret at these moments, or really much of anything but bewilderment.

She was once a naïve little girl who believed she would only have sex with the man she married, and who would never do bad things to her body like smoke cigarettes, and certainly who would not drop out of high school or put drugs up her nose.

It amazed Lucy that the naïve little girl was her – that was her – only four years before. How so much could change in such a short time...

And now she was holding a positive pregnancy test in her hand, a positive pregnancy test that had a little renegade drop of her pee travelling toward the results window, and on the other side of that, her thumb. Lucy threw the test away, and even as she told herself it was not accurate, her body knew it was.

Lucy got into her car and went back to the drug store where she purchased the first pregnancy test and got another one, this time a different brand that required nothing short of a science experiment to complete. It had a little dropper and a little volcano-shaped well, and a color chart. She did not bother going back to the apartment she had been sharing with Rodney for the past three months, but found the employee bathroom at the back of the store and set up shop.

She opened up the new pregnancy test, removed all of the contents, and set everything up on the back of the toilet in an organized fashion. She mentally checked the status of her bladder – yes, she did have to pee again, and held the little cup with one hand while unbuttoning her jeans and pulling them down, hooking her thumb into the side of her underwear, and then getting both jeans and underwear down at the same time in several jerky movements.

She held the cup up close, but dammit, still managed to pee on her hand. She stood up, and with her jeans and underwear still hiked down, Lucy did a little hop walk over to the sink and grabbed paper towels with her clean hand, hobbled back to the toilet and laid them down on the back of the tank with the rest of the contents of the pregnancy test box, laid the pee cup on top of the paper towels, and hobbled yet again back to the sink and scrubbed her hands with scalding water.

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She then pulled her jeans and underwear up, and proceeded with the test.

It required a dropper to take pee from the little cup over to the volcano-shaped well – three drops, neat as a pin, Lucy accomplished this part, then dumped the rest of the pee into the toilet, threw the little cup in the trash, and then scrubbed her hands again. She went back to the test, and picked up the directions to read what she should be expecting.

The directions said that if the test was positive, the bottom of the well would turn pink. The directions were very emphatic that even if the bottom of the well turned slightly pink, this indicated a positive result.

There was a color chart to compare the bottom of the well to, and on it were stripes of different shades of pink, from very pale baby pink, all the way up to scarlet. Printed in each of these stripes was the word, “POSITIVE.” Above the lightest pink color was a stripe of white, with the word, “NEGATIVE.”

Lucy looked into the volcano-well, and at the bottom was a very solid, very definite pink – a pink only one shade from being blood red.

Nevertheless, Lucy waited the three minutes the directions told her to wait, then looked again. Still with the red-pink. Lucy picked up the well, and picked up the directions with the color chart, and compared it to each of the pinks before discovering that her pink was darker than even the darkest of the “POSITIVE” stripes.

Lucy then did something she very rarely did – she looked in the mirror, at her own sunken eyes looking at themselves. She looked at her skin taut across her cheekbones and jaw line. She looked at the ugly, festering sores that she picked and picked at on her face, convinced there was something in her skin that was not supposed to be there, but never finding it, only carving out craters that would permanently scar.

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Lucy opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue. She looked at the angry red welts there, then at the raw patches lining the inside of her cheeks. She closed her mouth and looked at her hair.

It had been long her whole life, but she recently decided she wanted it short, and in a delirious, sleep-deprived state, concluded she could not wait until business hours for someone else to cut it, and she started cutting, and then cutting some more, and then when she saw the first chunk of her skin shining through the chopped up hair, finally stopped cutting.

Now she looked at it spiking up from her scalp, and then back down at the red-pink well, and then again at the color chart, back at the well, and again at the image she could hardly recognize as her own.

And she said, "Fuck."

Lucy went back into the drug store and purchased three more drug tests of three different brands. She returned to the apartment, and when she got to the door, realized she locked herself out.

It was stupid, she knew, to keep her keys on separate chains, but for some reason felt the key to her car symbolized her independence, and therefore could not be on the same ring as the key that unlocked Rodney's apartment.

Rodney, fortunately, was inside, but Lucy knew that he was asleep. Waking up Rodney was like trying to get a dead person to do a cartwheel, which was probably pretty difficult because Lucy could not even do a cartwheel, and she was alive, though barely so. She wanted to be one of those gymnastics girls so badly when she was nine, but when she found she could not even do the cartwheel, the Olympic dream fizzled out pretty quickly, but she still knew from that experience that the whole dead-person-doing-a-cartwheel-thing was an

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accurate comparison to what it was like trying to get Rodney to wake up.

Still, this was an emergency, and Lucy began to pound on the door and to ring the doorbell over and over. By the time the old lady across the hall cracked her door to see what all the noise was about, Lucy was crying and pounding the door and having the same feeling in her arms as when she was so little throwing a temper tantrum on the floor of her parents' house.

What an angry, angry little baby she used to be, and here she was with her own little baby in her scrawny belly.

The old lady had apparently seen some pretty rough times, and recognized what angst looked like right away. She gingerly approached Lucy and laid her hand lightly on the bony, quaking shoulder of the half-bald girl with the mutilated face.

Lucy stopped the pounding, and the crying, and simply laid her forehead against the door. The old lady asked her if she wanted to use her phone to call Rodney, and maybe that would wake him up.

It occurred to Lucy that she must have been yelling for him to wake up, but she thought she was only doing that in her head...but how else would the old lady have known?

Lucy turned to her, the same old lady she saw a number of times but whose name she never bothered to learn, and stepped toward the door across the hall. The old lady let her in and led her to the phone. Lucy dialed the number for the apartment, and it rang and rang and rang. Finally, Rodney answered.

“Open the fucking door.” They were the only words Lucy spoke in the old lady's presence, but again, that lady must have seen some bad things in all her days, because she had nothing but understanding in her eyes.

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When Lucy hung up the phone, she could hardly stand to look at someone else who so clearly was in such a horrible place at some time in their lives as she was in hers at that moment.

Lucy turned and walked out the door, back across the hall, and into the now open door of Rodney's apartment.

Lucy vomited for the third time that day and thought of Rodney's face when she told him she was pregnant. He smiled. And she screamed, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

He was happy. That was his immediate reaction. Of course, that was quickly followed by a demand for proof, which Lucy somehow anticipated in her stupor, which is why she bought the other pregnancy tests, and she went and took each of them, because, holy shit, she had to pee all the frigging time anyway, and of course they were all positive, and then Rodney smiled again.

This time, it was quickly followed by a demand of how he was supposed to know it was his baby.

Lucy did not anticipate this, and began to cry and yell about the fact that she hardly left that apartment, and when she did, wasn't he always, always with her, and how that morning was the first time in over a month that she even drove her car, and how the hell could it be someone else's baby?

And he smiled again. Lucy did not understand.

She wiped the spit from her mouth and blew her nose, then rinsed her mouth with mouthwash, and contemplated her life. She was technically homeless, a high school dropout, a drug addict, and now an unmarried pregnant teenager. And Rodney, the drug-dealing daddy, was happy about it.

Lucy took his reaction as a clear indication that he was insane, or at least had absolutely no idea what having

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a baby entailed. Lucy herself had no idea what having a baby entailed, but at least knew in her current state of life that it was not something to be carefree and happy about.

But as the idea began to sink in, and Lucy thought about her options, and mostly about how she was even able to get pregnant while in such poor physical condition, she knew that she was going to have this baby. Not just have the baby, but raise it, as well.

Although Lucy no longer went to church, did not want to have anything to do with church, or with anyone who tried to convince her to go to church, she still believed in God. If God thought she was a good enough person to carry and have a baby, then Lucy would be giving birth to and raising that child.

Lucy reflected greatly on her self-worth in relation to her pregnancy. She not once believed it was an accident. Not that she intended to get pregnant, which she certainly did not, but that she was in a horrific place in her life when she did get pregnant. And because her bottom line for abusing her body and allowing others to abuse her body was all about not giving a shit at all about herself, all of that abuse ceased, because it was not just about her anymore.

Whether she deserved a baby, could care for a baby, or even wanted a baby – these considerations were not relevant to Lucy. She was given a huge responsibility, which was to care enough for herself to get this little speck into the world, and then continue to care for herself enough to be a good mother to her child.

Lucy's drug buddies told her she should have an abortion, she was doing a lot of drugs when she got pregnant, and did not know if the baby would be healthy; she herself was not healthy, was in fact severely undernourished, and there was no way of knowing if she would be able to carry a baby; she was eighteen; she was homeless; the father was her drug dealer.

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There were many arguments from people about why Lucy should not have this baby. But all of the arguments were from people who never bothered to know anything more about Lucy outside of how she could serve them, and she knew this. She also knew everything they said about her was accurate; she could not deny who she was at that time.

But for some reason, abortion was not a consideration for her, not even fleetingly so. She knew damn well how babies were made, and she did just that on a regular basis without regard to herself or anyone else, and now here was a consequence.

A very, very, very real consequence. A consequence that Lucy saw as a sign pointing toward her worth as a human being, which was something she never before had, not once in her entire life.

And so she stepped up.

Lucy never again did drugs, not once she found out she was pregnant. She also quit smoking cigarettes, quit drinking caffeine, and started to eat, and to take care of her unborn baby by taking care of herself.

And this whole baby thing was big enough that it took up all of Lucy's mental and physical resources, and so she did not have any time to contemplate how exactly she was going to pull it all off.

She just did it. Because that baby was hers, and it needed her, and she was going to do what she needed to do.

She supposed one of the things she needed to do was to tell Rodney her intentions for the baby, which were to have it and raise it. Although the baby was also technically his, Lucy did not consider his input necessary or relevant when it came to making that decision.

However, she did believe he had some right to the baby, and she wanted to know if he was going to stay

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with her and help raise their child, or if he was going to bail.

She was not surprised at his desire to stay with her and raise the baby together, because of his initial reaction to the news of her pregnancy. However, she was very surprised that he wanted to get married.

Lucy told him that she did not want to get married just because she was pregnant, and while Rodney did not seem disappointed, he did not seem to dismiss the idea of marriage, either. But as with so many other things about her relationship with Rodney, Lucy chose not to acknowledge that for now.

What was at the top of her list of concerns was how she and Rodney would support themselves and the baby. Rodney had quite a lucrative business dealing drugs, and was not too keen on giving that up. He also was not too keen on giving up cocaine, or smoking pot.

Lucy, however, insisted that she was not going to continue to be in such a dangerous and unstable environment. She told Rodney that if he wanted to stay with her, he would have to quit doing drugs, too, and get a real job.

Before his dealing became so profitable, Rodney worked in a restaurant kitchen, and really enjoyed it. He was good at it, too, according to him, and he was able to secure a job cooking within a week.

Lucy found a job at a gas station, though she was continuously sick from the pregnancy and had stand on her feet for hours and deal with the general public, of which she was not a big fan.

But she enjoyed the work, too, the quick pace, the brief interactions, the almost complete lack of stress. All she really had to worry about was being shot in a robbery, and that kind of thing did not happen around Arbortown too much, so she did not worry about that a whole lot, either.

Things went relatively well for a few months. Because she was pregnant, Lucy qualified for state-covered medical care, and she found a doctor, and went to her appointments, and peed in more cups, and watched the pointer on the scale turn farther and farther to the right of 100 pounds, and got to hear her baby's heartbeat.

Rodney sometimes came with her to doctor's appointments, if he did not have to go into work early. He was working a lot, going in early and coming back to the apartment late.

Lucy was grateful at how easily he transitioned over to a legitimate lifestyle. They did not have much money, pretty much just enough to pay the bills, but this was okay with Lucy. She never felt like doing much besides sleeping and eating anyway, and standing on her feet for six to eight hours straight exhausted her.

She also already gained a lot of weight, having been quite underweight before she got pregnant, and her doctor said the weight gain was very good – she was getting healthy.

She was also getting boobs. Lucy was always flat chested, and being underweight did not help in that department at all. But by the time she was twelve weeks pregnant, she had a nice set of stretch-marked breasts, and they got a lot of attention that Lucy was definitely not accustomed to. She also was not accustomed to the breasts, and felt awkward when they got in her way. It was almost as if she were going through puberty all over again, but at a more rapid pace, and she was rather overwhelmed at how much her body changed already.

After getting used to the fact that she was going to have a baby, and that she was never going to be able to do speed again (a bitter-sweet concept), and that she was going to be sharing a home and life with Rodney, she began to contemplate how to tell her parents she was pregnant. Having gotten into a healthier state of mind,

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and starting to experience the foreign process of growing a human being, Lucy began to long for her mother's company and comfort.

Lucy also just missed her mom. Having been freed from her parents' home, she began to long for the familiarity of its rooms, of her old bedroom. She did not want to move back in or anything, but she did not leave on good terms, and felt very strongly a need to re-establish a relationship with her mother, and to be in that house again, if only to just ease the abruptness of leaving it as she did. She hated living there, hated her father, and hated her mother's blind deference to him.

But things were different now. She thought of how her mother told her if she ever got arrested or pregnant, not to expect to come back home. Lucy did not really want to go back home, but from her mother's warnings she assumed a very negative connotation associated with unwed teenaged mothers. She then began to reflect upon her own values, and what it would be like for her child in kindergarten when his or her father was introduced as the boyfriend.

Lucy thought again about Rodney's marriage proposal. She really did not want to get married just because she was pregnant, but as she thought of Rodney's willingness to do what was best for their child, she thought maybe she could be married to him. She then realized telling her mother she was getting married would be much easier than telling her she was pregnant.

Also, her father would be less likely to kill Rodney, which was a pretty valid concern for Lucy, because her father had a very cold violence about him, and she feared he would use her situation to justify homicide.

Could she really marry this guy though? Lucy thought some more. She thought about how raising a child with someone else was a pretty big commitment,

and she certainly was not thinking about wanting to be with anyone else, so why not be married to the other person, and just make things easier on her family and the kid?

And so she decided that she would be open to marrying Rodney, and when she told him this, he simply nodded.

And that was that. Lucy was getting married.

She called her mother.

“Hey. I just wanted to let you know I’m getting married.” They had not spoken in months, and Lucy figured she might as well just spit it out.

“Why?” Lucy did not expect that response, not from her mother, and probably not from anyone else. It did not occur to her that when announcing one’s engagement anyone would ask why.

“Because I’m pregnant.” Lucy was irritated, because she really did not want to get married just because she was pregnant, but she could think about that later.

“I’m going to have to call you back.” Lucy’s mother’s tone very clearly indicated she was not celebrating the news that she was not only getting a new son-in-law, but that she was going to be a grandma, too.

Lucy was worried, but again, decided she could think about it later. She knew that she would not be swayed by anything her mother said, that she would still do what she was going to do, but it would have been nice for her mom to be a little more supportive.

Lucy decided it was probably pretty shocking news for her mother, and that the conversation could have been much worse. And so Lucy went on with her day-to-day puking and eating and working and puking, and after a few days of that, her mother called her back.

“We support you.” It was a simple statement, but said a lot. Lucy did not envy her mother speaking to her

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father about it, either, and one of the reasons Lucy wanted to tell her over the phone was so that she would not have to see her father, or his reaction to this news.

Lucy asked what her father said, hating that she even cared about him, about his opinion, about whether or not he would still have anything to do with her after all she did.

“He’s fine.” Lucy thought her mother was getting pretty succinct in her communications, but did not mention this to her.

Again, her mother’s short statement said a lot, and that it meant her father would carry on as if this was all acceptable and normal, and that he would continue to treat her as he always did, which was like shit. Lucy was relieved.

A couple of weeks after that conversation, Lucy’s mother accompanied her to her regular doctor’s appointment. When the doctor pressed the heart monitor to Lucy’s belly, and the swoosh-swoosh-swoosh of the baby’s heartbeat could be heard, her mother took her hand and squeezed it.

They looked at each other and got all teary eyed, and experienced quite a lovely mother/daughter moment, and they were both grateful and relieved to have each other at that very second.

The past was left in the past, and Lucy and her mother looked ahead.

CHAPTER THREE

Lucy was quite overwhelmed with the prospect of organizing a wedding, especially since she only had one month in which to do so.

She struggled to sit down and write a guest list, as all of the other plans to be made depended heavily on the number of guests. Lucy was only able to accomplish an attempt at a guest list because she did not have any idea whom to invite.

She alienated herself from all of her old friends, and after getting clean, all of her and Rodney's drug acquaintances simply ceased to exist in their lives.

Lucy called her mother in tears, lonely and completely defeated and needing some sort of reprieve. Lucy explained her dilemma and found that her mother was having a similar sort of problem in figuring out which of the family friends, business acquaintances of her father's, and acquaintances in general should be invited.

Lucy did not want a big wedding, which was fine with her parents, as they agreed to pay for it.

Rodney did not really have many friends, either, as he was an asshole, and nobody could stand being around him for long, thus making it difficult to establish any sort of lasting relationship.

Thinking of this, Lucy wondered if that was why he was happy about her getting pregnant, and then asking

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her to marry him (or at least mentioning getting married to her). By having his child, Lucy would be forever connected to him, and even though she was marrying him, she did not like thinking he manipulated her into the whole situation. And that was one more thing she did not have to worry about at that moment. What was done was done, and she had to plan this wedding.

Lucy's father was not very happy about his daughter's present circumstances, and even though he appeared to have come to some sort of compromise within himself, he was going around telling his business associates that he was in the market for a shotgun for his daughter's wedding.

That was pretty much the extent of his contribution to the wedding plans, and he left to his wife the decision making process of whom to invite. Not unlike Rodney, Lucy's father did not really have friends, as he, too was an asshole, but unlike Rodney, he owned a multi-million dollar business and did not really need friends.

That left a bunch of acquaintances, though, and finally Lucy's mother made the decision that they were only going to invite family. Lucy's aunt, three uncles, eleven cousins, and all of the respective spouses on her mother's side would be invited, and on her father's side, well, no one, because he hated all of them and would not have anything to do with them.

This was okay with Lucy, because she had never even met any of them, although she did think it was weird that out of his seven siblings, Lucy's father did not remain in contact with a single one, and she was curious from time to time about them, as they were after all her blood relatives. However, if they were all like her father, she would not really want to have anything to do with them anyway.

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So it was decided that Lucy's mother's family only would be invited on Lucy's side. As far as Rodney's side went, his parents felt the family-only thing would be a good opportunity to smooth out all of their own complications surrounding their son's very sudden wedding.

In the end, except for those related to each other, there were about thirty people who'd never met before, and half of whom had never even heard of the bride, and the other half of whom had never even heard of the groom.

The ceremony itself was about ten minutes long, which was perfect since it was outdoors, and even though it was only May, it was already getting pretty warm.

Rodney's father was a very enthusiastic gardener, and so Rodney's parents had a very nice backyard, one they actually hoped he would get married in someday, but maybe not at twenty one years old to a teenager he knocked up. Regardless, they offered up their yard, and Lucy and Rodney accepted, and that saved one more expense for a wedding no one really wanted to happen, but was happening anyway.

The ceremony had to be short because Lucy was so sick from her pregnancy and could not remain standing for long or she would faint. Although Lucy accepted the fact that she was going to have a baby and really was happy about it, if not a little overwhelmed by the idea of motherhood, she really hated being pregnant. She had not stopped throwing up since about a week after she found out, and she was simply exhausted all the time, especially since she was working full time.

Once she started the almost-fainting thing, she was allowed to have a stool to sit on behind the counter, but her feet still hurt a lot, and Rodney had no interest in rubbing them for her when she got home.

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But here she was marrying him, right at that moment, and she could not stop giggling. She did not recognize this as hysteria, because her usual bouts of hysteria always included rageful screaming and crying, and so she just went with it. She said the right things at the right times, and Rodney did, too, and they did the ring thing, and that was it – they were married.

Immediately following the ceremony, Lucy went inside Rodney's parents' house and fell asleep on their living room couch. She was awakened to cut the cake with Rodney, and she did so, and then went back to sleep.

Everyone believed it was because of her physical condition and the heat, but all Lucy was aware of was that she could not hold her eyes open no matter how hard she tried.

Married life was not any different at all from living-together life, and so Lucy and Rodney did not really change anything except their tax forms and wherever Lucy had to officially change her name. Now that she was married, Lucy did feel more comfortable about being pregnant, though she could not figure out why. She supposed it had to do with her very conservative upbringing, even though she came to the conclusion that all of the rules and regulations about sex and whatnot were repressive bullshit.

But she did feel more comfortable, and she appreciated Rodney for that. She appreciated Rodney for a lot of things, such as the fact that their combined income meant that she did not have to live in a homeless shelter or in one of those facilities for pregnant teenagers. She turned nineteen two weeks after the wedding, and did not really feel much like a teenager anymore anyway.

She also appreciated his willingness to even be around, as his situation was not really uncommon, and one he could have very easily completely ignored. She

appreciated too that he gave up the illegal drugs and the illegal drug dealing even though it meant they were pretty broke.

Lucy did not mind being broke. She knew the baby would be able to have state-covered health care, and that her mother and Rodney's mother were already buying tons of clothes and diapers and other necessities. Her little family qualified for food stamps, and so they did not have to be concerned about the prospect of starving.

She and Rodney started a savings account so they would have the money to pay the bills while Lucy would be unable to work after the baby was born, and relatives neither of them even thought of for years were sending them checks as wedding gifts. These went into the savings account along with whatever they had left over from their paychecks after taking care of the monthly bills.

She was very grateful that, so far, everything with the baby appeared to be normal. It had a healthy heartbeat, and after she gained enough weight to put her in the healthy range, her belly expanded at a normal pace. Her blood pressure was a little low, hence the almost-fainting thing, but otherwise, she was doing really well physically, even though she felt like shit all of the time.

Lucy was rather proud of the way things were working out.

Needless to say, it was a pretty big shock when Lucy got a call at the convenience store one night from the police telling her that her new husband was in jail after having totaled her car while driving under the influence of alcohol.

The reason he was driving her car was because his was in the shop. He dropped her off at work about five hours before, and told her he would be at his own job

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until her shift ended, at which time he would pick her back up. Apparently, this would not be the case.

Lucy found out from the police that Rodney ran her car into a tree after ingesting a fifth of whiskey. They assumed this was all he had to drink, as they found only the one empty bottle inside the front of the smashed car, but of course, they did not know that for sure. They also did not know if he was under the influence of anything other than alcohol.

Because Rodney was knocked unconscious, he was transported to the hospital, where a blood sample was taken to do a tox screen, the results of which could and would be used against him in a court of law. Following the blood withdrawal and Rodney's return to consciousness, the police took him to jail.

Lucy arranged to have someone cover her shift, and got one of her neighbors to pick her up. She went back to the apartment and got the title to Rodney's car, which she used to bond him out of jail.

She said nothing to Rodney once he was released, although he was exuberantly apologetic. Lucy's silence was not because she was angry with him, but because she simply did not know what to say. She was completely shocked at his behavior. She was able to carry out the task of getting him out of jail only because it required a very simple set of pre-determined actions; once she got Rodney home, she did not know what to do, so she left him there and got a ride back to work to finish her shift.

In the days following Rodney's arrest, the reality of what could have happened began to sink in, and Lucy became furious. Her silence unnerved Rodney, but he longed for it once she started the yelling.

Lucy made it very clear to him how upset she was that he not only lied to her about going to work, but that he almost killed himself as well. She was very frightened at the idea of having her baby alone and with no help or

financial support – what would she have done if Rodney died? She certainly was not going to move back in with her parents, and the idea of his putting her at risk of having to do that brought on a fresh round of rage toward him.

Rodney's contrition allowed Lucy to unleash her fury upon him, but neither his contrition nor her rage lasted long. He almost immediately got another job, and began working close to eighty hours per week. Lucy, needing to have some sort of peace in order to just get through each day, began to transform her fury into sympathy. This was not an easy task, though, especially since Rodney refused to let her use his car after he totaled hers.

He got his own car out of the shop about two days after the accident. Lucy was not able to afford full coverage insurance on her car, so there was no way to recover anything after Rodney totaled it. Lucy simply no longer had a car.

Rodney attempted to share his car with her for a little while, but he quickly tired of having to arrange his schedule around her getting to and from work, the grocery store, and her doctor's appointments, which were getting more frequent as her due date approached.

Rodney made so much of a fuss about the whole situation that Lucy eventually decided it would be easier to find her own transportation rather than rely on him. She attempted walking to work, but between her persistent sickness from being pregnant and the heat of summer, she could not physically accomplish this.

She asked her mother if she would bring her old bike over. It was a purple mountain bike she got when she was twelve, and once Lucy got a more comfortable seat for it, she was able to get around quite well. In addition to the seat, Lucy purchased a wire basket that hung over the handlebars.

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She found that she could fit two paper grocery bags in the basket perfectly, and began going to the super market more often so that she would not exceed her two-bag limit.

Although Lucy was now able to transport herself wherever she needed to go, she was extremely resentful toward Rodney about having to ride her childhood bicycle around town. As her belly became bigger, Lucy felt more and more ridiculous riding around on that bike, especially when she was wearing the hideous bright green uniform required by her job.

It was very difficult on her pride, too, whenever she would pass by people she knew, especially the people she knew from school who went on to attend college and who would stare at her as they drove by in their brand new cute cars during their visits home.

Having lived in Arbortown her entire life, Lucy found she was not able to avoid absorbing information about the current whereabouts and activities of her former acquaintances. There were times, too, when she heard about people who were once much more than acquaintances, and one of these people she heard about from time to time was Will.

This is how she knew that he went on to the University of Georgia in Athens. She was shocked at first hearing that news of him. She did not consider that after their breakup his life continued to go on in the direction at which it was always pointed, while her life, having never had any long-term destination whatsoever, simply spun about chaotically.

The time Lucy spent with Will was the most stable of her life, and although she was fully aware of the fact that she was not happy toward the end of the relationship and instigated their breakup, she could not help but feel a sense of being left behind when she thought of Will going off to college.

She did not think much of him during her drug-induced insanity, but with a clearer mind and a longing for simpler days, he resurfaced in her consciousness. The thought of him seeing her now terrified her, although she did not think about why this might be so. Her fear was never realized, though, because Lucy never did see him at the gas station or on her roadside bicycle journeys.

She did see others from high school, and Lucy hated those times. She rationalized that this was because her former acquaintances acted in a superior manner towards her, but in truth, she was embarrassed by the fact that she worked at a gas station.

Although she hated high school – did in fact drop out of high school – Lucy found she had a very strong thirst for knowledge, or at least to be recognized as knowledgeable. She knew she was smart, and as a result, Lucy's boredom – and ego - made it very difficult for her mind to settle as she carried on the mundane tasks of which her life at that time was comprised.

Lucy sought out ways to exercise her mind. She got a library card for the first time since she was a child, and felt tremendously fortunate that the library was easily within biking distance of their apartment. Lucy checked out three novels at a time, read them within a week, and then returned them and checked out three more.

She was heavily addicted to trashy romance stories, of which the library had an abundance, and they were a fantastic escape from her own reality.

In addition to reading, Lucy tried to get Rodney to play trivia and word games with her, but she so easily beat him that he quickly refused to play. He would, however, play cards with her and this was what they did whenever they were together, which was not often because of his very long workdays.

Rodney's work schedule proved to be very good for their marriage. Once Lucy quit doing drugs, she very

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quickly lost interest in Rodney as a person. He was not very fun to her drug- and alcohol-free mind, and in addition to the fact that he bored her, he also was just not very nice, as amply evidenced by his totaling her car and then refusing to let her drive his.

Additionally, the tox screen results came back from the hospital where Rodney was treated following his accident – he was doing cocaine in addition to drinking.

While Lucy felt betrayed by Rodney, she took very seriously the fact that she vowed to be married to him – for better or worse. She also had a very difficult time coming to terms with the fact that this guy was not only her husband, but the father of her unborn baby. Lucy felt very cornered, although she did not think of her situation, or even of how she really felt about Rodney, in such direct terms. She was very literally in survival mode, and surviving was one thing Lucy knew how to do, and doing it relied heavily on obliviousness.

Rodney's long absences from Lucy's daily life allowed her to get through each day much more easily, as he was not there constantly upsetting her with his insensitivities.

She really felt he tried to be a good husband – sometimes he brought her flowers left from the tables at the restaurant where he worked, and she knew he was excited about the baby. When Lucy first felt the baby move, she tried over and over again to get Rodney to feel the little flutterings by holding his hand to her belly, but the baby's movements were not yet perceptible to anyone but her, and she gave up for the time being.

One evening though, Lucy was lying on the couch watching television, and Rodney came in from work and greeted her by kneeling on the couch in front of her and laying his head on her belly. He started doing that after telling Lucy he wanted to be able to communicate with

the baby, and she allowed him this way of feeling closer to his unborn child.

Lucy felt the baby moving, but thought nothing of it until Rodney suddenly gasped and shot up off the floor.

“What the hell was that?” Rodney was shocked by the very clearly discernable movement he felt against his face.

“You felt that? It was the baby!” Lucy was very excited that Rodney finally was able to take part in the amazing experience of encountering their unborn child.

Lucy was not sure if her mind really accepted the fact that she was pregnant, but that baby sure did know she was, and now it was letting its father know that it would be coming into the world to change their lives forever.

Lucy reflected a lot on that moment when Rodney first felt the baby move in her belly. She needed so badly to have some kind of connection with this guy who was her husband. She married him, and she had every intention of remaining married to him.

Lucy knew marriages were supposed to be difficult, and felt that her marital experience was proof of that. She also was very aware of the fact that she and Rodney were very young, and that they really were trying to make this work.

Actually, Lucy knew that she was trying to make it work, and Rodney was still showing up at their apartment every night after his second shift ended, so she supposed he was trying to make it work, too.

The day came when Lucy would have the ultrasound that would reveal the sex of her baby.

She was terribly excited, as was Rodney, and for some discomfoting reason, her father. Well, she did not know if he was excited, but he wanted to accompany

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them to the ultrasound so he could be there when they found out if the baby was a boy or girl.

Lucy was so surprised by her father's desire to have anything at all to do with her that she readily agreed.

Lucy's father walked her down the aisle when she married Rodney, but following that did not really have much contact with his only child. Lucy was hurt by this, but having been raised by him knew her father was not a loving person. This did not stop her from wanting and needing his love, though, and for a split second after he pulled up to the apartment building to pick her and Rodney up to go to the doctor's office, Lucy was pleased.

She was also really nervous.

Lucy's father did not like Rodney. This was not only because Rodney knocked up his daughter, but because of Rodney's criminal record.

When Rodney's accident and arrest were printed in the local paper, it was not the first time Lucy's father read about him in the police blotter. This was because it was not the first time Rodney was arrested for drug or alcohol related offenses, and Lucy was not exactly sure how his reputation became known to her parents, but knew that they knew his background – and that they knew how she knew him.

But the pregnancy and marriage changed all of that, or so Lucy hoped. Rodney's arrest and the proof of his continued alcohol and drug use sullied the flimsy depiction Lucy presented to her parents – and to herself – of him.

However, he did seem to have made a turn-around with the two jobs, and taking responsibility for the impending court action.

Lucy believed her mother was trying to see the good in Rodney, and to see an effort on his part to improve his situation, because she needed to believe that

her daughter and soon-to-be-born grandchild would be cared for.

However, Lucy's father was a different story, and as she and Rodney approached his car on the morning of the ultrasound, she was very nervous about how he would act toward her husband. Rodney may not have been the greatest husband, but he was her husband, and she did feel protective toward him.

She need not have worried. Her father was very congenial toward Rodney, even more so than he was ever to Lucy. Lucy was quite shocked, and also felt inexplicably uneasy that her father and husband appeared to be acting friendly toward one another. On the way to the doctor's office, they actually bantered back and forth about stupid things like football and cars.

They easily carried on this little chat since Rodney automatically took the front seat in the car, relegating Lucy to the back. She found this very irritating – it was just the sort of thing her father would have done, and as she contemplated that similarity between her husband and her father, she had a very, very disturbing thought: she married someone just like her father.

As this atrocity attempted to sink into Lucy's reality, she began giggling hysterically from the back seat. Rodney and her father ignored her until her giggling became full-blown yelps of loud, open laughter. Her father glanced at her in the rear-view mirror, and Rodney turned slightly toward her, but they were both so caught up in their very deep conversation about gas mileage that they paid her no further mind.

As they approached the doctor's office, Lucy's boisterous laughter turned to wretched sobs that she had no control over whatsoever. The fact that she could not stop crying frightened her, which made the crying even more intense.

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This never happened to Lucy before and she could not figure out what to do about it. After the car was parked, Lucy's father and Rodney both looked at her sobbing hysterically in the back seat.

Rodney asked her what was wrong, and Lucy could not answer him, because she did not know what was wrong, and also because she could not speak. Her father got out of the car and headed dismissively in to the doctor's office.

Lucy, though still very upset, made the effort of moving her burdened body out of the car and heaving herself to her feet. She followed her father in, and Rodney, quite unnerved by his wife's behavior, especially in front of her father, followed her in.

Once they were in the waiting room, Lucy, still sobbing, went to sign in, and the nurse at the front desk hurried around the counter to approach her. The nurse asked Lucy if she was okay, and Rodney spoke up, saying that Lucy just started going crazy like that in the car on the way over.

The nurse put her arm around Lucy's shoulder and led her back to one of the empty exam rooms. Lucy sat down in a chair, and the nurse got her a cup of water and a wet washcloth, and told her to drink the water, and held the washcloth to the back of Lucy's neck.

Lucy's sobs began to ebb off, and as she sat there with this very comforting nurse, thought that she should remember how much better the water and washcloth were making her feel, so that she could comfort her own daughter one day if need be. Then she thought about how she would be a much better parent than her own were to her, and that hopefully her own daughter (or son) would never have such a fit or need such comforting.

The nurse explained to Lucy that sometimes hormones can cause pregnant women's emotions to go a little haywire, and that she thought this was what was

going on with Lucy. Lucy felt like that was a very good and even logical reason behind her outburst, and immediately felt much better having an acceptable label for it.

She blew her nose and rejoined her father and husband in the waiting room. They were both sitting there silently, obviously uncomfortable among so many women in a place that catered to women, and hardly acknowledged Lucy as she sat down.

Lucy tried futilely to make conversation with her father, and then with Rodney. She was very relieved when they were called back for the ultrasound.

Once in the exam room, all of the attention turned to the still blank screen upon which the sex of this baby would be revealed. Lucy heaved herself up onto the exam table and lifted her blouse, hoping nothing was exposed when the ultrasound tech tucked the paper drape into the front of her pants to keep them from getting the ultrasound gel on them.

Then she sat back, and strained to see the screen while the tech rolled the ultrasound detector thing around and across her belly, searching out the unborn baby. A little baby outline appeared, and Lucy inhaled sharply as tears sprung from her eyes.

It was the third ultrasound of her pregnancy, but seeing that baby in there touched her heart so strongly she could hardly breathe. She looked at the baby moving and kicking and sucking its thumb and then thought about how that was her baby and it was in her body, and she started to get a little overwhelmed, and so started nervously asking the tech different questions about what was on the screen.

They all looked as the heart was found, all four chambers identified and then on to the kidneys, and then the stomach, and the measurement of the head and other

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parts, and a ridiculously cute shot of the bottom of the baby's foot.

Finally the tech got to the important bits, and announced that she could see clearly the sex of the baby. Lucy waited expectantly to hear what it was, and when the tech asked if they wanted to know, blurted out a yes, accompanied by a little bit of spit, which landed on the tech's arm.

Lucy apologized, but the tech thought it was funny, and then looked at all of them and told them the baby was a boy.

A boy.

Lucy was going to have a little baby boy.

After finding out that his daughter would be having a son, Lucy's father seemed strangely cheerful, although he did not say anything at all regarding the matter. Lucy examined her father from the back seat of his car as he drove her and Rodney back home. There was a smugness about him that made Lucy very uneasy, and as she realized this, she also realized that his excitement and interest in her unborn child made her very uneasy, too.

Lucy imagined her father trying to take her baby away from her, and knew then that she would have no qualms about killing the man before she would allow him to bring any harm to her child. Lucy felt she should have been disturbed by the idea of killing her own father, but instead she felt a calmness about her that was foreign, though not unpleasant.

Lucy relaxed for the first time in the back of that car and went back to daydreaming about the day she would finally meet her baby.

For the first time in her life, Lucy openly looked at her naked body. Well, almost naked – she had

underpants on, huge, disgusting, fat-old-lady underpants, but she could not really see them below her freakishly huge belly.

She thought back to when she first began getting brave enough to wear two-piece bathing suits, when she was about fourteen or so. She was always terribly self-conscious of her very flat chest and the little bump of her tummy – she considered herself fat. She looked in the mirror and felt how truly sad it was that she looked at herself that way when there was absolutely nothing wrong with her body, and she wished she could have been more comfortable with herself at that time.

Because now she was completely deformed.

Her breasts continued to get even bigger, and they got in her way whenever she reached for something or was getting dressed or pretty much did anything involving the movement of her arms.

Even when she was trying to sleep, her huge, foreign chest would squish together uncomfortably. The size and distortion of her nipples were even more distressing to Lucy than the stretch marks radiating out from each of them; she could not believe it was even possible for nipples to get so big.

On top of all of that, she began leaking the clear, yellowish fluid that preceded the full-fledged breast milk that would appear a few days after giving birth. She was only about four months along when all of this leaking began, and Lucy was very embarrassed about it, especially since she initially kept thinking she was somehow spilling things over and over again on the same spot of her shirt.

But no, it was her leaky boobs leaking through her shirt, and they seemed to leak almost constantly. Lucy found breast pads at the drug store – they were like the pads she used to protect her underwear during her period, except they were round and went in the front of her bra.

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She had to carry them around in her purse, just as she did with the panty liners and tampons when she still got her period. Lucy thought one of the plusses of being pregnant was that she would not have to have her period anymore, but now her body seemed to require more maintenance than ever.

She even had to start wearing the panty liners again, because as her belly got bigger, her control over her bladder got smaller, so that whenever she sneezed or coughed or laughed, a little pee would come out. It was disgusting.

And she sneezed all the time. According to one of her pregnancy books, the nasal membranes may thin out, making the nose much more sensitive, and possibly even resulting in nose bleeds. Lucy's nose already was sensitive after she snorted all kinds of foreign material up into it, and she was just beginning getting regular nose bleeds when she found out she was pregnant.

But now she was constantly sneezing and getting stuffed up, and whenever she blew her nose, it would bleed. She had hay fever all her life, too, but now just a picture of a flower or cat or grass would trigger an attack of sneezing and snot pouring out, and then the bloody Kleenexes each time she blew her nose, and then the pee coming out with each sneeze, and Lucy felt as though she would go insane. The only thing that could stop one of her sneezing fits was if she went to sleep, and that was beginning to elude her, as well.

When she first got pregnant, Lucy slept and slept and slept and slept. As her pregnancy progressed, she slept even more. However, her hips became very tender, and she could not sleep on her side without them aching terribly, and her belly was so big that when she lay down on her back, it crushed her lungs and she could hardly breathe.

She finally figured out that she could wedge herself at an angle into the couch, and if she strategically placed pillows all around her, she could accomplish a sort of body suspension thing where it all evened out and she could sleep.

But even this took hours to achieve, hours of tossing and turning and re-positioning, and turning and tossing to find just the right spot. Even then, Lucy was not aware if she found the right spot, or if she just got to the point of passing out from pure exhaustion. Either way, she was always very grateful when she would wake up to find she had gotten more than a few hours of sleep.

The “morning” sickness still had not stopped, and Lucy continued to puke at least once a day, and she was becoming quite expert at it. She had it down to a science, and could go from nauseous to completely cleaned up in less than five minutes. It was a little unsettling to anyone who had the opportunity to witness one of these spells, but by that time, Lucy did not give one ounce of a shit about what anyone thought.

She just wanted this baby out of her.

She worked at the convenience store until she was eight and half months pregnant, which was when she simply could not get on her bike any longer. They were very accommodating at the store. She was still sweeping and mopping up the floors, but was excused from other duties that were dangerous for her, such as anything that required climbing on a ladder or carrying heavy objects.

Her managers also turned their heads when Lucy would take out her frustrations on the customers, and this happened more and more often.

Lucy was completely miserable. She was huge – all of that puking did not interfere with her ability to eat and eat and eat, and her body weight literally doubled from her skeletal pre-pregnancy frame. She was also snotty and pukey and weepy and tired, but despite all of

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this kept up with all of her job duties, and did not call out of work unless she literally could not stand, and that only happened once, when it turned out she developed a urinary tract infection and was taken to the hospital.

Yes, except for that infection, Lucy would suit up and show up whenever she was scheduled to work, riding her bike into the store and pushing it into the back room so she would not have to leave it outside and worry about it getting stolen.

Those customers really did piss her off, though. At least once every couple of days, some woman would come in and, taking note of Lucy's very obvious condition, extol the virtues of pregnancy. Lucy realized that her pregnancy experience was in no way the norm for all women, but she really hated it when a customer would ooh and ahh over her, and then ask, "Isn't being pregnant wonderful?"

Lucy would respond with a cursory, "No. I hate it," which was then almost always followed by the instigator's gasp of horror and declaration that no, Lucy did not hate being pregnant. After Lucy insisted that she did, indeed, hate being pregnant, whichever woman was insisting on carrying on with this nonsense would look hurt and confused, then stumble out of the store as if Lucy was some sort of abomination.

Again, Lucy did not give a shit.

The day she stood examining her hideously disfigured, almost-naked body in the mirror was Lucy's first day of her maternity leave from the store. While she was relieved to not be making the bike ride every day, and not mopping floors and waiting on jackasses and being on her feet all day, she was not looking forward to the next couple of weeks in which she would have to keep her mind from snapping.

This was an increasingly difficult task, and Rodney so far was absolutely no help at all.

His excuse for never rubbing her feet after she got home from work was that his own feet hurt just as badly after having to work two jobs, and that she should feel lucky she only needed to work one.

He also continued to refuse to let her use his car, although he did occasionally give her a ride to work, or pick her up afterward. He did not like picking her up, though, because then he would be locked in to taking her back to work the next day, since her bike would not fit in the car and had to be left at the store overnight.

Lucy did not understand why he would not let her drive his stupid car, especially since he was the one to wreck hers, and this continued to be a source of contention between the two of them.

Each day Lucy rode her bike to work, she fumed about how she could be in a car if it were not for Rodney. Each evening, as Lucy rode home on her bike in the dark, she would worry about getting hit by a car or kidnapped or beaten up or much more likely falling, and she would curse Rodney all over again.

As a result, Rodney ended up getting the brunt of Lucy's fury, and she fully believed he deserved every bit of it.

So when Rodney quit his daytime job, he did not tell her but pretended to go to work every day to get away from her. If Lucy knew he could have very easily been driving her to work, she probably would have killed him – literally – so, really, her not finding out about it was for the best. Additionally, even though he was not going to work as she believed, she was happy for every minute he was out of the house.

Lucy did not examine the dysfunction of her marriage at all by this time, because she was too consumed with getting through another day of pregnancy. The last two weeks before her due date were interminable, although for some reason it was around that

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time she finally stopped puking. She still raged through each day, though, counting the hours until the due date.

And then that day came and went, and Lucy began to sincerely believe that she was going to be pregnant forever. Her doctor kept saying that they should wait a little while longer to allow her body to begin the natural childbearing process, but by the tenth day after her due date, Lucy was simply hysterical about still being pregnant, and her doctor finally agreed that it might be time to induce labor.

Lucy had a very eventful delivery that ended with an emergency caesarian, and while it was terrifying, all she could think about was the fact that after all of that hell, her little baby boy was finally in her arms.

She named her baby Joseph after the youth pastor who gave her the first dose of self-worth she ever had. It was fitting, because her baby – perfect and healthy and beautiful – was the second person in her life who gave her a feeling of self-worth.

Lucy felt that if she ended up with this perfect baby after all of the shitty things she did, there must be something good about her after all. She secretly feared that her baby was going to be born with some sort of defect, or was going to be sick, or was in some other way going to have to suffer for the selfishness and self-abuse she accumulated throughout her lifetime.

But he was not – he was absolutely perfect.

Because of the complications surrounding Lucy's delivery, she had to be completely sedated in order for the C-section to be performed, and she was not conscious when Joseph was born. When she regained consciousness in the post-op room, there was a shift change going on, and no one seemed willing or able to take her to see her baby.

She did manage to find out that he was just fine, and that he weighed almost nine pounds. When Lucy

heard this, she questioned the nurse about whether or not she was talking about the right baby – Lucy could not imagine having a nine-pound baby. She was only seven pounds when she was born, and Rodney was only six.

Still, she was very happy to hear that he was okay, and over the next few hours, she would nod off and then wake up and try to get someone's attention to take her to see her baby. For some reason, no one seemed to think it was a priority, and Lucy started to get very upset.

Finally, a nurse wheeled her out of the post-op room and into her private room, where Rodney was fast asleep on the chair/cot. Lucy called out to him over and over, but he would not wake up. She pushed the button for a nurse and waited about ten minutes, but no one came. She called out to Rodney again, and still he would not wake up.

Lucy felt like she was in a nightmare. She pushed the nurse's button again, and this time they finally responded. Lucy was in tears, and demanded to see her baby, yelling into the intercom.

About fifteen minutes later, a lactation nurse arrived carrying baby Joseph, and Lucy reached out her arms to finally, finally see his face, but the nurse pulled him away from her and said she needed to learn how to get him to breast feed first.

Lucy broke down, crying and crying, saying she just wanted to see her baby.

The lactation nurse did not realize Lucy had not yet seen her son, and as it was over five hours since he was born, rushed to put him in her arms. Lucy held her son close, and pulled the blanket back so she could see his whole face clearly. He was awake and he stared at her unblinking with the purest love Lucy ever felt, and at that moment, she fell head over heels in love with that baby.

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A patience that did not before exist in her fell over her, and she felt a complete peace and a complete joy, neither of which she ever previously experienced.

She looked over at the nurse and asked her to please wake up Rodney.

After a lot of shaking, which Lucy enthusiastically encouraged from her bed, Rodney finally opened his eyes. Lucy asked if he saw the baby yet, and he said he did.

She looked at Rodney triumphantly, and he returned her gaze sheepishly. Lucy knew Rodney never completely believed the baby was his, and this was yet another source of pain for her. But one needed only to glance at Joseph to see this child was clearly fathered by Rodney, he looked so much like him.

Despite his resemblance to her husband, Lucy knew she was holding the most beautiful baby in the whole world, and every miserable, godforsaken moment of her pregnancy and delivery and quest to finally get her hands on him was worth just that one moment of looking into his completely innocent eyes, and knowing he was hers.

And after years and years of being scared and lonely and skeptical, Lucy loved.

Oh, how Lucy loved her little baby! She was amazed at how difficult it was to care for him – not the actual tasks required to care for him, which came fairly naturally to her, and surprisingly, to Rodney as well, but the energy.

It seemed she would just barely get to sleep when his little bleating cries would wake her to nurse him. And although she longed to just stay in that bed and sleep and sleep and sleep, every time she looked at Joseph and held him to her, every time he was comforted just by her

touch, she was overcome again at how deeply she loved him.

She ended up staying seven days in the hospital because of an infection she got related to the C-section, and Rodney was a complete pain in the ass the entire time. He would get to the hospital in the morning and see the baby, then conk out on the stupid chair/cot again, and he would go into his coma-type sleep, and be oblivious to everything going on around him.

Lucy suffered a touch of post-partum depression, something that no one explained to her or warned her about, and she had no idea why she could not stop crying, even when she was so happy with her baby, and Rodney's sleeping drove her to hysterics.

On one occasion, Lucy became so upset that Rodney would not wake up and take part in this new part of their lives she asked one of the nurses to wake him and tell him to leave. Because of the cesarean, Lucy was pretty much stuck in the bed, and wanted to be able to rely on Rodney to help her when she needed to move around and change the baby and so forth, but Rodney just did his sleeping thing.

So Lucy was very surprised when they got Joseph home and Rodney began acting like a caring and attentive father.

Even though Lucy was the one who had to feed Joseph, Rodney would sometimes get up at night to get the crying baby, and change his diaper, and then deliver him to Lucy's arms. Rodney also seemed to be just as delighted by Joseph as Lucy – well, Lucy assumed it was just about as much delight Rodney was capable of, and she was pleased.

She began to have positive feelings towards Rodney, possibly even love, because of the love he so clearly had for her baby.

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These positive feelings did not necessarily transfer into the bedroom, though, and Lucy really no longer cared to have sex with Rodney. Not that she did not want to have sex, she just did not want to have sex with Rodney.

Because she was married, she did not choose to seek sex elsewhere, but it did not really matter in the grand scheme of things, because during the first six months of Joseph's life, Lucy was exhausted all the time. She went back to work two months after Joseph was born, and she and Rodney had alternating work shifts so that one of them was always with the baby. This was because Lucy was terrified of the idea of letting a stranger care for her baby, and also because they could not afford a sitter.

Lucy began to work mornings, as Rodney's remaining job (he told her he quit his second job to be with the baby) was at a restaurant only open for dinner, and she had to be at the store by four thirty a.m. to get ready to open at five. Once Lucy gave birth, she began to get some of her perspective and confidence back, and finally put her foot down about the car. She told Rodney she would be using his car to get to work, the grocery store, the baby's doctor, and wherever else she needed to go.

Rodney, having come to realize and accept that he was undeniably the father of Lucy's baby, actually felt kind of bad about making her ride her bike everywhere during her pregnancy, and he did not argue at all when Lucy began taking his car. Lucy felt this was a wise move on Rodney's part.

As Lucy healed physically and mentally from the hideous ordeal of bringing Joseph into the world, she found herself expecting more from those around her in terms of respect. She really did go through a lot, and here she was clean and sober, gainfully employed, married,

and the very good mother to a perfect baby – why should she continue to let people walk all over her?

Rodney had no idea Lucy even possessed any kind of confidence, as his relationship with her began with his giving her drugs to have sex with him, and in Rodney's experience, this type of behavior from a girl was not indicative of someone who expected any respect at all.

But Lucy knew she worked hard, and she was very proud of how she and Rodney were pulling off the whole married-with-a-baby thing. For the first time in her life, she had evidence of her worth, and she wanted to be treated like a worthy person.

She really had no experience in going about making this happen, though, and rather than become assertive, Lucy assumed a very aggressive stance toward pretty much the whole world. It was true that people did not walk all over her anymore, but she did not realize she was alienating just about everyone who had anything to do with her.

As in high school, she had no idea how intimidating she became, but Rodney did, and he did not react well to being intimidated.

He felt like Lucy thought she had him by the balls, and this was because, in reality, she did have him by the balls. In addition to facing felony drug charges stemming from the incident in which he totaled her car, he was flagrantly inconsiderate to her during her entire pregnancy. His lying and illegal activity also caused Lucy to not trust him at all with money, and she maintained tight control over their finances.

To top it all off, Lucy was a raging bitch to him.

Lucy realized her behavior toward Rodney was pushy, and even though she hated being seen as a ball-and-chain type of wife, knew of no other way to keep

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their lives in order other than to bully Rodney into doing what she wanted him to do.

Lucy had every reason not to trust him, and he knew it, and instead of trying to earn back some trust from her, Rodney continued the behavior that prompted Lucy's low opinion of him. Lucy found little stashes of cash around the house that Rodney would try to hide from her, and he would often come home very obviously stoned, but deny it like his life depended on it.

He was also extremely pushy toward Lucy about sex, and would chip away at her for hours before she would finally concede to sleeping with him. This did not make Lucy desire him any more than she already did, which was pretty much not at all. In fact, it was one more thing for her to be angry about, and she was already pretty angry.

However, Lucy still did truly want her marriage to work, and felt if she stuck around, she and Rodney could make that happen. She tried to talk to him about communicating better, about how she needed him to stop the lying and doing drugs in order to establish some trust, but he rarely, if ever, listened to more than the first few words out of her mouth.

But Lucy just kept plugging away at life, once again using oblivion as a tool to survive.

Despite the fact that she really did not like being around Rodney, she imagined a relationship with him in which he loved her and she loved him, and that included shared values and goals for their child and their lives. She tried to be nice to Rodney, and pulled it off pretty well when he was not around to remind her how much she did not like him. The fact that they hardly ever saw each other made things much easier on them, as well.

And Rodney really did love Joseph, and it broke Lucy's heart to think of ever taking her baby away from his father. She had such a horrible relationship with her

own father, and she wanted much better for her own child, and fervently willed Rodney to fulfill that role. But as strong as Lucy's will was, it was not strong enough to make Rodney behave as she wanted.

On the day Joseph was seven months old, Rodney did not come home after work. This was because he was in jail again, and since he was already out on bond for his previous offense, he was not going to be released any time soon without a very large amount of money. He thought perhaps Lucy would be able to get her parents to put their house up so he could get out, and this was the sole purpose of his collect call to their apartment at three o'clock in the morning.

Lucy was awake, of course, and sick with worry, when she answered the phone and learned that what she was so afraid of happening again actually happened. She asked him what exactly transpired, but he was not interested in discussing anything but the deed to her parents' house. The mere thought of contacting her parents made Lucy very, very nauseous for a number of reasons.

The first reason was the thought of having any contact at all with her father. Except for that weird day when he took her to the ultra sound to find out that the baby was a boy, he was very absent from her life.

While she was again hurt by this, Lucy felt safer not having anything to do with him. She did not like taking Joseph over to her parents' house, and her mother primarily saw her grandson at Lucy's apartment or when her father was out of town. She just felt very strongly the need to keep her child as far away from her father as possible.

She was afraid of what her father could do to her, and to her baby, and the idea of asking him to get Rodney out of jail did nothing to hinder that fear.

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The second reason was the thought of having any contact with her mother about anything that reflected negatively on Rodney.

Lucy was terribly self-conscious about the way Rodney treated her in front of her mother, which was the only time Lucy seemed to be aware of how abusive he was toward her, and she hated thinking of how it hurt her mother to see her being treated that way. Additionally, Lucy tried very hard to speak highly of Rodney to her mother, and to try and paint him in a very positive light.

This was not easy to do, but Lucy wanted – needed – her mother to believe her marriage and home life were just fine. The last thing Lucy wanted to do was tell her mother that Rodney was in jail again, and that he wanted Lucy to bail him out with the deed to their house.

The third reason was that Lucy knew her parents would likely scoff at the thought of putting their home at risk for the likes of Rodney.

The fourth reason was that Lucy was pissed, and she was not in any mood to do anything but try to get some sleep, since she knew the days ahead were going to take a lot out of her. She did not explain any of these reasons to Rodney, but simply hung up on him, took the phone off the hook, and went to sleep.

No more than an hour later, Joseph began to cry, and Lucy went into his room to see what he needed. She changed him and nursed him, but he would not settle down when she put him back in his crib. This was unusual for him – the normal routine was for him to just go back to sleep, and Lucy really, really wanted to go back to bed.

But Joseph would not stop crying when she put him in his crib. She finally took him out to the living room and propped herself up in the corner of the sofa, curling her body around her baby.

He did not cry when she was holding him, but he did not go to sleep, either. He just sat there and stared at her. Lucy placed her hand on top of his soft, downy head to try to get him to close his eyes for a little bit, and was surprised and concerned when she realized he was burning up. He never ran a fever before, and although Lucy knew it was very common for babies to run fevers occasionally, her heart still did the painful thud thing from fear for her little son's physical safety.

Lucy got the baby thermometer out and placed it in Joseph's armpit to take his temperature. The doctor told her the most accurate reading would be from taking his temperature rectally, but Lucy was not ever going to do that to her kid – ever. So the armpit it was, and when the thermometer beeped its reading, Lucy became even more concerned when she saw how high it was.

She reconnected the phone and called the on-call nurse number provided by the pediatrician's office, and was relieved when the nurse told her that Joseph's fever was most likely not life threatening, as he was easily soothed when she held him, and he did not appear to be anything more than a little uncomfortable. Then the nurse directed Lucy to give him some baby Tylenol, and that he should go to sleep pretty quickly after that.

Lucy thanked the nurse, hung up the phone, and began to cry because she did not have any baby Tylenol, and had no way of going to get any since her bastard of a husband took the car that night before he was arrested, and there was no telling where it was at that moment.

Lucy sat back in the couch and held her baby, and wanted so badly to sleep, and for her baby to not be sick, and her husband to not be in jail, but none of those things were part of her current reality.

Then she looked back down at Joseph, and saw his big eyes staring so intently at her. He was so content sitting there, and as she stared back at him, Lucy felt the

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patience and peace and love fill her up, just as it did the very first time she looked into his eyes the day he was born.

Then she remembered that she had a sample of baby Tylenol in the diaper bag. The pediatric nurse gave it to her after Joseph's first shots. She went and got it, read the directions, and administered it to Joseph.

He took it very easily, and within ten minutes was back asleep. Lucy laid him down in his crib, and carrying that pure love for her baby strong within her, went back to her own bed and slept very peacefully until it was time to get up and face the next day.

Rodney totaled his car. That was what precipitated his latest arrest, that and the fact that he was drunk. Lucy ended up having nothing to do with getting him out on bond this time around. She had no idea how he got out of jail, and she really did not care.

She did not ask any questions because she did not want to know any answers. She did make it clear, however, that she was going to have nothing to do with helping Rodney out in any way whatsoever with his legal problems, or with his illegal behavior.

She also made it clear she did not want to have much to do with Rodney at all, outside of his being home to be with Joseph while she worked her shift at the gas station, to which she again had to ride her bike.

Pretty much the only interaction she had with Rodney over the next few months was limited to Joseph's care and Lucy's obtaining Rodney's paycheck from the restaurant. She carried on in a robotic fashion, only showing any kind of positive feelings or emotion when she was around Joseph, whom she adored and for whom she lived.

She often thought of where she would be if she did not get pregnant. It was true she would not be married

to this lying and irresponsible asshole, but she also would not have her little boy.

From where her life was headed when she got pregnant, Lucy felt confident she also would not have her personal freedom, or even be alive at all, if she continued down that road. For this, in addition to the pure joy she got from her son, Lucy was always grateful.

But she was still married to this lying and irresponsible asshole. The only thing keeping her with him was the fact that she simply did not know what else to do. She was very young, a high school dropout, and had a baby to care for. She was also terrified of the thought of having to return to her parents' house, which was really her only tangible option. So she stayed with Rodney.

But she did not let him touch her, or even get near her. She banished him to the couch, and slept alone in their bed. On the one hand, Rodney was okay with this, as it made it much easier for him to come home whenever he wanted to, since he was not waking Lucy by getting into bed with her.

On the other hand, Lucy knew Rodney was very frustrated with her refusal to have sex with him. The reason she knew this was because he complained about it all the time.

He also pressured her a great deal, to the point that Lucy would end his attempts at sex by yelling at him to get off her. She really did not care if it hurt his feelings or not – she did not want to have sex with him, and his trying to bully his way into bed with her was definitely not a turn-on.

This life was not too bad overall, though, since she stayed very busy with work and taking care of Joseph and the apartment. The closest thing she had to friends were the people she worked with, and whom she really did find fascinating.

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There was one woman in particular with whom she loved working. Her name was Diane, and she fit every Hollywood embodiment of poor white trash. She was short and squat, had terrible acne scars, a full set of false teeth, and although she was only thirty-seven years old, looked to be closer to sixty.

Lucy loved her. Diane was working at the gas station for about a year before Lucy, and was not very friendly at the get-go. Lucy, having grown up in Arbortown, felt confidently that Diane viewed her as a snob, and Lucy did not blame her a bit for that. People from Arbortown were pretty much all snobs, and Lucy herself did not like most of the people she grew up around, or a lot of the customers she waited on at the store.

Lucy was determined, however, to prove to Diane that she was not like anyone else from Arbortown, and she accomplished this fairly quickly by displaying a meticulous work ethic that included a willingness to perform any task needed to be done in the store.

Lucy's background in scrubbing toilets in a factory turned out to be very good training for convenience store work, and since the store was much more interesting than her father's place of business, Lucy enjoyed putting forth the effort to get her tasks done well.

It also did not hurt that she started out at two dollars an hour above minimum wage, which was more than she was ever paid before.

So Lucy was happy to take on any challenge Diane saw fit to present, from scrubbing the floor of the cooler while five months pregnant to cleaning the public bathrooms.

Lucy was only required to clean the bathrooms once, as it actually was an assignment Diane and the store manager gave her to see what she was really made of. The public bathrooms were in a particularly disgusting

state, and Lucy threw up four times, and almost fainted, but she got the job done.

Diane and the manager felt pretty bad about it, though, because Lucy was pregnant at the time and almost had to be hospitalized from dehydration. Regardless, Lucy made a good impression on these people who lived lives so foreign to hers.

While she proved her lack of snobbery, her scorching tongue was something she would never be able to hide, as demonstrated whenever any of the customers irritated her.

While Lucy grew to be perfectly comfortable with the fact that she worked at a gas station and had certain obligations to the general public, she did not for one second believe she should be condescended to or belittled by anyone, especially anyone from her own town. She knew many of the people who came in, and found the worst customers were often the mothers of people with whom Lucy participated in a lot of illegal activity.

She did not think they knew who she was, but she knew them, and she knew how fucked up their kids were, and what shitty parents they were, and she was not about to take any flak from them.

In addition to the mothers of people she grew up and did all of that illegal stuff with were the fathers of the same people, the husbands of these miserable women. Lucy hated every single one of these men even more than their female counter-parts.

This was because they were the biggest pigs she ever met. While Lucy could handle the occasional sexist remark from a construction worker or teenager, could even laugh it off, she had absolutely no tolerance for the shameless flirtations of her father's contemporaries.

There were even a couple of times when one of these men came in to the store to pay for gas, and with his

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wife waiting in the car, asked Lucy if she would like to “go for a ride.”

Lucy did not know exactly what he meant by “go for a ride,” but she had plenty of ideas of what that particular phrase could entail, and it made her physically ill every time he said it.

It also made her realize how much of a façade her hometown was – all of these people attempting to convince themselves that they were faultless and clean as a whistle, when in reality most of them were far worse trash than anyone could ever accuse even Diane of being.

Lucy actually had a number of complaints made against her by a number of customers, but she was a very good employee. She did not steal, she showed up when she was supposed to, and she was intelligent enough not to screw anything up.

In fact, she was offered an assistant manager’s position, but turned it down. She told herself she did not want the job because she knew Diane was next in line for it, but the real reason was that, on a very deep level, she did not want to have any sort of career in the gas station business, and it was easier for her to believe her job was just a temporary thing until she got something better if she was not advancing in the company.

In addition to the fact that she was a valuable employee, the reason none of the complaints against Lucy had any real consequences for her was because her coworkers loved it when she went off on a customer.

Lucy did not know this for some time, but after about a year of working there, she established a certain reputation among the customers, who grew to be very polite to her. Diane noticed this, and let it slip that she and the manager, and even some of the regional managers, watched the security tapes of Lucy bitching out people, and how funny they thought it was.

Diane even had quite an accurate impression of Lucy, and when she demonstrated her version of Lucy's angry gesticulations, Lucy was initially very embarrassed.

She got over it quickly, though, because she was actually flattered by the attention, and by the idea that she was getting away with so much because of how she was valued at her job, even if it was a job she considered to be pretty easy, although physically demanding at times, especially while she was pregnant.

It was, after all, really the first time in her life she was appreciated in such a manner, and it made her feel good. It also made her feel very protective of Diane, and of the customers who came in who were obviously not in great financial places in their lives.

Lucy could certainly relate to this, and although there were not really any homeless people in Arbortown, there were some raging alcoholics and drug addicts who simply had no money left for food.

Lucy was supposed to throw away the hotdogs on the rotating grill after a certain period of time, but every now and then, someone who looked as though life was treating them particularly harshly would come in and ask if they could have one, and she would give it to them. She knew she was on the security tapes, and if she had the 89 cents to cover the cost, she would pay for it herself, but she would also occasionally just include it in the number of hotdogs that were dumped and that she was required to report at the end of each shift.

The same went for the coffee, especially if the hard-up person had their own cup already, and she did not have to account for one of the store's cups in the inventory.

Lucy could relate to these people, and while she did not approve of their lifestyles – still had, in fact, a lot of shame associated with her actions that put her in the

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very same position in the past – she simply could not shun them. She knew very well what it felt like to be broken, to be unable to muster up the pride to care for herself.

She also remembered the way her father would complain about the homeless in general, and how they should all just go get jobs, and they were simply too selfish and irresponsible to carry their weight in society, and so instead mooched off everyone else who worked hard every day.

While she could not pinpoint exactly why, Lucy was always very disturbed by her father's blatant judgment and condemnation of these people he never took the time to meet or find out anything about.

He covered under the same blanket of hate and ignorance when it came to the poor as he did when it came to other races or religions, or really anyone who was not white and rich. And Lucy wanted to be as different from him as she possibly could.

In this way she could see that her handouts and unwillingness to condemn the homeless and drug addicts and alcoholics and mentally ill and the poor as a form of rebellion against her father.

But the bottom line was that she just knew what it felt like to be a freak, and that having these types of problems did not necessarily equate to being bad or undeserving. She did not attempt to justify these people's decisions, or to defend them from accusations like those of her father, but she did not really see the point in making judgments to begin with, and at the end of the day, she slept well.

One day Lucy was called in to work to cover Diane's shift. It seemed Diane's husband died during a botched drug deal involving crack cocaine and a stolen handgun. While Diane left her husband behind in Atlanta

years ago, and had in fact not even spoken to him in over two years, he was still her husband, and she was upset.

Although Lucy did not hear anything but bad about Diane's husband, she was upset that her friend was upset.

Lucy was also upset because Rodney was bitching about her covering Diane's shift, even though he had the night off. Lucy did not care if he was bitching, and was surprised and appalled by his lack of empathy, although by this time she did not know why she continued to be surprised by his coldness.

Someone was dead, and it was not going to hurt Rodney to be alone with Joseph for one evening. Although he and Lucy hardly ever had an evening off together, Lucy was happy to have a chance to get out of the house, even if it was due to sad circumstances.

Over the next few days, Lucy helped out at the store when she could. Her mother was available to keep Joseph, but only for a couple of evenings, and as much as she hated trying to get Rodney to stay home with their son, the circumstances called for it and so that is what she did.

On the day of the funeral, Lucy dressed in her only formal outfit, a long black dress with a tiny flower print all over it, left Joseph with Rodney and got a ride with the store manager in order to attend the service. Lucy did not have much experience with funerals, having only been to one before as a child, and because she was not particularly distressed by the death of someone she thought was an asshole, she was interested to see how it all played out.

Once she and the manager arrived, the manager went to sit with Diane, and Lucy took a seat at the back.

Despite her curiosity, she was quite uncomfortable with the other people attending, as she

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was not exactly sure what the appropriate behavior was, or if she should even speak to anyone at all.

So she sat by herself and just observed.

Diane was very composed during the entire service, but the dead man's mother was absolutely hysterical. She cried and cried and wailed and sobbed and all of those other adjectives that describe a display of grief. Lucy was reminded of a biblical story from her childhood that mentioned professional mourners, and thought that the dead husband's mom would have been very talented in that profession.

Lucy herself remained very composed, as well, until an incredibly cheesy country music song was played. It was apparently one of the dead husband's favorite songs, and Lucy did not catch what it was about because as soon as it started, she too began crying uncontrollably.

It started out as a little pang of irritation, because she really, really hated country music, and turned quickly into an overwhelming feeling of sadness. She tried to calm down, but then thought of the dead husband's mother being so upset, and then thought of how she would feel if anything ever happened to her own son, and then there was just no stopping it.

Lucy was terribly embarrassed by her outburst. Under the circumstances, she did not feel justified in such a violent and naked show of grief. She stood from her seat, and giving thanks for having sat at the back and close to the doors, walked quickly from the room and out into the lobby or foyer or whatever the big front room of a funeral home is called.

One of the funeral home employees, believing Lucy was upset over the deceased, rushed to her side with a box of tissue and led her to a secluded alcove that she did not notice upon entering the building. The employee

told her to please feel free to take all the time she needed, and that is exactly what Lucy did.

It was not that she was taking advantage of this privacy in which to express her feelings, it was more that she was pretty much hysterical and was simply unable to stop crying. After about fifteen minutes, Lucy began to be concerned over whether the service was over and Diane or the manager was looking for her.

However, she was much more concerned with the idea of anyone she knew seeing her in this condition, and so she stayed in the little alcove.

It took about half an hour, but Lucy finally pulled herself together. Apparently, the service was still going on, and as Lucy walked toward the doors to go back in, they swung open and out came the casket on a dolly, followed by the dead husband's mother and Diane, and then everyone else who attended.

Lucy simply fell in line with the rest of them, very relieved at her timing.

In the days following the funeral, Lucy found herself in such a state of peace that she thought something might be wrong with her. She was especially concerned with the idea that she finally went insane, and a complete detachment from reality was what was making her feel so calm. She did not worry too much, though, because she really could not remember the last time she felt so rested and calm, and it felt good.

She even began to be nicer to Rodney. Promptly upon hearing the first pleasant words to him out of her mouth since he was last arrested, he began his campaign to have sex with her. Lucy, having been suffering from her own self-inflicted dry spell, was overcome with physical need and so gave in with very little urging from her husband. Rodney was very pleased, and as an act of gratitude, suggested to Lucy that they get new cars.

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Lucy was shocked. She was in charge of their finances, and knew very well that they would not be able to afford one car, let alone two. Rodney, however, gave her some story about some distant relative dying and leaving him some cash. Lucy did not believe it for one second, but found it much easier to accept his explanation for having so much money on him than it was to wonder how he had really gotten it.

She also really, really missed having a car.

Although she was getting to and from work and accomplishing the basic errands required to keep the household going by riding her bike, she still had to get Joseph to his check-ups, and going anywhere with him in tow involved asking her mother for a ride.

This was something she liked only slightly less than asking her mother to babysit Joseph, although the reason behind this was pride. There was also the matter of being pretty much tied to the apartment, and outside of walks with Joseph in his stroller, Lucy never went anywhere just for fun because the transportation issue made it so difficult.

So when Rodney suggested getting the cars, and came up with a good enough lie to cover the existence of money, Lucy was very excited.

The next time they were both off work at the same time was the following week, and on that day, they packed up Joseph and got a ride to a car dealership. Apparently, Rodney was already in some sort of discussions with the salesman, as they already knew each other and got right down to business. The salesman showed Lucy what was within the price range provided by Rodney, and she immediately chose a station wagon.

Her very succinct decisiveness was due to an ongoing daydream of hers involving transportation large enough to hold an entire week's worth of groceries and Joseph all at the same time.

She worked out that her dream car would be a station wagon because a sedan would feel too much like her parents' cars, and there was no way in hell she would ever drive a minivan, even if she went on to have nine more kids (which she already knew she would not). She also did not want to have any type of SUV, as they were the standard car of most of the people she resented so much.

And so the station wagon it was. As soon as everything was taken care of with the salesman, Lucy installed Joseph's car seat in the middle of the back seat, buckled him in, and told Rodney she was going for a long drive. He laughed, pleased with her pleasure, and went off to find his own car.

Lucy felt a thrill of independence as she pulled out of the lot. The first thing she did was drive to the gas station where she worked and filled up her car with gas.

There were many times when she was working and customers came in complaining about the price of gas, and Lucy longed to be able to have a car to put gas in that she could complain about.

Now she had that car, but rather than complain about the price of gas, she was simply startled at how much it went up since she last drove a car. After paying for the gas and showing off her new ride to her co-workers, Lucy only had three dollars, so she took Joseph to the bookstore.

This bookstore was built within the past year, and Lucy had never been to it because it was on the other side of town. She was always grateful for having the library so close by, but the library just did not smell the same as a bookstore, and when Lucy first walked into that glorious place, she simply stood and inhaled one of her very favorite smells for a good minute.

This particular bookstore was one of those really big corporate ones that had a coffee shop. Lucy went to

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the coffee shop to see what she could get for Joseph to keep him occupied so that she could have a pleasant browsing experience. She was hoping for a lollipop or something, but there was nothing like it there. There were cookies, but they were huge and not within her budget, and besides that, she did not like the idea of Joseph having so much sugar.

She spied the glass container of biscotti atop the café display case, and asked the person working there what they were. After hearing his description – and seeing the much smaller price – Lucy bought one for Joseph and handed it over. He stuck it in his mouth and began gumming it.

Lucy was pleased, because it was going to take him a long time to get through that whole thing with his four tiny teeth. She pushed the stroller toward the fiction section, and picked up the first fat paperback she found.

She held it to her face and thumbed the pages, causing them to fan out a little puff of lovely new-book-scent directly under her nose. After indulging in this for about three minutes, and with Joseph deeply preoccupied with his biscotti project, Lucy spent an hour slowly winding through the rows of books and journals and pens and little gadgets designed to make book-reading easier and more pleasant.

When Joseph finished his biscotti and became antsy, Lucy took him into the bathroom, changed him into a fresh diaper, and fixed him a bottle. She then took him out to her beautiful new car, got him settled back into his car seat, and packed up his stroller in the very spacious back section of the station wagon.

She got behind the wheel, put all of the windows down, and drove out into the only town she ever lived in. Immediately after finishing his bottle, Joseph went right to sleep.

Lucy drove and drove and drove, going through the neighborhoods of her childhood acquaintances, seeing how houses and lawns and things changed, but mostly how they stayed the same.

She drove by the little park where she met Kieran for the first time. It seemed like such a long time ago since that day, but it was only five years. Thinking back at how drastically her life changed since then, five years did not seem as though enough time went by.

She pulled into the little parking lot alongside the park and looked out at the picnic table they all sat around that night. She looked back at her beautiful sleeping baby, thinking how nice it would be to share the joy of him with someone who brought her joy, and wondered if Kieran would speak to her after years of her silence.

Once Lucy got the idea of speaking to Kieran again into her head, she could not get rid of it. She became very preoccupied with the thought of what she might say to him, and of what he might say to her. She ran over scenarios in which he was delighted to hear from her, and she felt very light-hearted thinking of different versions of their possible conversations.

Then she thought about the scenarios in which Kieran was very hurt and angry with her, which filled her with anxiety and sadness.

The last time Lucy saw Kieran was not a very positive interchange. He was working at a restaurant in Arbortown, and Rodney was harping on the idea of taking her out on a date. She did not really care if he took her out on a date or not – her early motives in the relationship were not necessarily romantic, and so she was indifferent to romantic gestures.

But Rodney insisted that she go on a date with him, because the last girl he asked out refused to do anything other than casually hang out with him.

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Apparently Rodney needed some sort of definition of his relationship with Lucy, some sort of formality to boost his fragile ego, and Lucy agreed to go with him. She was spending most of her time with him at that point anyway, so why not?

The only problem about going out to dinner, though, was finding a time when they were hungry. Amphetamines were not the best thing for the appetite, and the only time Lucy ever felt like eating was after one of her long sleeping spells. So that is when they ended up going.

Rodney asked her where she wanted to go, and Lucy told him she wanted to go to her favorite restaurant in town, which was a pizza parlor. Lucy always loved going there as a kid, when she would have contests to see how many pieces of pizza she could eat, and playing the arcade-style video games (the only time she ever enjoyed video games), and even fantasized about being there on a date someday, which actually had not happened yet.

The decision was also influenced by the fact that Lucy knew Kieran was working there, although she did not mention this to Rodney.

In preparation for the date, Lucy actually took some care to think about what she was going to wear, and to put on some makeup.

At that time in her life, Lucy was not typically very concerned about what she looked like. She hated her chopped-off hair because she thought she looked like a little boy. She also had the scabs on her face from picking at it so much, not to mention the way her bones jutted out all over her body from all of the weight she lost.

As a result, her typical outfit consisted of jeans with a belt she had to keep hammering a nail through to create new notches to hold them up, and a baggy shirt so that the bunched up waist of the belted jeans was not too noticeable.

Hiking boots were her shoes of choice, and the entire ensemble looked terrible. Not only did she look like a little boy, she looked like a very sick little boy. Lucy considered she probably looked thin, and her face probably looked a little gross with the scabs, but she really just did not think about it too much.

There was never any problem getting the attention of the guys around her, so what did she have to worry about? Rodney was pleased with her efforts for their date, though. She was wearing jeans that were only slightly too big (she found them at a thrift store), and a long-sleeved leotard type of shirt that some guy shoplifted from the mall and gave to her once he figured out he had no use for it. She tied a scarf, gypsy-style, around her scraggly hair, and put on mascara and lipstick.

She tried to find a compact of compressed powder to use as a foundation, which was her practice in high school, but she could not find one that was light enough for her very pale skin, and so the mascara and lipstick was all the makeup she wore.

She did not want to wear her hiking boots with this outfit, as they made her feet look huge and completely out of proportion to the rest of her very slight body that was being revealed by the close-fitting clothes. She found an old pair of ballet-slipper type shoes she just about wore through years before but never wanted to part with, and she finished off her outfit with these.

She, too, was pleased enough with the end product of her efforts, and feeling kind of pretty, looked forward to being in public, a rare sensation for her.

She and Rodney arrived at the restaurant just after the dinner rush, but still a couple of hours before it closed. This was very early in the day for them to be out, so it all seemed kind of surreal to Lucy. After they arrived and ordered, Lucy asked their server if Kieran still worked there, and then felt her heart skip a little

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when the server told her that yes, he did, and yes, he was working at that moment.

Lucy asked the server to let Kieran know she was there, and then explained to Rodney that Kieran was a friend from high school. After she assured him that she never dated Kieran or had sex with him and that he really was just a friend, Rodney seemed okay with the situation.

As Lucy sighed with relief about that, Kieran came into her line of vision. She saw him see her, and was startled at his initial reaction to the sight of her. His face was pensive, and then upon seeing and recognizing her quickly flashed into a sort of disturbed-type expression, and then realizing she saw him, too, he gave her a smile.

Lucy saw that his smile did not nearly reach his eyes, but he was such a welcome sight to her that she felt her heart warm all the same. She had forgotten how beautiful he was, and how happy his smile could make her feel.

Kieran had not forgotten how beautiful Lucy was, but was shocked at the physical transformation of her. She seemed very fragile and tragic, and he did not quite know how to act, so he simply kept smiling.

Kieran came to the side of their table, and Lucy looked up at him and said hello and introduced him to Rodney. Kieran looked at Rodney, and then back at Lucy, and then back at Rodney, and told him it was nice to meet him, although it was very clear to Lucy that Kieran did not think it was nice at all.

She was stung by his blatant disapproval of whom she was with, and chose to ignore both his disapproval and her hurt feelings, instead pushing forward with quite an awkward conversation.

Kieran made very short, very superficial small talk, then declared his need to get back to work. He gave

Lucy a strange smile out of the corner of his mouth, and turned and walked back into the kitchen.

Lucy faced Rodney, expecting a negative evaluation of Kieran's obvious cold shoulder, but Rodney did not seem to have noticed anything unusual. He made no comment at all about Kieran, and instead began talking once more about the girl who refused to go out on a date with him, and how now he was with someone who would.

Lucy was not interested in hearing this again and was very thrown by the strange interchange with Kieran. She forced herself to focus instead on Rodney and their date. After the meal, Lucy headed for the restroom, and once she was out of sight of Rodney, Kieran caught up with her. He put his hand on her shoulder to get her attention, and she turned to face him. He looked angry, and Lucy felt her hackles rise.

Kieran asked her what she was doing with Rodney, and why would she be with someone who was so obviously an ass. This was a very good question and one that Lucy avoided thinking about on a daily basis since she started hooking up with Rodney. She did not want to think about the true reasons she was with him, and tried to create some semblance of a real relationship with him, but Rodney made it very difficult, because he was so obviously an ass.

When Kieran confronted Lucy with this very sensitive subject, she became defensive, and instead of addressing his question about Rodney, asked him why he was acting like an ass when she first saw him. She pointed out that she had not seen him in a while (not for Kieran's lack of trying to keep in touch with her), and was looking forward to seeing him, and that she was pissed off at how he treated her and Rodney.

Kieran stepped back and looked at her like people do when they think they recognize someone, but it turns

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out to be someone else. Confused, surprised, and taken aback. Lucy, tears burning behind her eyes, turned and walked out of the restaurant, completely forgetting about the fact that she was in the middle of a date.

And that was the last time she saw or spoke to Kieran.

Nearly two years passed since then, and so much happened since then that Lucy truly felt like it was a different life and she a different person living it. Lucy felt such a longing to hear Kieran's voice, to have some contact with him, that it completely overwhelmed the pain of their last meeting. She finally made the decision to contact him, and set about planning how that was going to happen.

She waited until the next evening when Rodney was at work and she was alone with Joseph in the apartment. She strapped Joseph into his high chair, and loaded the tray with Cheerios. She then angled the high chair toward the living area so that she could keep an eye on him in case he started choking.

Then she straightened up the living area so that it was neat as a pin. Then she ran the vacuum, and re-straightened up. All of this only took about seven minutes because Lucy always kept the apartment immaculate, and the living area was only about eight by twelve feet.

So, with Joseph still preoccupied, and without having anything available to assist her in avoiding making the call, Lucy sat on the floor in the middle of the room and pulled the phone off the table and set it in front of her. She took a deep breath, took note of the shaking in her hands, and dialed the number to Kieran's parents' house, a number she would probably remember for the rest of her life because of the number of times she called it over the years of their acquaintance, and then deep friendship.

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Lucy did not know if Kieran still lived at home or not, but she felt it was a good start, and planned to ask for his current number if he was not living there anymore. She dialed all but the last number, and then thought that she might need something to write on if Kieran did not live there anymore, and she would need to get his new contact information.

So she hung the phone back up, and went to her bedside table upon which she kept a notepad of smooth, thick paper and a fine-point marker, the utensil with which she always insisted upon writing (the thick paper was so that the ink did not bleed through).

Lucy brought the notepad and marker back out to the living room, glanced at Joseph to make sure he did not choke on a Cheerio and turn purple during the three seconds she was out of the room (he did not), and sat back down on the floor in front of the phone.

Then she again dialed, and this time when she got to the last number, it occurred to her that perhaps Kieran's parents changed their number, or moved away, or hated her or something. This thought prevented her from touching the last number for about ten seconds, and then her old adage popped into her head and out of her mouth.

"Fuck it." She went to dial the last number just as Joseph said in his beautiful, innocent baby voice,

"Fuck it."

Lucy was shocked. Joseph's vocabulary so far only consisted of "uh oh," "da da," and "ma ma." Now here was his very first sentence, and it was "fuck it." Joseph apparently loved how his voice sounded forming that magnificent phrase, and so he began repeating it in his babbling way.

"Fuck it fuck it fuckitfuckitfuckitfuckit."

Lucy hung up the phone, looked over at him, and said, "Fire truck. Fire truck."

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Joseph was not buying it, and repeated his new phrase again, this time followed by a high-pitched shriek and a bubbly baby giggle. Lucy sighed and decided Joseph's vocabulary – and her own - could wait.

She picked up the phone again, and finally got through the entire number with her shaky and now sweaty hands.

After the third ring, just as she was about to chicken out and hang up, Kieran's stepmother answered the phone. Lucy said hello and asked if she could speak with Kieran. His stepmother told her he did not live there anymore, and asked if she could take a message.

When Lucy said who she was, she was very surprised at the kindness in Kieran's stepmother's tone. She always sounded very annoyed whenever Lucy called years before, but this of course could have been due to the fact that Lucy was only one of a number of females calling that house throughout the day and night during that period of time.

The stepmother and Lucy had a brief, pleasant conversation, during which Lucy learned that Kieran and his brother – her other old friend – Malcolm, moved into an apartment in Atlanta, and that they were both working nights at different restaurants in midtown. Kieran's stepmother learned that Lucy had in fact gotten knocked up, gotten married, and had a baby (she heard rumors, but that was different from hearing it directly from the horse's mouth).

Then Lucy asked for Kieran's number.

As his stepmother gave her the number, Lucy wrote it down with her fine-point marker onto one of the smooth thick sheets of paper in her notepad.

After saying a pleasant good bye, Lucy looked at the number, and then carefully wrote Kieran's name above it in large, clear letters. Then she thought about the fact that she was married, and added Malcolm's name

above the number, so that it was less obvious (to whom, she did not know) that she was primarily interested in contacting Kieran. Malcolm's name up there made it seem more as if she was contacting "old friends" instead of "a guy she used to know."

Contacting "a guy she used to know" was exactly what she was doing, but whenever Rodney talked about hanging out with "a girl he used to know," Lucy became jealous and wondered about his fidelity. She never pursued her wonderings, as she was pretty sure he cheated on her a great deal, and did not want a confirmation or a denial of her hunch.

If Lucy was honest with herself, she would have realized she did not really care what he did as long as he left her alone. Nevertheless, Lucy was not at all comfortable with the idea of cheating on her husband, and really had no intention of doing any such thing. But still, it made her feel better to think of contacting Kieran as "getting in touch with some old friends."

At this point, Lucy was feeling increasingly anxious, and also a little nauseous. She was very, very nervous, because she knew for sure that she was going to be calling a number that definitely led to Kieran. Rather than steep in her nerves, though, she just plowed through and dialed the number. As it rang, she sat up on her knees and white-knuckled the phone, pressing it hard onto her ear, all the while unaware of anything but the ringing.

When Kieran answered the phone, her stomach did a little flip, and then fell down. She was thinking that the chances of him answering were slim to none, as it was evening and he was most likely at work. But he was not at work. He was at home. At home, answering the phone. And saying hello again, because Lucy was so shocked at the sound of his real live voice that she did not say anything.

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When she realized she was just sitting there silently, Lucy breathed out a short, “hey!” She could not really think of anything else to say, her main goal being to just keep him from hanging up until she could get her mind straight enough to have a conversation with him. But he knew it was her right away.

She knew he knew it was her, because he responded to her, “hey,” with, “Lucy?”

Once she confirmed it was indeed her (she said, “yeah”), Kieran laughed a little bit and asked her what was going on. He asked her about the baby, and the being married, and all of the same things he heard going around that his stepmother already confirmed with her.

Lucy thought he sounded happy about her baby, but not so much about the marriage to the ass he met the last time he saw her. Lucy let this slide, which was easy, because he did not comment much on that aspect, just gave a little, “huh,” when she told him she was still married.

And she was so, so happy to hear his voice. So happy to hear it that she told him how happy she was to hear it, but then felt self-conscious because it was quite a spontaneous and emotional statement.

He laughed and said he was happy to hear from her, too. Lucy believed him, although she could also hear a bit of strain behind his words. She did not blame him at all, and was in fact quite relieved he was willing to speak to her at all.

After their initial catch-up conversation, Lucy, reflecting on the last time they spoke, made another spontaneous and emotional statement, this time in the form of an apology to him for how she behaved. She was not only surprised that she just blurted this out, but also by the way tears leaped out of her eyes from the shame and the relief of saying she was sorry and the joy of being in touch with him.

Kieran paused, and sighed, and listened to Lucy's attempt to stop crying by holding her breath, and he pictured her face doing this, and he told her he was sorry, too.

It was at this time that Joseph started to get fidgety in his high chair, and started calling out "fuck it" again, having figured out quickly that his mother would respond quite dramatically to this new trick.

Kieran heard him in the background, and asked Lucy for clarification of what Joseph was saying. Lucy told him that, yes, her baby was gleefully spouting profanity. She also told him that she was trying to convince Joseph to say "fire truck" instead, and how it was not working out so far.

Kieran really enjoyed this scenario. When he first heard that Lucy was having a baby, he had a difficult time picturing the angriest, most foul-mouthed female he ever met being maternal, especially after the state in which he last saw her.

But when he heard her little boy's foul mouth, and the exasperated, yet gentle and loving, tone with which she tried to alter his wording, Kieran felt a peace about the whole thing. Well, still not the married-to-the-asshole thing, but at least the Lucy-being-a-mom-thing.

After talking for about thirty minutes, Kieran remembered that he was supposed to be meeting some friends, and that he was late in doing so. Before hanging up, though, he asked Lucy if she would like to bring Joseph up to see the apartment and hang out with him some time.

Lucy certainly would like that, and told Kieran so. He suggested late the next morning, which would give them plenty of time to spend together before he had to go to work, and Lucy readily agreed.

She thought very briefly about the fact that she was scheduled to work, but also knew she would not have

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any problem getting someone to fill in her shift for her, as people were always looking to get more hours. She also knew her manager would not have any problem with this, as she had never before done such a thing.

Considering this, Lucy thought of the times Rodney asked her to call in sick to work so she could stay with Joseph, and she refused every time. The only times he asked her to do this were on the occasions in which he stayed out most of the night before, and wanted to sleep all day.

Lucy was aware of the fact that she did not work at the Pentagon, and that lives did not depend upon her job, but it still really pissed her off when Rodney wanted her to blow off her job so that he could sleep off whatever the hell he was doing the night before.

Rodney always said he was working late, but Lucy knew this was not true. When he first started staying out far past the time he usually came home from work, she was worried that he got arrested or died or something, and she called the restaurant where he worked.

No one answered, and Lucy knew this was because no one was there. Rodney, however, insisted that no one could hear the phone because they were all working hard.

Lucy could not imagine what hard work needed to be done in a suburban family restaurant at 2:30 in the morning in the middle of the week, and told Rodney this on a number of occasions. She also told him it was very obvious to her when he came home stoned, but he stood behind his work excuse and denied his drug use to the point that Lucy thought he actually believed his own lies.

She was more offended that he believed her to be that stupid than she was by the fact that he was out partying all night.

Perhaps if he was more straightforward about his illegal and immoral activities Lucy would have found more confidence to leave him, and more determination to make it on her own with Joseph. Perhaps this is why he maintained his innocence, because it left a sliver of hope for her to hang on to.

Regardless, he lied, Lucy did not believe him, and the world kept turning.

Lucy did not have any intention of telling Rodney what she was really going to be doing the next morning, but she knew he would be so glad to have most of the day to sleep without the interruption of his hungry little son insisting on attention that he would not really care what she was doing anyway.

And so Lucy made her plans with Kieran, and she was full of joy and nerves at the thought of seeing him again.

And she did not even feel guilty when she thought about the fact that the only way she was going to be able to make this visit was because of the car her husband just recently bought as a present for her.

The next morning, Lucy, having easily made the arrangements to get her shift at the store covered, enjoyed the couple of extra hours of sleep, but still woke early and eagerly at the thought of her excursion into the big city.

In addition to seeing Kieran, Lucy was very excited about going into Atlanta. She loved Atlanta, and when Kieran's stepmother first told her he was living there, Lucy felt a dull thud of envy. Arbortown was only forty miles south of the city, but it was a different world entirely – a world Lucy had been trying to escape for her entire life.

Her envy of Kieran's escape to Atlanta was very quickly overcome by the gratitude for having a place to visit there, and besides, Lucy could not be envious of

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Kieran's fortune for long, because it meant he was happy. This of course made Lucy happy, since he was, after all, an "old friend."

So, with visions of Kieran and Atlanta's skyline in her head, Lucy jumped out of bed and began preparing for the day.

Her first order of business was waking Rodney up and telling him she was not going into work. She also wanted to get him off the couch, still his usual sleeping place, so she could have plenty of room to move around while getting Joseph up and ready to go. By the time she was able to wake him, he was very pissy about it. He asked why she was not going into work, and she told him an old friend of hers invited her out to lunch in Atlanta.

Rodney griped about the money she would be spending on gas, but once she assured him her friend would be paying for the lunch and that she was taking Joseph with her, he happily went back to sleep in their bed.

With Rodney out of the way, Lucy hurried to shower and dress before Joseph woke up. She took extra care shaving her legs, and was pleased that she did not nick herself one single time, a feat she hardly ever accomplished. She spent extra time washing and conditioning her hair, and in scrubbing her face. As she rinsed the soap from her face, she felt the smooth skin of her cheeks and jaw, and thought back to the mess her face was the last time she saw Kieran.

Lucy stepped out of the shower to dry off. As the steam cleared from the mirror, she found herself examining her naked body once again. She had not done so since very soon after Joseph was born - she was horrified by the lax, stretched out skin that was left behind, and the way she still looked pregnant. Her response at that time was to get a pair of Rodney's jeans and immediately tuck her extra skin and belly into them,

wincing through the pain of her cesarean incision, the tight denim material forming a stout girdle.

After that, Lucy never wore anything but jeans, even in the summer time. The very idea of putting on a bathing suit for the purpose of tanning or anything else shook Lucy to the core.

She had really not adjusted well to the changes pregnancy brought to her body. Looking at herself now, though, she was relieved to see that her belly definitely did not appear pregnant, but was disturbed still by that extra skin, especially the part that hung down over the scar in her abdomen.

Looking at her breasts, Lucy was finally okay with the fact that she actually had some. As a teenager, she was so self-conscious about her chest's defiance at sprouting any sort of breasts at all, and although it involved stretch marks and a hell of a lot of getting used to, Lucy was glad that at least now she had herself some boobs.

The stretch marks there were the first to appear when she got pregnant, but faded enormously, unlike those around her belly, bottom and thighs. Once she was able to purchase a heavy-duty support bra to put them in, Lucy's breasts looked great under her not-too-tight-but-definitely-not-baggy t-shirts.

They probably would have looked even better in a blouse that did not circle her neck, but it never occurred to Lucy to dress in such a way. Not that she had the money to do so even if it did occur to her. But she was comfortable in her jeans that fit snugly and her t-shirts that covered enough of her to not feel self-conscious, but not so much that she looked like a little boy.

The fact that she let her hair grow out long again also detracted from the little-boy look.

Lucy was not thrilled about her hair, but she was very relieved that it was long again. The humidity of the

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south curled it up into frizzy ringlets that Lucy hated, as her idea of perfect hair was straight and smooth. She took to wearing it in braided pigtails, and this is how she went ahead and fixed it after she got dressed. She also went the extra step and put on her basics of mascara and lipstick.

Stepping back to view the end result of these efforts, Lucy was very pleased. She did not in any way have any notion of how she could make herself look better, but was solely concerned with avoiding looking worse. She had certain standards, mostly involving covering up as much of her body as possible, and she met these standards in order to feel comfortable. When she felt comfortable, she was able to relax a little.

On this day, she felt a step above comfortable with how she looked, which border-lined on “kind of pretty.” This made Lucy happy, and more excited about seeing Kieran.

Her memory of his initial reaction to her appearance the last time she saw him stuck tightly at the front of her mind, and she was confident that now she at least did not look like a strung-out junkie.

After she finished getting herself ready, she went to wake up Joseph. She gave him breakfast, got him bathed and dressed in his cutest outfit, and then set him down to play with his toys while she packed up what she would need for the day, which was a lot of stuff.

Lucy thought of how a trip like this even across the street would have been impossible on her bike, and took a moment to again be thankful for her car. Thinking of her car – the one Rodney got for her - Lucy started to have a little flash of guilt about being not-quite-honest with him, but that passed pretty quickly.

She loaded up the car with all of Joseph’s gear, and then Lucy locked up the apartment, buckled Joseph into his car seat, and they were on their way. Lucy was even excited about the trek up to the city, as she was still

not beyond the novelty of driving again, and Joseph made a fantastic travelling companion. As long as he was full and had a clean diaper, he was amazingly content. Lucy got a string of toys that attached across the car seat and dangled above his head, and he babbled and played with the toys all the way into the city.

One of Lucy's favorite things in the whole world was approaching the city of Atlanta from the south on the interstate.

After passing the airport, I-85 merged with I-75 to form one giant gap of road, and not far after that, the tail end of a curve revealed a nearly unobstructed view of the city where Lucy was born. The anticipation and the traffic and the time it spent getting there and all of the other inconvenient and uncomfortable things that went along with that trip were all well worth that unveiling of buildings and activity and life.

It was especially wonderful at night, with all of the lights everywhere, but it was still spectacular during the day, especially on that day, which was a clear, cool fall day, and so the smog was not hazing everything up.

As she drove into the city's belly and took the exit for Kieran's apartment, Lucy felt like an adventurer and racecar driver all rolled into one, which was pretty much how most people felt when driving in Atlanta. Not everyone enjoyed that sensation, but Lucy was not one of those people – she loved it, although she took extra care to be alert since she had Joseph in the car with her.

Kieran and Malcolm got an apartment in the Little 5 Points area of Atlanta, which made Lucy especially envious, as she always loved that neighborhood. It was where the freaks were: unique shops and restaurants and bars, and more piercings and tattoos and black hair dye than any place else in the entire state combined.

Lucy was about fourteen years old the first time she went there, and it scared the shit out of her. But at the

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same time, she felt a sense of liberation she had not experienced before, and as she returned again and again, this evolved into a feeling of acceptance in the little community of nonconformity that was Little 5 Points.

Re-entering the neighborhood for the first time in almost two years, Lucy was thrown back to those happier, more innocent times, when simply being among all of those intensely searching people was enough of a high to get her through days at a time. Very little had changed in the area in the past couple of years, and Lucy was glad for that.

She drove slowly, looking at the different places of business, remembering herself and her friends and imagining what they must have looked like wandering around the square as very young adults.

This led to Lucy's reflecting once again on how long ago that all seemed, and how much changed in her life, and she kept driving.

She found Kieran's apartment relatively easily – she only needed to turn around once – and pulled into the little lot next to the building. She felt very nervous, and her hands were sweaty, and she was shaking a little bit, and she felt like she was breathing funny and that she might throw up, but she got out of the car anyway.

She opened the back door to get Joseph out of his seat, and he was happy in his curiosity about this brand new and foreign part of his world, turning his head back and forth over her shoulder, trying to see and take in everything at once.

Lucy planted him on her hip and swung around to get the diaper bag. She paused to sort out what she needed to bring with her right away, and what would be okay to leave in the car, and she was having a hard time making decisions. Finally she just decided Joseph and the diaper bag would be enough for now, as those were the essentials. She closed the door and turned to lock it up,

and saw Kieran coming down a flight of stairs, and she startled and dropped her keys.

She met his eye and smiled sheepishly at him, then hoisted Joseph up a little more on her hip in order to balance him there as she bent down to retrieve her keys. This she was attempting to do before Kieran got to the car, so she would be able to see him full on before he got to where they were, but she did not succeed, because he was not that far away. When she swung back up with her keys, there he was.

Right there in front of her, looking as though he was there all her life.

He had his beautiful smile fully radiating from his face, and even though they both felt awkward, and could tell the other felt awkward, Lucy could not keep the smile from breaking out on her own face.

“Hello.” Kieran did a tiny wave and leaned in to see Lucy’s baby, Joseph, better in her arms.

“Hey.” As soon as Lucy uttered this response, Joseph leaned out of her arms towards Kieran, reaching for him.

Kieran and Lucy both laughed, and Kieran took Joseph from her and held him out away from her so they could each get a good look at the other, then Kieran sat Joseph on his own hip, and they made their acquaintances.

Lucy went to open the car again, because now that she had both of her arms and hands to herself, she could carry in the rest of Joseph’s baby stuff without any trouble. She unloaded everything from the car, and followed Kieran up to his apartment.

Once inside, Lucy looked around to take in the small living area that became the kitchen on the other side of the room, and there at the dining table, she was surprised to see Malcolm eating a bowl of cereal.

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She was so focused on seeing Kieran again that she completely forgot he lived with Malcolm. Lucy once more broke out into a big grin and told Malcolm hey and asked how he was doing. He looked almost the same, too, but a little more grown up, or maybe just more hardened, than the last time she saw him.

He smiled back at her and stood to give her a big squeeze hug, and said he was good, but that he had to leave right away because he was working a lunch shift that day and was running late. He took a moment to check out Joseph, who was very interested in Malcolm, as well, and they exchanged pleasantries. Lucy felt a thrill of pride shoot through her heart at the warm and approving reception her son, still on Kieran's hip, was getting from the brothers.

Malcolm headed for the door and tossed a goodbye at Lucy, saying maybe next time he could hang out longer. Lucy told him goodbye, and turned back to examine the apartment some more.

It was a really great place, a dividend of a large old house that was split up into individual apartments. There were dark hardwood floors, and giant windows with a built-in window seat running under them. The décor was the eclectic collection of second and third-hand furniture, with some skateboarding posters on the walls for accent.

About halfway between the kitchen section and living section, a little hallway led straight back to a full bathroom, with a bedroom off to either side. Lucy asked if she could use the bathroom. Of course Kieran said she could, and that he would be okay with Joseph for a few minutes, and Lucy went in and closed the door behind her.

She really, really liked the apartment, and was feeling that envy again, but she was also feeling a little overwhelmed at seeing Kieran and Malcolm. At various

times throughout her life, Lucy felt as though she were watching herself in a movie, and even had songs in her head to serve as the soundtrack.

This was not one of those times. It was, rather, the exact opposite. The old, charming tile work in the bathroom, and the rust stains below the spout of the tub were very real, and she felt very present where she was; she felt safe.

Lucy took care of her business in the bathroom, and as she was drying her hands on a towel hanging from a hook on the back of the door, she heard Joseph on the other side, slapping it and saying, “Mum mum mum,” which is how he summoned her.

She opened the door carefully so he would not fall, and as she looked around the door and down at him, he looked up at her and laughed and smiled, thrilled to see her again.

Lucy laughed with delight at the little creature who loved her so, and bent to pick him up for a smooch on his chubby neck, and at the same time, to inhale his clean baby smell. After her mini-reunion with Joseph, she looked up at Kieran, who was staring at her.

She smiled at him, and again said, “Hey.” Kieran did his little wave again, and they shined their smiles on each other.

After a moment, Lucy walked back toward the front door, where she dumped all of Joseph’s paraphernalia, and retrieved the diaper bag. She took the bag and carried Joseph over to the couch, where she sat down with him on her lap.

Lucy took out a few of Joseph’s toys and some animal crackers, and set him down so that he was standing by the coffee table, using it to steady himself. He began to grasp the crackers, and after shoving a few in his mouth, ignored the toys Lucy took out and began to toddle around and explore the apartment.

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He quickly found a bucket of golf balls in a corner, plopped his diapered bottom down, and proceeded to have a great time dumping them out onto the floor and then putting them all back in the bucket again.

Lucy asked Kieran what he and Malcolm were doing with all of those golf balls, and he explained that Malcolm worked at a golf club back in Arbortown, and acquired a few golf balls during each shift, and so began a collection. There was really no definite purpose for them, but they were good for random entertainment, as Joseph clearly found out.

After assuring the golf balls were clean enough for Joseph to be putting his hands all over, Lucy went back to the couch and sat down.

Kieran offered her something to drink, and when she said she would like some coffee, he started a fresh pot in the kitchen. They spent the next two hours chatting and catching up and laughing and interacting with Joseph. Kieran was enamored with the baby, as Lucy felt everyone in their right mind would be, and he played very sweetly with him, hopping around making crazy whooping noises that Joseph found hysterically funny.

Lucy had not laughed so much in a long time.

When Joseph began rubbing his eyes and pulling on his ears, Lucy fixed his bottle, changed him into a dry diaper, and set him in his portable bouncy seat, which was among the cache of baby things she brought along. Joseph, content to bounce and drink his bottle, drifted off to sleep within minutes. Kieran put together some sandwiches for lunch, and he and Lucy sat at the dining table and ate companionably.

After they ate, Lucy got up from the table and went to stand before the magnificent windows overlooking the street below. Kieran walked up from behind her and stood very closely to her, though did not

touch her at all. Lucy, feeling warmth leaping from his body to hers, leaned back into him, and took his hand behind her back, remaining faced away from him. He hooked his chin over her shoulder and rested his cheek on hers. They stood this way for a long time.

Lucy stood holding Kieran's hand and looking out the window, and except for the tears dropping silently from her eyes, was very, very still. Kieran asked softly if she was okay, and she did not respond, because she really did not know.

He waited a moment, then moved away from her, retrieved a box of tissues, and placed them on the window seat in front of her. Then he sat next to them, looking up at her. She smiled at him, then sat down on the other side of the box of tissues.

Kieran asked her how married life was, and Lucy told him it was fine. Lucy was not lying; she really believed her married life was fine. What she did not realize, though, was how much her definition of "fine" changed and warped to fit her situation.

Kieran told her his stepmother read about Rodney in the local paper following his recent arrests. Lucy responded by stating that Rodney got eight years of probation, and that she did not really know much more about it, because the whole thing pissed her off so much that she did not like even thinking about it.

The disposition of Rodney's criminal charges was a surprise to Lucy. He got an attorney, although she did not know how he paid for it. Well, that was not exactly true, because she had a good idea of how he paid for it – the same way he paid for their cars - but it was just one more situation that was easier to ignore than confront. Regardless of how it happened, Rodney managed to avoid any jail time by accepting a plea deal that consisted of the probation and a large fine.

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Lucy did not attend court with him, insisting that she needed to stay with Joseph instead, and Rodney was irritated that she was not supportive of him. Lucy did not quite know how to respond to that, and so did not.

In the end, it did not matter, because it all got resolved in a way that allowed her to continue her daily routines without interruption, and at that point in their relationship, this was all Lucy was concerned about.

Lucy went into her marriage with very vague ideas of what it would be like, but knew one thing for sure, and that was that marriage was hard, and if people were going to stay together, they had to work at it. It was this reasoning that allowed Lucy to remain in her marriage to Rodney, lumping the abuse and jail and overall disharmony into the category of typical marital difficulty.

She made a very grand assumption that Rodney tried just as hard as she did to stay together, and that they would be, well, fine.

After she ran all of this over with Kieran, Lucy looked at him and gave a little shrug. As he was about to respond, though, his phone rang. He got up and answered it, and Lucy watched as he lowered his head and his voice and turned his back to her and took a few steps away.

The conversation was short, and after Kieran hung up the phone, he returned to his place on the window seat and told Lucy it was his girlfriend.

Lucy felt a sick stab in her stomach at the word “girlfriend,” and it took her a moment to respond with a short, “Oh.”

She did not know why she felt so hateful, but she did. Even though Lucy had no idea who Kieran’s girlfriend could be, she hated her. A lot.

Joseph, having been woken by the phone ringing, began to cry. Lucy stepped over to him and picked him

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up out of his seat. She comforted him, changed his diaper again, and fixed him another bottle for the ride home.

Kieran helped her gather all of the baby stuff, and then carried it all out to her car. Lucy, with Joseph back on her hip, unlocked the car and opened the door to get him buckled into his car seat. As she climbed back out of the car and stood to face Kieran again, she smiled at him, and told him it was really good to see him.

He told her the same, and then she got into her car, and with Kieran standing in her rearview mirror, began the drive back to her husband.

CHAPTER FOUR

After Lucy's reunion with Kieran, she could not quite get back into her usual routine of getting through each day. She had a very hard time getting to sleep at night, and an even harder time waking up in the morning.

She began to dread leaving the apartment for any reason, although once she was out she felt okay for a little while, but it was always a relief to get back there. She began to be late for her shifts at the store because she kept getting caught up with little tasks right before she left for work.

These tasks were not urgent, and on some level Lucy knew that it was not imperative to accomplish these things at that moment, especially when she just needed to get out the door and get to work. But accomplishing these minor actions – folding a load of laundry, finding a particular t-shirt, scrubbing a pan, fixing her hair a certain way – became very, very important to her in the minutes before she was supposed to leave the apartment.

Diane never complained about covering Lucy's shifts, but began to stare thoughtfully at Lucy for very uncomfortable lengths of time without really seeming to be aware she was doing it. To make matters worse, her manager was beginning to ask questions about why, after almost two years of showing up on time to every shift for which she was scheduled, she began getting there late.

Lucy knew the manager was concerned, but that concern was quickly turning to frustration, as Lucy was never able to answer that question. How could she when she did not know the answer? As a result, though, Lucy began to get more and more resentful about going into work.

This led to her job decreasing on her list of priorities, and as this happened, the cleanliness of the apartment began to increase in importance.

Although Lucy became less afraid of the possibility that her son would be poisoned by invisible germs, as his first birthday drew near, she began to become more obsessive about cleanliness than ever. She imagined microscopic monsters crawling on every surface of the apartment, and spent a huge amount of her time scrubbing and disinfecting every inch and corner of her family's living space.

She had an especially difficult time caring for Rodney's possessions, and with the areas of the apartment in which he spent most of his time, namely the couch and the bathroom. She began to wash his clothes separately from hers, and was only comfortable with the cleanliness of them if she washed them in scalding hot water and with bleach.

Not surprisingly, Rodney's wardrobe began to suffer terribly, and he was not happy about having nothing he could wear that was not bleach-stained or shrunken.

Lucy did not care about his complaints, and told him if he had a problem with how she did the laundry, he could do his own. Rodney did start doing his own laundry, and after he washed a load of his clothes, Lucy would run the washer without any clothes in it on the hot cycle and with bleach before she would wash anything else.

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She also began spraying down the shower and tub with bleach after Rodney showered, and all of this contact with bleach began to make her hands burn and blister a bit.

There was also a problem with the fumes from the bleach, and since she used bleach so often, she began to keep all of the windows in the apartment open to keep the fumes cleared out. Since it was beginning to get chilly outside, she kept the heat jacked up so that she and Joseph would be warm.

In addition to all of the scrubbing and washing, Lucy vacuumed at least once a day. Joseph was not very comfortable with the noise of the vacuum, but he was content if Lucy held him on her hip while she sucked up all of the miniscule debris on the carpets throughout their small abode.

Keeping up the house in such a manner was exhausting, and Lucy's back and neck ached constantly. This did absolutely nothing to rekindle her diminishing desire to go to work, and she began to call in sick for her shifts.

Within a month, this practice escalated to about two or three times per week, and when her manager hired a new person to work at the station, Lucy knew she was about to get fired, so she quit.

As she previously alienated herself from her high school friends, Lucy successfully cut herself off from the people she befriended at her job. Diane made quite an effort at keeping Lucy from isolating herself so severely, but Diane's persistence was no match for Lucy's neurotic preoccupations, and she too eventually stopped trying.

Lucy now had her entire days free to scrub the house and care for Joseph. She also had no real reason to leave the apartment, and she would go days – occasionally even more than a week - at a time in which

she only stepped foot out the door to go the ten or so yards to the mailbox.

She would leave the grocery shopping until there was literally nothing to eat in the apartment, though this was how those cans of mystery foods at the back of the cabinets were finally consumed.

When she did go grocery shopping, she would buy as much food as she could afford on the meager budget now consisting only of Rodney's paycheck. He recently began to insist on depositing his paycheck himself, and while Lucy was suspicious about this, was relieved to not have to leave the apartment to go to the bank.

Leaving at all became a tremendous ordeal for her, and whenever she did leave, she was usually wearing an oversized sweatshirt and pajama bottoms. She did, however, put real shoes on – Lucy was not going to be one of those people who wore slippers to the grocery store.

As much time as she spent keeping the apartment and Joseph clean, Lucy left little time or energy for her own personal hygiene or grooming. She only showered when she could no longer tolerate her own smell, and felt as though she had a crust growing on her face and scalp. It was difficult for Lucy to feel very clean for very long, but as with leaving the apartment, tending to her own personal needs was a tremendous effort.

There was no bother with make-up, because she could not afford to buy any, and her hair was always wrapped into as tight of a knot as she could manage at the base of her neck, so that while it got very long, no one could tell. Lucy really did not care.

She failed to notice how thin she was and how pale her skin became, as she again took to avoiding mirrors. The over-sized sweatshirts and the pajama pants with their elastic waists allowed Lucy to prolong her

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oblivion over her diminishing waistline and declining physical appearance.

Her relationship with Rodney, at this point, consisted primarily of asking him for money.

She knew he had it coming in from different sources than his legitimate job, and she could just barely make his paycheck spread over their rent, utilities, food, and general basic household items. Although Lucy's isolation removed the cost of going anywhere or doing anything or seeing anyone, she desperately needed ways to preoccupy her mind when Joseph was content on his own or asleep, and when there was absolutely nothing else she could clean.

She read and re-read every book she owned at least three times. She had a very worn deck of cards with which she played hour after hour of solitaire. Other than that, she needed at least a few dollars here and there to help maintain her oblivion.

She took to crossword puzzles, the kind that came in booklet form with newsprint pages. When she was able to swing an extra few bucks from Rodney, she used it to purchase as many of the crossword books as possible, and then spent hours and hours filling in all of the blanks on each page.

She quickly figured out that all of the puzzles had primarily the same clues and answers, but in different orders, and so she could fly through one of the puzzles in a matter of minutes. She would complete a booklet of puzzles within a day or two, and was always hungry for more. She had no interest in the more difficult puzzles, for it was not as much about challenging her mind as it was about keeping it preoccupied.

It would have been much easier for Lucy if she had any desire to simply watch television, but she found that when she became caught up in the daily and weekly program schedules, she did nothing at all but sit around

and watch TV. The couple of times Lucy went through one of these constant TV-watching marathons, Rodney got upset with how messy the house became.

Because Lucy was not working at a paying job, she felt horribly guilty about sitting around and doing nothing all day, other than keeping Joseph clean and fed. Her shame of this was so great that from then on she refused to watch any television at all.

And so it still went, until the week of Joseph's first birthday. Joseph was going to have a little family party at her parents' house. While Lucy was excited about her child's first birthday, she was not looking forward to spending any time with her parents. Her self-imposed isolation did nothing to improve her relationship with her mother, who out of concern began to call Lucy on a regular basis and quiz her on what, if any, activity Lucy participated in.

Lucy's mother also began each of these phone calls with a status update on Joseph, demanding to know where he was and what he was doing at the exact time of her call. Lucy, having very quickly tired of this third-degree about the care of her own child, began to answer her mother's questions by describing dangerous, imaginary scenarios.

Her mother did not think it was amusing when Lucy would casually state that Joseph was in the bathtub by himself with the water running, or playing at the top of the stairs in his walker (they did not even have any stairs, and Joseph had long since outgrown his walker), or sticking metal forks into the electrical outlets.

Lucy, though, did not think what she viewed as her mother's overbearing paranoia about Joseph's safety as funny, either. Lucy's resentment toward her mother was building and building, and because they both had the inability to work this sort of thing out through

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constructive communication, there was no dissipating of the tension.

Lucy did give in, though, to her mother's request to host the get-together for Joseph's birthday.

Lucy felt bad about the fact that she did not have any friends to invite over to celebrate the birth of the most important person in her life, and Rodney seemed rather indifferent to any sort of celebration beyond sticking Joseph's face into a cupcake with a single candle smoking out from the icing. She also felt obligated to allow her parents to experience their grandchild's major life events, even if she was anxious about it. She had not seen or spoken to her father since the day Joseph was born, and even that was a very superficial interchange.

Lucy and her mother set the date and time for Joseph's birthday party. It was going to be on the Saturday before his actual birthday, and the festivities would consist of dinner at her parents' house, followed by cake and ice cream.

Lucy knew her mother purchased quite a few things for Joseph, because she called to consult Lucy before buying each one. While she was grateful that Joseph would lack for nothing as a result of her mother's indulgence, Lucy again felt bad that she was not able to provide all of these things for him on her own.

She did not wallow too much in those thoughts, though, because she gave Joseph all she had, and she was usually confident in that knowledge.

She really did, though, want to be able to get something for him for his birthday, at least one present that would be from his mother at his party. Although she knew that Joseph was pretty oblivious to the fact that he was turning one and that she could have easily purchased his gift right in front of him, Lucy wanted to be able to shop alone so that she could take her time to find something.

She had been squirreling away money for the past few months in preparation for his birthday, and since it was not a very large amount, she was anticipating having to shop carefully to find the right thing. Lucy usually did not mind having Joseph with her when she shopped because she only shopped at the grocery store, and since she became very familiar with where all of her usual products were, could get in and out very quickly.

The excursion she was going to take to find his birthday present, though, was going to likely involve numerous stops, and she did not want to have to be hauling him around, getting him into and out of his car seat over and over again.

She told Rodney about a month before that she was going to need him to stay with Joseph one morning so that she could accomplish her gift-buying. Although Rodney complained about her not bringing in any money, he had no problem with her being there to care for Joseph at all times.

He had come to take for granted the fact that he could stay out as long as he wanted in the evenings, and be able to sleep in the next morning. Lucy tried to insist that he still make an effort at helping her care for Joseph while he was home, but gave that up pretty quickly as the effort of prodding Rodney to do something he did not want to far outweighed the effort of just doing it herself.

Finding a present for Joseph's first birthday was important to Lucy, though, and so she was determined to get Rodney to give her this one morning to do her shopping. Although she knew she gave him plenty of notice by telling him about it a month ago and then reminding him about it every few days and on the night before, Lucy anticipated problems getting him to wake up when the time came.

On that morning, Lucy woke up and carried out her usual routine with Joseph, and then went to wake up

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Rodney so that she could take a shower and get ready to go out. Rodney, as usual, was asleep on the couch, and Lucy approached him, saying his name over and over and telling him to wake up, which produced absolutely no results. She leaned over, put her hand on his shoulder and started to shake him in addition to repeating his name – nothing.

Lucy began to get upset. She was already very anxious about going out, and Rodney's refusal to wake up was not only infuriating, but representative of his place in her and Joseph's lives. Once she got that thought into her head, she became even more upset and started hitting Rodney and yelling his name.

Joseph, still in his high chair with his breakfast, was not happy about the noise or the violence and began to whimper. Lucy went to settle him down, and then returned to her task of beating her husband, but much more subtly.

Rodney eventually gained consciousness, though in a very offended mood. He asked Lucy what the hell she was doing, and when she reminded him that he was supposed to watch Joseph that morning, Rodney grumbled and sat up on the couch.

Lucy sighed with relief, though she was still quite angry, and went to take a shower and get ready. Her anxiety by this point was manifesting itself in a violent shaking of her hands, and seeing them flutter like that made her even more anxious.

Lucy planned to have a nice, long shower in which she would take her time and shave her legs and relax and not worry about Joseph doing something that would result in his death.

Her showers usually involved setting Joseph up in his high chair in front of the television and putting cartoons on, and then running to get the water going, stripping quickly, and performing the minimum amount

of washing necessary, which did not include shaving anything. She would spend the entire time in the shower imagining Joseph rocking his high chair to the point that it toppled over and left him dangling with a broken arm; it did not matter to her that the high chair was designed to make toppling over pretty much impossible.

Needless to say, showering and relaxing were not two things Lucy usually did together. Actually, relaxing was not something to which Lucy was really prone at all, and so on this morning, she was looking forward to being able to try the relaxing thing out, and take her time showering without worrying about her baby's demise.

But she did not anticipate being so nervous about leaving, and the thought of even trying to shave her legs with her trembling hands brought to mind a scene containing so much blood that Lucy quickly decided her legs would just have to remain hairy.

Still determined to make an attempt at relaxing somewhat, Lucy ran the water as hot as she could tolerate, and did her usual shower routine. She had to keep reminding herself that she did not have to hurry, and when she realized that relaxing was going to be a lot of work and very stressful, gave up and went about things in her usual hurried mode.

Once she got out of the shower, Lucy could not seem to get dry. She felt like her body was oozing sweat from every orifice, as if she was in a sauna. Even after moving from the steam-filled bathroom into her bedroom, Lucy could not seem to dry off, and after a few minutes gave that up as well.

As a result, dressing was a little difficult with all of the tugging and re-adjusting she was having to do as the moisture on her body clung to her clothes. She also planned to blow dry her hair and put on makeup, but could not bear even the idea of the heat of the hair dryer, and her face was too sweaty for makeup.

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In the end, Lucy had to settle for the fact that she was wearing regular daytime clothes, and would at least be going out without having to worry about people whispering behind her back for wearing pajamas out in public.

As Lucy came out of her room and re-entered the living area, she was very irritated to find Rodney slumped back over on the couch, again fast asleep. She looked over at Joseph, who had taken his food and juice and made a sticky, swampy mess on his high chair tray.

Lucy sighed and cleaned up the mess. She changed Joseph into clean, dry clothes, and then strapped him back into his highchair in front of the television. He was not happy about being returned to his restrained state, but calmed down and entered into a kind of trance when Lucy found a pre-school show on public television.

She went back to her bedroom and took the pillows from the bed, then laid them out around the high chair so that Joseph would at least have a softer landing in the still probably impossible event he rocked his high chair over.

Lucy then went toward the door, but turned back to check and see if she left the coffee maker on. When she thought about the fact that she knew the coffee pot was not on because she unplugged it after her second cup of coffee, as she did every day, Lucy sighed, then took a deep breath, and left the apartment, careful to lock the door behind her.

As usual, once Lucy got out of the apartment, she felt a little better and after about half an hour even stopped shaking and sweating. She drove to a shopping complex the next town over, in which there were at least five stores that sold possible birthday presents for Joseph, and thought about how much she again missed driving, but did not allow herself to evaluate what was causing her to miss it.

If Lucy was capable of contemplating any solutions to her problems, she may have been equipped to consider what a disaster her life was.

She did not know of anyone to whom she could reach out, though, and even if she did, her pride would have prevented it anyway. So at that time, Lucy did not make any attempt to dismantle her self-denial. Instead, she shopped for a birthday present for her son. She was surprised at how much of a selection she had, and was very pleased to have been able to make several purchases with her small allotment.

After completing her shopping, Lucy had a little money left over and decided to treat herself to an expensive cup of coffee. She loaded her bags into the back of the car and then walked the short distance to the coffee shop. She got her coffee and then sat at one of the outdoor tables and did absolutely nothing at all.

It was a strange yet comforting sensation to be able to have a little chunk of time in which no one knew where she was or what she was doing, or to have any goals to accomplish, or expectations to meet.

As Lucy enjoyed the beautiful fall morning, she imagined what it would be like to get into her car and just drive to the ocean and never come back. The thought of leaving Joseph stabbed her heart, and so she amended her daydream to include him. He was, after all, a good travelling companion. She could fill up her car with as much of their stuff as possible and just go somewhere no one knew them and where they had no obligations.

She imagined having a credit card and using it to fund her runaway trip, or even better, finding Rodney's money stash.

She knew there was one somewhere – he never kept his illegitimate earnings in a bank, instead choosing some hiding place in which he kept his wads of cash. Lucy knew this from her days as a junkie, when he was

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her drug dealer, and when he allowed her to know such things, probably because he did not think she would have the balls to steal from him.

He was mostly right – she did steal from him, but only a little bump of speed here and there, and this was mostly because she did not want him to know just how much speed she was putting up her nose. She really did not want to know that herself.

But those days were gone, and this day was here.

The thought of finding Rodney's stash and taking it and Joseph and finally getting out of that town gave Lucy a thrill down to the tips of her toes and made her head float a little above her body for a second.

It was at that moment she realized she hated her husband. In fact, he made her feel just like her father did – like she was nothing but a commodity to make his life both convenient and sadistically entertaining.

She had not thought of this likeness between her father and husband since that day at the doctor's office when they all went to find out she was having a boy, and the hard realization that she married someone just like her father made Lucy's stomach churn over, and she abandoned her coffee and ran to the bathroom because she really thought she was going to be sick.

She did not puke, but she still did not feel good at all. She took a little time in the privacy of the bathroom of the coffee place to wet a towel with cold water and press it to the back of her neck, just as that nurse did to soothe Lucy's hysteria before Joseph was born.

Once she was feeling a little more stable, Lucy looked at herself in the mirror and contemplated what it meant to be who she was.

She thought of her life, and of her decisions, and when she tried to compare what her life was like now with what her dreams and expectations as a child were, she discovered that as a child her only dream and

expectation was to have the ability to be as far away from her father as possible. It occurred to her that she only lived a few miles from the home she was dreaming of escaping for almost her entire life, and her stomach churned again.

This time, though, instead of getting that faint, unstable feeling, something in her hardened, and she felt a sense of calm and power that she had not felt in a very long time. She looked again at her reflection, and saw an angry bulldozer of a young woman looking back at her.

Lucy decided that she would, indeed, find Rodney's stash and take her baby and get the hell out of hell.

She returned to her apartment to find Rodney back asleep on the couch, and Joseph whining in his highchair, banging an empty bottle on the tray and sitting in a soaking wet diaper. As Lucy comforted, bathed, and redressed her little son, she went back over her initial plan on getting out of there, and wondered why she had not thought of it sooner.

For the next few days, Lucy was very preoccupied with how she was going to go about her escape with Rodney's money. The getting out of town was not going to be difficult, as Rodney was gone almost all night long almost every night, allowing Lucy plenty of time to pack up and go.

She had not found his stash yet, but felt confident it was somewhere in the apartment. She knew he would not carry that much cash on his person or in his car in case he was arrested again and the money was found. She also knew that he would keep it close to him, and that he still maintained his naïve belief that Lucy would not have the balls to steal from him or to leave him.

Why should he think any differently? Had Lucy not been living under his thumb for over two years now,

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putting up with his abuse? Whenever Lucy thought of how foolish and cowardly she was, she took comfort in the fact that she would not be able to pull off what she was about to do if she did not first live those years with Rodney the way that she did.

And so she figured she could easily find the money, and assuming there would be at least a few thousand dollars in cash, estimated she would have enough to get to Charleston, South Carolina, and set up her new life. She planned to pay the deposit and first month's rent on an apartment, get Joseph into a daycare, find a job, and within a short time be earning her own money and still have enough of Rodney's money left over to put away for a rainy day.

Lucy chose Charleston for two reasons. One was that it was by the ocean, and the other was that it did not get very cold there, at least not cold enough to snow. She saw pictures of the old, southern town in one of the books she perused that first day she had her car when she took Joseph to the bookstore.

Charleston looked like a fairytale place to live.

Lucy felt confident about getting away as far and fast enough that Rodney would not have a chance of finding them. She believed he would be upset about her taking Joseph from him, but she knew he would be incensed about her stealing his money and would make every effort to get it back.

Lucy was not concerned about him contacting any authorities to report his drug money stolen, though, and she planned to leave a very concise note for him at the apartment to avoid being reported as missing. Lucy also decided she would put a letter in the mail to her parents on her way out of town letting them know she was fine and that she got out of there and to please not try to find her because she never wanted to come back.

Lucy determined the night of Joseph's birthday party would be a good time to go. It would give her a chance to say good-bye to her parents, even if they did not know that was what she was doing, and also give them one last time with their grandchild.

Lucy had not yet decided if she was going to contact her mother after she left, but knew if she did, it would not be anytime soon. She was a little distressed about taking Joseph away from the only family he ever knew, especially his father, but she also knew the people in that family cared more about their own comfort and pleasure than about her or Joseph.

On the afternoon of Joseph's birthday party, Lucy was beginning to become concerned because she was having a harder time than anticipated finding the money. She waited until that day to look for it because she did not want Rodney to see any sign that his stash was disturbed or detected.

He told her that he was going to work the dinner rush at the restaurant, and then leave to meet her at her parents' house for their own dinner and Joseph's party, and then return to work. He was already gone a couple of hours, and Lucy was getting antsy.

She told her mother that she would come over a little early to help her get dinner ready, or at least to help set up, as she was otherwise worthless in the kitchen. She knew her mother also wanted some time with Joseph before she was too preoccupied with the festivities to be able to pay much attention to him.

Lucy was okay with this arrangement at the time, but regretted agreeing to going over there early when she realized she would need more time to find the money.

After another hour of searching, Lucy figured she would have to give up for the time being to get ready to

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go to her parents' house. She would search some more after the party when Rodney would be back at work.

Lucy packed up the usual load of baby necessities for Joseph, and then got him into the car and took him over to see her mother. When they pulled into the driveway, her mother came out to meet them and brought Joseph into the house so that Lucy could unload the car.

Once everything was settled, Lucy and her mother began a surprisingly pleasant visit that primarily consisted of catching up on Joseph's latest achievements, and comparing them to the timeline within which Lucy accomplished the same feats when she was a baby. After playing for a time with Joseph, Lucy's mother finished preparing dinner, and Lucy got Joseph into the high chair her mother kept there and helped to set up the meal.

Then they waited for each of their husbands to arrive, as they were due at the house any moment.

After a half hour went by, Lucy's mother became alarmed. Lucy became angry. Lucy's father had a habit of disappearing now and then for a few days or so without informing anyone of his plans or his whereabouts. Every time he did this, Lucy's mother would worry that he was killed, or kidnapped, or subjected to some other condition that would explain why he was precluded from coming home or contacting her.

As a young child, Lucy was caught up in her mother's panic, and also imagined that her father was dead or dying or being tortured. Each time her father disappeared, she and her mother were both terrified, unable to cope, and sat around in fear until her father walked in the door two or three nights later wanting to know why dinner was not waiting for him on the table.

He would not acknowledge his wife's or daughter's concerns except to criticize them for overreacting to such an extent. He would not

acknowledge at all any inquiry into his activities and whereabouts for the time he was gone.

As Lucy got older and saw this song and dance about two or three times a year, she became very jaded about the whole thing. She tried her best to comfort her mother, and to reassure her that he would be back, but as the years passed she began to find it more and more difficult to muster up the energy to support her mother during these times of pseudo crises.

When her father did not arrive home for Joseph's birthday party, Lucy naturally assumed he went on another of his mystery getaways. Although Lucy really tried hard not to expect anything at all from him, she was upset that he would do such a thing on her son's birthday.

She also began to wonder where the hell her own husband was.

At first Lucy assumed he got caught up at work, and after an hour passed since he was supposed to be there, too, she called the restaurant to see what was going on. This was not something she did often, if ever at all, but this was their child's first birthday party, and therefore called for more aggressive measures.

When Lucy asked for Rodney, the manager came to the phone and told her that Rodney had not worked there for several months. Lucy, after a stunned pause, thanked him and hung up the phone.

She stood, shocked, next to the phone for a few minutes before turning to go back into the living room where her mother was watching the evening news and playing with Joseph. By that time they had gone ahead and given Joseph his dinner, but were still holding out on the cake and ice cream in the hopes that the husbands would arrive.

Lucy's mother was sitting on the floor of the living room with Joseph, and stared in alarm when she saw Lucy's face.

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Lucy told her mother what she learned from Rodney's former employer.

Lucy's mother asked no one in particular what Rodney was doing during the whole time he was supposed to be at work.

And then the news anchor answered that question by urgently reporting a breaking story about two men who were busted in a prostitution and drug ring based in Arbotown, an upscale suburb south of Atlanta.

Lucy's father and husband appeared on the screen, both men attempting to shield their faces, but finding it very difficult given their hands were cuffed behind their backs as they were being led into the county jail.

Lucy looked at her mother, and her mother looked at her, and they both looked at Joseph (who was not in the least bit concerned), and then at the television, and then back at each other, and then at the phone as it began to ring.

Lucy and her mother fielded phone calls for about an hour before Lucy's father was able to get through via a collect call from the county jail. The phone calls were a mixture of press, to whom the standard response was, "no comment," and a hang up, and of friends and family, to whom the standard response was, "we don't know what's going on and we have to keep the line open if they (the husbands) try to call here," and a hang up.

Most of the calls were from the press.

When Lucy's mother got a call from a national news organization, she issued her standard response and hung up the phone, but then began to make a weird humming noise which she did not stop until she had a bottle of wine before her on the counter and a full glass to her lips.

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Although Lucy was also terribly anxious and worried, she did not want a drink because she was going to have to drive home with Joseph in the car. She had not had a drink since before she was pregnant, and felt her tolerance for alcohol was probably quite low.

She considered for a moment that she could remain at her mother's for the night, but quickly turned from that notion as she imagined the two of them killing the bottle of wine, then a few more bottles from her mother's pantry, and then pulling a teary and slobbering all-nighter dodging calls from the press.

And so while Lucy's mother was pounding a glass of wine in the face of adversity, the phone rang yet again, and this time Lucy answered it.

It was the collect call from the jail they were expecting. Lucy accepted the charges, and then handed the phone to her mother. Her mother was mostly silent with the occasional, "yes, yes I understand," thrown in, and after about two minutes of this hung up the phone.

Her mother did not give her any details, but instead looked at Lucy and told her that her father said she should go to her own apartment because Rodney had been trying to get a hold of her there for the past hour. Although Lucy's mother did not convey any anger in transmitting this message, Lucy felt the ire behind her father's words, and she immediately felt defensive.

She did not know what else to do, though, and so followed his instructions.

Lucy packed up Joseph, and leaving her mother safe and sound with a disconnected phone and a fresh bottle of wine, got in her car and went home. As she got close to the door with Joseph on her hip, Lucy could hear the phone ringing from inside. She knew it was Rodney, because their phone number was not listed, and aside from the usual official places, like the bank and utility

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company, the only person Lucy knew who had the number was her mother.

Lucy got Joseph inside, put his pajamas on, and propped him up to sit on the couch by her to drink his bedtime bottle. She waited until he was content before answering the phone, which continued to ring the entire time.

As Lucy accepted the charges for the collect phone call from the jail, she wondered how expensive it was going to be and thought of what her next phone bill would look like. Then she realized she did not care, because she would be gone by the time that bill arrived.

Rodney, practically spitting into the phone, asked her where she had been. Lucy told him she was at her mother's house, where he should have been instead of out snorting coke and exploiting women.

Rodney chose to ignore that comment, instead telling her that he needed her to move some of his things for him. Lucy asked what kind of things, but Rodney only said that the phone was probably bugged. He told her to go into their bedroom, move his bedside table, and pull up the carpet from the corner of the wall.

Then he gave her an attorney's name to call, and he hung up the phone.

Lucy hung up her end of the line, and then waited for Joseph to finish his bottle. Once he was done, she sat him up on her lap, patting him on the back until a few burps popped out, then hugging him close to her and sniffing his baby smell, gave him kisses and put him down for the night.

Joseph, as usual, watched her turn on his night light, and then close the door behind her. Lucy heard him begin his nighttime babbling session, which she knew would be followed by a good solid nine to eleven hours of sleep.

As she reflected on her fortune of having such a well-mannered and content baby, Lucy went to check that the front door was bolted shut. Then she turned out all of the lights, and looked out the window through a slit in the cheap plastic blinds.

She did not know what she was looking for, but after she did not see it, went back to her room and turned the light on there. There was only one window in the bedroom, and Rodney covered it with a dark curtain immediately upon moving in. Lucy assumed it was so that the sun would not wake him as he slept all day, but now realized it was probably much more likely that this action stemmed from paranoia.

Lucy, now having a much better idea of what her husband was doing, felt that his paranoia was warranted. She, too, was feeling paranoid, and checked that the curtain was in place, then closed her bedroom door, turned to Rodney's bedside table, and wondered how fast the cops would be here if that phone conversation was in fact bugged.

Lucy began to shake at that thought, and as she watched her hands tremble, it occurred to her that she did not have any problem leaving the apartment or being out of it since she planned to leave Rodney. She took this as validation that leaving Rodney was the right thing to do, especially since he was now the cause of her hands shaking once again.

Lucy moved the small table enough to allow space for her to comfortably fit behind it and to pull up the carpet, which was easily accomplished when she grabbed a tuft of it at the corner and tugged. A hole, about one by two feet and crudely cut out of the subflooring, became immediately visible. Lucy backed up a little and folded back the loose chunk of carpet and tucked it under her knees.

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She leaned forward over the hole, in which a large, battered shoebox was sitting. She pulled the lid off the shoebox and saw about a dozen tightly packed zip lock baggies. They were each filled to capacity with Rodney's favorite substance in the whole world, which of course, was cocaine.

It took the cops until seven the next morning to finally show up. Lucy had not slept, although she tried. She did not think Rodney would be calling back, but took the phone off the hook anyway.

After removing the shoebox and placing it on the kitchen table, Lucy determined that if the cops did not show up there by the time Joseph woke up, she would call them herself to come get it. For the time being, though, Lucy wished to have a bit of quiet for herself and her son before their home was turned upside down in the likely event of a police search.

Lucy did not like having the drugs in her home, so close to her baby, and so close to her own nose. She never really liked cocaine, but that did not mean she did not do any. She was clean for almost two years, and she did not want to start using again, but even more importantly, knew that she would not start using again for the simple reason that her son deserved a mother much better than that.

However, Lucy's certainty in her ability to not start using again began to wane, and she felt sharp anxiety pains in her chest at the very clear fact that she could start using again at that very moment.

It was all very stressful, and on top of that Lucy kept imagining SWAT officers storming her apartment with guns drawn, scaring the shit out her and her baby and throwing them both to the floor while they tore everything apart. She thought that probably would not happen, but could not know for sure as she had no idea

how these things happened in real life, or whether or not her husband did anything to warrant such an assault.

Lucy decided she would rather be close to Joseph if any type of raid happened, and so she brought her pillow and blanket into his room, trying to be very quiet so he would not wake up, and lay down on the floor alongside his crib, spending the whole night staring at the shadows cast by his nightlight onto the wall.

At the first signs of the morning sun, Lucy finally gave up her attempts to sleep, and quietly left Joseph's room. After visiting the bathroom, Lucy started some coffee and got a bowl of cereal and sat on the couch to eat.

She usually sat at the dining table to eat, but it still had the big box of cocaine on it, which significantly diminished her appetite, and Lucy knew she would need the energy from her cereal to get her through the morning, which was why she was eating it while sitting on the couch.

After she finished her cereal, Lucy thought of taking a shower before waking Joseph up, but did not want to be naked with her baby unattended should the cops bust down the door. She instead just did the basics of personal hygiene, and once she changed into clean clothes, she went to wake up the baby.

She got him changed and started on his morning bottle when the knock she was waiting for – hoping for, actually, rather than the door being kicked in – came.

Even though the police knocked instead of barging in, they also shouted, “POLICE! WE HAVE A WARRANT!”

This alarmed Lucy, and so she held Joseph protectively and yelled out that she had her baby with her and she was coming out. She opened the door slowly, and one of the officers yelled at her to put the baby down and put her hands up, but Lucy froze at the idea of leaving her

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child unprotected and terrified on the floor while they grabbed her and patted her down.

The officer again yelled at her to put the baby down, and had his gun drawn and pointed into the air.

Just then, Lucy heard a woman's voice yelling to put the guns away, and although the guns remained drawn, the officers began to back off a little. Lucy just stood and continued to stare when she saw a very tall, very blond woman in plain clothes and a police jacket approach.

The officers reluctantly made a path for her.

She was a bombshell, but ridiculously thick eyeglasses diminished the effect of how striking she was. Lucy was looking nervously around at the gung-ho cops and their guns and then at the blond, and she knew her knees were going to crumple from fear at any moment.

The blond told her she would need to be searched for weapons, and Lucy nodded and put Joseph down on the floor, where he immediately started to whimper.

The blond asked Lucy to put her arms up and stand with her legs apart, and then did a quick and non-invasive pat down. Finding no weapons, the blond asked if she could pick up Joseph, and Lucy nodded her assent.

Joseph looked at his mother, and then back at the blond stranger who was lifting him from the floor. He did not give her one of his winning smiles, but did not start crying hysterically either. Mostly he just looked nervous, but curious.

The blond patted on Joseph's diapered bottom, and finding no contraband there, handed him back to Lucy.

She introduced herself as the lead detective on the case involving Lucy's husband and father. Her name was Detective Monroe, and she told Lucy they had a warrant to search the apartment. Lucy, feeling much better having figured out the blond, rather than the psycho cops she

first encountered, was in charge, immediately told her about Rodney's phone call the night before.

Lucy knew Rodney anticipated the search of the apartment and wanted her to hide the drugs somewhere outside of the building. However, Lucy was beyond giving a shit what Rodney wanted her to do, and felt much more comfortable aiding the investigation against him.

Perhaps if she did not have to ride her frigging bike the entire time she was pregnant she would have been more sympathetic to Rodney's immediate plight.

Lucy told Detective Monroe about the hiding spot and that the box of cocaine was on the kitchen table. After checking out the shoebox, Detective Monroe asked Lucy to sit in one of the kitchen chairs with Joseph while she and the other officers searched the apartment, and Lucy complied.

The officers swarmed in and began a restrained ransacking, and Detective Monroe went straight back to where Lucy said the hiding spot was. After a couple of minutes, the detective came back into the kitchen and asked Lucy if there was anything else stashed away in the floor.

Lucy looked her straight in the eye and said no. The detective crossed her arms and sighed, then began a staring contest with Lucy, and after about three minutes – which was a long time to have a staring contest with a cop, but Lucy passed it by trying to imagine what the detective looked like without her thick glasses – Detective Monroe told Lucy she thought there was probably something else in the hiding spot.

Lucy said no, there was nothing else, and then she said nothing else.

After finding nothing more of interest in the apartment, the officers retreated and Detective Monroe left her card and a very stern and emphatic direction to

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Lucy about contacting her immediately if she found anything or learned of any new information. Lucy, having set Joseph up in his high chair with some crackers, escorted Detective Monroe out, and after waving a little goodbye, closed the door, bolted it, and sank to the floor.

Lucy thought of her car, which was parked behind the next building over, and about the car key she hid in the wood chips under the front window of the apartment, and about the nineteen thousand, seven hundred thirty two dollars that were tucked into the spare tire in the compartment under the floor of the cargo area of her station wagon.

Lucy spent a very low-key morning with Joseph, and after she put him down for his nap, went into her own room and collapsed onto her bed and fell immediately to sleep. Joseph woke her a few hours later with his “mum mum mum,” pulling her reluctantly from her slumber.

Then she remembered the events of the morning and shot straight up out of bed, and went to see about Joseph.

As she changed him into a dry diaper and prepared lunch for them both, Lucy went over in her mind what she had done the night before.

After pulling the shoebox of cocaine out of the floor, Lucy got a flashlight and inspected the surrounding area, figuring this was where Rodney hid his cash as well.

She was right.

The money was lining the area a few inches inside the lip of the hole in the subflooring, and after Lucy made sure she got all of it, laid it out on the floor beside the bed and counted it. It took over an hour to get the final total.

Then she covered the hole back up and replaced the bedside table, and put the box of cocaine onto the kitchen table. She went back into her room and gathered

the cash, then put it in the bottom of a laundry basket and then filled the basket with dirty clothes.

She listened out for Joseph, and when she did not hear a peep from him, took the basket outside and locked the apartment door behind her. She put the basket into the back of her car, and then drove it behind the next building over, where there was less light from the streetlights.

She went around to the back of the car and took the money out of the dirty laundry and put it into the spare tire, then locked up the car and walked back to her apartment.

Once there, she removed her car key from the ring and hid it in the wood chips lining the ground in front of her apartment. Lucy accomplished these tasks as quickly and inconspicuously as possible, fighting not to look around to see if anyone was watching her.

She did not think there would be, since the complex in which they lived was pretty quiet, but there was no way to know about these things. She went back into her own apartment, and set about the task of trying to go to sleep.

The title to the station wagon was in Lucy's name, and when the police came in, Lucy was afraid they would already know that she had a car, and was very relieved when they did not ask about it.

When one of the cops was going through her purse, which was right in front of her on the kitchen table, she saw him pick up her key ring and inspect it. There were only three keys, which he asked her about: one was to the apartment, one was to their mailbox, and one was to her parents' house. She was certain he was going to ask about her car at that very time, but he just went on with his searching.

Thinking about it again was making it difficult for Lucy to eat her lunch, and she was happy to see that Joseph appeared to be completely oblivious to it all. Just

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then Lucy remembered that she had not plugged the phone back in, and for a split second was worried that Rodney would have been trying to get in touch with her.

Then she remembered that she did not care anymore what Rodney thought, and that he was in jail, and at least for the time being, could not do anything at all to her.

After a moment, though, she did go and plug in the phone jack and within twenty minutes it was ringing. Lucy answered and again accepted the charges for a collect call from the jail. Rodney again did not wait for her to say anything, but asked why the hell she was not answering the phone this time.

Lucy answered by telling him about the police coming to search the apartment that morning, and when Rodney asked if she moved his stuff for him, she told him that she did not.

This left Rodney silent for a moment, and then he asked what she did with it. She told him about giving the cocaine to the cops and showing them the hiding place. He sighed a very angry sigh and asked what she did with the other stuff.

She told him she did not know what he was talking about. Rodney began to describe how serious he was about her telling him what she did with the other stuff, meaning, of course, the money, and Lucy again told him she did not know what he was talking about, and when Rodney began to sputter obscenities that did not really form any sort of intelligible sentence, Lucy hung up the phone.

Before disconnecting it again, though, she called the leasing office and let them know that she would be moving out that afternoon. Because she was a very reliable and pleasant tenant, and because the property manager saw Rodney on the news and felt sorry for Lucy with her little baby, and because the property manager

did not yet know about the damage in the floor of the apartment, Lucy was able to immediately get out of her lease with only the loss of the initial deposit.

Lucy thanked the property manager, and then hung up the phone. She was about to disconnect it again, but then thought of her mother and wondered if she was okay.

Well, Lucy knew her mother was not okay, was never okay, but still wanted to see if her mother at least did not go completely insane with the stress and scandal of everything that was happening. However, when Lucy called her mother's number, she only got a busy signal, and realized either her mother disconnected her phone, or it was still ringing off the hook.

Lucy hung up her phone and finally disconnected it, then got Joseph settled in front of the television so that she could pack up their things. The first things she packed up were all of the sentimental things that could not be replaced, which consisted of her old pictures and yearbooks, and all of the keepsakes she accumulated in Joseph's short life. This all took up one small box.

Next, Lucy got her only suitcase out and packed up her favorite pieces of clothing and pairs of shoes. Since it was a big suitcase and Lucy had a very limited wardrobe, she still had two thirds of it left to pack up Joseph's clothes and some linens and other minor essentials.

Lucy again left Joseph in his highchair and went to retrieve her car. After she got back, she loaded the box and suitcase into the car, then loaded the travel playpen and bouncy seat and as much of Joseph's other toys and gadgets that she could fit. Then she gave Joseph an extra snack in his highchair and unhooked the TV and put that into the front seat.

After Joseph finished eating, she packed him into the car, too, and they left.

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Since Rodney was most likely not going to be able to come after her, Lucy's new plan was to find a different place to live close by, and then return for the rest of the stuff. She really was not particularly worried about any of the items left behind, though, especially since it was mostly old furniture she hated and all of Rodney's stuff.

She figured the more realistic scenario would be that the property managers would end up having to haul it all off, but felt that the spectacularly clean condition of the apartment would make up for the extra work she left them with.

Lucy headed over to her mother's house to check on her, and also contemplated staying there a few days as a base from which to find a new home. When she got there, she saw news vans parked in front of the house, and a bunch of people hanging out along the curb. There were also a large number of police officers milling about the entire property, and Lucy surmised that her parents' house was raided by this time as well.

She pulled up the driveway and honked the horn until her mother figured out who it was and opened the garage door.

Lucy pulled into the garage, and her mother closed the door, very effectively keeping Lucy and Joseph from having to be exposed to all of the reporters and cameras.

Joseph was already a little spooked by all of the activity, and Lucy was not interested in letting her baby be frightened by the aggressive practices the reporters already demonstrated by crowding her car on the street before she pulled into the driveway.

Lucy got Joseph out of the car and walked into the kitchen from the garage. Her mother disappeared after opening and closing the garage door for Lucy to get in. Lucy stepped around the disheveled house, marveling at

how much more damage the officers did here than back at her apartment, where not much was disturbed.

When she got to the living room, she saw her mother, hands on hips and very stern-looking, talking to Detective Monroe.

As Lucy approached the two of them, she was able to see beyond the room out to the screened-in porch, the floor of which was torn up. There were lengths of chain-sawed two by fours stacked off to one side, and all of the patio furniture was stacked quite carelessly off to another side. Lucy could see that there were officers removing objects from the floor, what appeared to be gray duffle bags.

Lucy thought of her father's cars over the years, how they were all gray four-door sedans. The interiors of the cars were always leather, and also always gray. The carpet in his office was gray, as was his office furniture. The boat she grew up skiing off was a two-toned gray with gray interior features.

Lucy imagined the gray duffle bags were somehow connected to her father, and the fact that they were hidden under the porch in his back yard further supported this conclusion.

Lucy, Joseph still on her hip, approached her mother and Detective Monroe, and threw the detective a little wave with her free hand. Lucy's mother stared at her, appalled, and asked if Lucy and the detective knew each other.

Lucy responded by telling her mother they met earlier that morning when her apartment was raided. Detective Monroe confirmed this, and told Lucy's mother that a pretty large quantity of cocaine was found there, but that it was believed to be Rodney's personal supply.

The detective suspected a much larger supply of cocaine was being hidden somewhere else, and her

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suspicious turned out to be accurate, as nearly a dozen of the gray duffle bags were filled with cocaine.

When Lucy heard this, her jaw dropped. She knew a little about dealing cocaine, as she was previously involved in that very pastime, but never came remotely close to seeing anything like the amount coming out of the dirt under the porch of her childhood home. She assumed the shoebox was the entire supply from which Rodney was selling, as she could also not imagine him having that large of an amount for his personal use.

Lucy wondered how Rodney did not get himself killed dealing drugs on this level. He was not a very shrewd businessman, and his sensitive ego often got in between him and common sense.

Of course, the shrewdness was apparently where her father came in to the picture. That made more sense. Lucy did not figure anything at all out about the whole prostitution thing, though, and asked Detective Monroe about that element of the case.

Lucy's mother produced a socially-suitable horrified expression upon hearing the word "prostitution," and gasped at Lucy. She then turned to the detective and waited expectantly for an answer as even her best attempt to remain calm and indifferent was no match for her curiosity.

Detective Monroe explained that the prostitution aspect of the organization was a more recent development, and was in fact the downfall of the women's husbands.

Apparently, Rodney and Lucy's father failed to take into account how seriously the upper-scale residents of Arbortown wished their fabricated hometown to remain a place of innocence for their families, and it did not take long for one of these concerned citizens to call in an anonymous tip. Beyond that, Detective Monroe told them she could not discuss the open investigation.

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At that moment, Joseph, having become agitated at his restricted movement in his mother's arms, threw his upper body back in an attempt to escape.

Lucy, used to his escapades, shifted to catch him, then told her mother she was going upstairs to let Joseph run around until things calmed down, and then thought that maybe she would not be allowed up there. Detective Monroe said they were finished with that area of the house, and Lucy told her thanks and goodbye, and went up to her parents' room where Joseph could watch his preschool shows on the giant television.

After about an hour of zoning out with Joseph, Lucy heard her mother come down the hallway. Lucy sat up and looked toward the door as her mother walked in and moved to sit near her on the bed. Joseph toddled over and got onto his grandmother's lap, and she smiled at him and began to cry. Joseph seemed to sense her distress, and he simply sat still, letting her hold him as she finally broke down. Lucy heaved a big sigh, retrieved a box of tissues for her mother, and sat back on the bed.

As she and her little son allowed her mother to cry, Lucy reflected on the fact that she was the connection between the two of them, between two generations, and she wondered how far she could stretch to hold on to both of them.

Lucy ended up staying with her mother for quite a long while. This turned out to be a pretty easy decision after she found out that a judge deemed her father a flight risk due to his international business connections and access to millions of dollars.

When Lucy heard about this, she was shocked to learn that her father had so much money at his disposal, but her mother told her it was not really true, that it was tied up in other things, and that the judge apparently refused to see it that way.

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As a result, her father would remain in the county jail until his trial, which could take as long as a year to come about. This did not really bother Lucy, and after about a week, saw that her father's absence or the fact that he was in prison did not really bother her mother, either. In fact, mother and daughter got along much better than they ever had before, and it was a kind of surreal calm before the storm they were anticipating with the upcoming trial.

Rodney was granted bail, but it was very high, and Lucy had no way to post it.

Well, Lucy had no way she was willing to post it. She contacted the attorney Rodney told her about, but he wanted a five thousand dollar retainer, and said that if the case went to trial, it could end up costing upwards of fifteen thousand dollars in attorney's fees. Lucy told Rodney she did not have any funds available to hire the attorney, and when he asked again what she did with the other stuff he hid in their old apartment, Lucy again told him she did not know what he was talking about.

Rodney knew Lucy was lying, and Lucy knew Rodney knew she was lying. However, Rodney could not do jack shit about it, and he and Lucy both knew this, too, and knew that the other knew it.

Lucy suggested that Rodney get a court-appointed attorney, and that is what ended up happening. Rodney, however, did not believe he would get the same caliber of representation with a court-appointed attorney as he would with an attorney who would be paid close to twenty thousand dollars to handle his case.

Lucy figured he was right, but still did not care.

The hell Lucy had gone through and Rodney's contribution to that hell hung heavily between them, about as heavy as nineteen thousand, seven hundred thirty two dollars.

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Lucy and her mother passed the winter months bonding and spending precious time with Joseph. Their husbands sat in jail while each of their attorneys worked out plea deals with the prosecution. Lucy's father's attorney was somehow able to get the evidence of the prostitution ring thrown out, but there was still the matter of having enough cocaine under the back porch to give the entire county a good little buzz.

The county in which Arbortown was located was known throughout the state for its extreme sentencing on drug charges, and about this even Lucy's father's highly paid attorney could do no better than to work out a prison term that would possibly allow her father to die a free man, if he lived to the age of ninety-three.

As a result of the evidence of the prostitution stuff getting thrown out, the charges against Rodney regarding that aspect of the case were also thrown out.

However, there was still the matter of the cocaine he hid in the apartment. Although it was actually his personal supply, the amount was considerably more than the state needed to prosecute him for possession with the intent to sell, a pretty serious offense.

There was not much room for his attorney to bargain an ideal plea agreement, especially in light of Rodney's prior record, and also especially since Lucy made it perfectly clear that she would voluntarily testify against her husband.

Again, the reputation that particular county had for harsh punishments on drug charges was not anything Rodney's attorney could get around, even if he was paid thousands of dollars.

Considering all of this, the appointed attorney managed to work out a deal in which Rodney would only have to serve a minimum of fifteen years of a much longer sentence. Rodney was getting off pretty lightly.

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The day after the sentencing hearing for Rodney and Lucy's father, during which they each pled guilty to a number of felonies, Lucy and her mother, both having already retained their own lawyers, filed for divorce from their respective husbands. It seemed that in the state of Georgia, conviction of a felony was grounds for divorce.

Lucy and her mother both liked those grounds, as did the judges presiding over their cases, and each of their divorces went through smoothly.

Lucy got full custody of Joseph in her divorce, and her mother got all of the marital and business assets in hers. And they both got to be single women again.

On the day Lucy's divorce was final, she left Joseph with her mother and went out for a drive. She drove to the picnic table where she first met Kieran, and sat there and wept with relief that her hellish marriage was over.

And then she wept with relief at finally acknowledging to herself how much she loved Kieran, and always did.

Following their divorces, Lucy and her mother began to plan for the future. Lucy's mother decided to sell the house and the business and move to Florida to live on the beach, something she always dreamed of doing. Lucy was happy to see her mother so free, but glad they got the time together without her father because she was going to miss her mother when she moved away.

Lucy decided to look for a place in Atlanta. The thought of living in the city became much more real to her after she visited Kieran at his apartment, and she felt her own newfound freedom warranted a step much grander than simply moving into another apartment in Arbortown.

Her mother inspired her by finally going after her dream, and since Lucy always dreamed of living in

Atlanta, which was certainly within the realm of possibility, she felt confident she would be able to do it. She was nervous about the idea of living with Joseph in the city, but kept reminding herself that many babies live in large cities all over the world, and she did not have anything to worry about.

Another reason Lucy decided to move to the city was because she knew Kieran still lived there. She did not tell her mother about this component of her motivation, mostly because she had such a hard time admitting it to herself. Although she and her mother had grown closer, Lucy did not feel quite comfortable sharing these feelings with her, and really wished she had someone to talk to about it all.

But she did not have anyone to talk to about it, and even if she did, Lucy still could not be sure she would tell anyone else about Kieran. She was worried that her moving to Atlanta would be viewed as being a little bit psycho if anyone knew a big part of her reason for doing it was to be close to a guy she was secretly in love with.

She also was really uncomfortable with the notion of making such a big life decision based on her feelings for a man. That kind of thinking about men thus far got her nothing but pain.

The whole Kieran factor was just so overwhelming and confusing that Lucy just stuck with the following-her-dream motivation for moving into the city. She still had the cash she took from Rodney's hiding place, and she did not touch it after putting it into a pink shoebox and up on a high shelf in a storage closet. Her mother assumed Lucy was penniless, and paid for everything.

Lucy tried telling her about the money once, but her mother simply pretended not to hear her. Lucy did not catch on to her mother's intentional oblivion right away,

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and repeated her spiel about the money three times before she finally figured out that her mom had no desire to have anything to do with it.

Lucy did not know if this was because her mother did not want to have knowledge of anything illegal, or if she just wanted to pay for everything so Lucy could keep her money for herself. Lucy thought it was probably a little bit of both.

She found her mother to be amazingly talented at not seeing what was right in front of her face, and knew that was how she stayed married to Lucy's father for so long, and how he was able to conduct all of his illegal business at the house without his wife's interference.

While Lucy always largely resented this aspect of her mother's personality, she had to admit she felt much more comfortable having the cash tucked away for the time when she would have to move out on her own with Joseph. Lucy was particularly comfortable with her mother paying for the attorney to handle her divorce, which cost thousands of dollars.

Lucy's mother said it was coming out of her father's pocket, and it was about time Lucy was getting anything good from him, even if he did not know about it. Lucy was definitely okay with that.

Her mother's willingness – desire, even – to rebel against Lucy's father was so liberating for Lucy that whenever she began to feel uncomfortable about the amount of money her mother was spending on her, went back to thinking of it coming out of her father's pocket, which quickly quelled her concerns. This reasoning was very similar, perhaps even identical, to that which she applied to the situation with Rodney's money, and she was able to calm her conscience fairly easily with that, too.

When the time came for Lucy to get her own place, she was in a very strong financial position to do

just that. She was not willing to tote around almost twenty thousand dollars in cash, though, and could not figure out how she could open a bank account without drawing suspicion. The answer to that dilemma came from Lucy's mother.

Lucy was sitting at her mother's dining table looking for apartments for rent in the Atlanta paper when her mother approached and sat down across from her. She looked at Lucy, and stated that she felt Lucy and Joseph should have some of the money from the sale of Lucy's father's business, and placed a cashier's check for twenty five thousand dollars on top of the newspaper Lucy was holding.

Lucy was aghast. There was no way she was going to take such a large amount of money from her mother, and began to protest vigorously. Her mother ignored her and asked if Lucy would mind leaving behind the pair of shoes in the pink shoebox that was on the top shelf of the storage closet.

As usually happened when her mother was playing mind tricks, Lucy did not immediately catch on, and simply sat at the table with her mouth gaping unattractively.

Lucy knew it was unattractive because her mother told her so, and then asked again about the pink shoebox while simultaneously tapping her finger on top of the cashier's check. The wheels in Lucy's brain started turning again, and it finally dawned on her what her mother was doing. She wanted to give Lucy the cashier's check in exchange for Rodney's cash so that Lucy could more easily go open a bank account and use the money.

She would also have a legitimate source from where the money originated. Lucy looked at her mother in surprise, and smiled. Then she frowned again and said that the shoes in her closet were only a size nineteen thousand, seven hundred thirty two. Lucy's mother rolled

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her eyes in exasperation, then said she would watch Joseph while Lucy went and opened a bank account.

Lucy did just that, and when the account executive at the bank asked her - in a purely conversational tone - where she got the money, she told him her mother just sold her business and left it at that. The executive left it at that, too. Lucy wondered if they tipped off the government or anything when a big account like that was opened, but knew that even if Detective Monroe found out about the account herself, there was no way to link her mother's cashier's check with the money only Lucy and Rodney (and, superficially, Lucy's mom) knew for sure existed.

Thinking of Rodney, Lucy wondered if he would retaliate against her by telling someone about the money he hid with the cocaine in their apartment, and that he believed Lucy stole it.

She wondered if his admitting to having the money would bring additional charges against him, and thought it might not, which really scared her because then he would have no reason to keep that information to himself. Then she remembered that she was not going to have Rodney's cash any more, only the money her mother purportedly gave her from the sale of the company, so that even if Rodney did try to cause any trouble over it there would be no way of proving anything.

Lucy then wondered if what she and her mother were doing was considered money laundering, and thought it probably was. Then she realized the bank guy was asking her to sign the documents to open the account, and Lucy apologized for her lack of attention and went back to focusing on the task at hand.

Everything went smoothly, and the funds cleared without any problem, and Lucy had her legitimate pile of

money with which she and her child could start a new life.

Once Lucy got back to her mother's house, which was already up for sale, she went to find her and Joseph.

Her mother was sitting at the piano with Joseph on her lap, holding one of his index fingers in each of her hands, and pressing them down on the keys. Joseph was having a wonderful time, his face emanating his excitement at this new magnificent trick. Lucy thought of how her mother did the same thing with her when she was a little girl, playing Chopsticks on the old organ they used to have.

Then Lucy remembered how, when she was about nine years old, she and her mother rented a van and took the seats out of it and drove it up to Ohio to get the piano on which Joseph was now banging and which her mother had growing up. Her mother's cousin or somebody was trying to get it from Lucy's grandmother, who told Lucy's mother to come get it if she wanted it.

So that is what they set out to do. However, upon returning to her childhood home, Lucy's mother found a few more items of furniture she wanted to bring back in addition to the piano.

After a lot of sweating and moving and rearranging, Lucy and her mother ended up fitting all of the loot into the van, but Lucy had to ride all the way home laying on top of the piano.

That was a long time to be laying on top of a piano. But it all turned out to be worth it since it meant Lucy could have that moment of seeing her son and her mother together playing it right then. Lucy's mother did not hear her come in over the noise of the piano, which Joseph began pounding freestyle, and Lucy walked over and said hello.

Her mother asked how it went at the bank, and Lucy told her it went just fine, and then put her arms

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around her mother's shoulder, giving her a kind of awkward side-hug, and told her thank you. Her mother pretended to ignore her, which Lucy did not realize until after she repeated her thank you three times.

With the large, now-spendable amount of money secure in her new bank account, Lucy felt more comfortable going about finding a place for her and Joseph. It was the night before she took her house-hunting trip to the city, and she was going over again in her mind what the next day would be like.

She was looking in the Atlanta paper every day, and arranged with several different landlords to inspect apartments. Her mother went to Florida to look at property for herself, and so Lucy was going to have to take Joseph with her apartment hunting. This was going to make for a much less convenient apartment search, but Lucy figured there were plenty of other single mothers who handled much more.

Lucy was just beginning to think of herself as a single mother. It did not even occur to her that she belonged in that category until a few days before when she was thinking about how she was going to have to find a daycare facility for Joseph once she got a job.

She was thinking that it was going to be a lot of work getting herself and Joseph ready every day, and then taking him to daycare, and then working all day, and then picking him back up and getting home and getting them both dinner and the list of daily tasks she was going to have to accomplish just went on and on. Lucy wondered how single mothers did it, and it was at that point she realized that she, too, was a single mother.

This made Lucy feel a little better, and though she did not know why, felt a boost of confidence whenever she thought of "plenty of other single mothers," and included herself among them. Having thus bolstered

herself up, Lucy now looked toward the apartment hunting excursion with Joseph as an adventure.

The next morning, Lucy awoke to the sound of Joseph's newly formed, "Mommy! Mommy! Mommy!" While it was exciting to hear her son's language develop, Lucy sometimes reminisced about less verbal times. The early mornings when she did not want to get out of bed, such as that particular morning, were usually when this reminiscing took place.

After she woke up a little, she imagined what her beautiful little boy must look like at that moment: she knew he was most likely standing up in his crib, hanging on to the railing, fresh faced and full of energy. Thinking of him in this way transformed her into looking forward to getting out of bed, which is what she did.

When she walked down the hall and into Joseph's room, he was pretty much as she imagined him, except that he was also looking expectantly toward the door.

When she opened it and walked in, he ceased his calling out and broke out into a huge, sunny grin. Lucy was once again struck by how much she loved this little creature. He reached his hands out for her and she went to him and took him out of the crib and down the stairs and into the kitchen to start another day.

As Lucy started a pot of coffee, she thought about how fortunate she was to be able to have all of this time to spend with her baby, and also to not have to be working. The past months in her childhood home without her father were peaceful and serene, and the reason behind his absence made it much easier for Lucy to just not think of him, and also to be able to have a relationship with her mother that was never before possible.

It was also a time in which she immersed herself in the reality that she was no longer married to Rodney.

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The divorce was painful and triumphant and liberating and humbling. It was painful because she really did not want to have ever gotten divorced. Her success in that ideal would have been much more likely to happen if she had not married Rodney, but still, when she made those vows, she meant them, and it was hard for her to have such solid expectations that were so wrong.

It was a very tough lesson, and she was already learning from it.

The triumph and liberation were both pretty self-explanatory. Lucy was trapped in a situation that was physically and mentally debilitating, and now that she was out of it and Rodney was going to be in prison until Joseph was an adult, Lucy felt a freedom she never before experienced.

Lucy was very aware, though, of how her own poor decisions got her into that marriage. She felt a lot of guilt about the fact that her complete lack of concern for herself also meant she had very little concern about anyone else, and that her selfishness resulted in her having a child with a person like Rodney.

She was tremendously grateful for Joseph and obviously knew that she would not have him had she not made those bad decisions, and about that she could come to no definitive conclusion. It simply was what it was, and for some reason, this was very, very humbling for Lucy.

She was a survivor, and she managed to be just that for her entire life. But in being a survivor, she was tied so closely to protecting her own wounds that she was not able to see one iota of the bigger picture. Now that she was given some breathing room, Lucy was able to look back at how bad things were, and to imagine how so much worse they could have gotten.

Lucy was also very humbled by the incredible opportunity she was given to start over. She was excited

about the future, something else she never before experienced, but she was also afraid of screwing everything up again. Her only solution to that fear was to just go ahead and move forward anyway, and just deal with whatever problems came up when they came up.

Feeling as though her feet were firmly planted in reality, Lucy finished her coffee and went about the morning in preparation for her first trip to Atlanta in almost a year.

She thought of contacting Kieran to see if he wanted to have lunch or something, but the thought of him answering the phone in the middle of languid afternoon sex with his girlfriend (Lucy still knew nothing about this girl) put a pretty quick stop to that idea.

After Lucy got Joseph and herself all cleaned up and ready to go, she loaded up the car and off they went.

She had four different apartments to look at, and she had hopes of using one of her brand new checks (they were printed on polka-dot patterns in alternating shades) to put down a deposit on one of them. She had no way of knowing how quickly her mother's house would sell, and as nice as it was to have that time there, she was anxious to be out of her childhood home.

She also did not want to have to make additional trips to Atlanta, because as fun as it was every now and then, the whole ordeal of packing up Joseph for a day of running around in and out of the car was really quite exhausting.

So Lucy kept her hopes up about taking care of everything on this one trip and drank in the first sight of the Atlanta skyline once again.

Seeing the city as she drove into it gave Lucy an unanticipated jolt of excitement about the fact that she was really, really doing what she dreamed of for years. She was getting the hell out of Arbortown and moving to

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the city in which she born, and which she not only loved, but felt loved her back.

Lucy followed the directions given to her by the property manager of the first apartment she would see that day.

She began to feel slightly disappointed as the directions took her farther and farther away from midtown, and out the east side of the city via Memorial Drive. This was not an area with which Lucy was familiar.

She arrived at the very large complex, and as she drove through it was immediately concerned with the number of young people roaming and lounging about in different groups, and how they all stood a little taller and stared intently at her as she drove by.

Lucy decided to err on the side of caution and assume that while there were probably plenty of good kids in the sporadic groups laid out about the complex, the sheer volume of them significantly increased the chances that there were some troublemakers out there.

Another factor was that Lucy, as a white person, was largely among the minority there, and this made her uncomfortable. She hated that she was even thinking along those lines, and felt she was being racist and ignorant, but while she would probably never say it out loud, she could not deny how out of place she felt.

Lucy drove through the rest of the complex and circled around to exit. She got back onto Memorial Drive and headed back into the city.

The next stop on her list was an old factory that was recently renovated into loft apartments on Ponce de Leon Avenue in midtown. Lucy's hopes climbed as she neared the building and quickly became enchanted.

She parked her car and got out, pleased at the fact the building shared a lot with a large grocery store, and imagined how convenient it would be for her to keep her

food stock up. She took Joseph's stroller from the back of the car and strapped him into it. He was getting very heavy to carry around, and since he was getting very adept at transporting himself independently, he ran around like a maniac every time she put him down to walk for himself.

Lucy gave thanks to the inventor of umbrella strollers every time she so easily restrained her child in one, and then just as easily maneuvered it about.

Lucy met the property manager in the front office, and the woman, who was about five years older than Lucy, looked her up and down, then smooshed her face into a terrible fake welcoming expression and asked Lucy to follow her to see one of the units. At first, the manager wanted to only show her units that were on the interior of the building, repeating over and over how much less expensive they were per month, but Lucy insisted on seeing one of the units that overlooked Ponce de Leon Avenue.

As soon as she walked into the corner unit, Lucy fell in love. The master bedroom was in the corner, and the two corner walls were compiled of huge factory windows, making the room very open and light. The second bedroom was along the front side of the building, and while it was also lovely had only one wall of windows. The living area was on the interior of the building, but the very high ceilings and smaller windows looking out toward the interior courtyard made the room just as charming as the bedrooms.

The kitchen and dining areas were along the side of the building and were walled on one side by the factory windows, as well. Lucy, being very hesitant to display her excitement, told the property manager that she was interested in renting that unit.

The property manager dropped her fake niceness, and looking Lucy up and down again, and then at Joseph

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in his stroller, said flat out that she did not think Lucy and the baby would fit in with the other tenants in the building.

Lucy was initially confused at what the property manager was saying, as she was already imagining what she would do with the space, but then felt as if she was slapped as the realization of what was happening hit her. Lucy knew her young age was very obvious and that her wardrobe of jeans and t-shirts did not exactly scream sophistication, but she did not anticipate such harsh judgment from the city in which she felt so comfortable.

Lucy fought the stupid tears welling up behind her eyes, and saying nothing at all, wheeled Joseph out of the unit, down the elevator and out the front door. She managed to get Joseph in his car seat and the stroller packed up and herself behind the wheel of her car with only the minimum number of drops escaping from her eyes, and left the lot.

Joseph began fussing almost immediately, and Lucy noticed that it was past time for his lunch. She pulled into a fast-food restaurant, parked, and brought Joseph in so they could sit down and eat. After she ordered, paid and got their food, Lucy juggled everything over to a table and arranged it all, then sighed into the seat.

After pretty effectively blocking how hurt she was by the scene at the loft, Lucy figured out she was very hungry, and she and Joseph had a pleasant and uneventful meal.

Having re-fueled, Lucy and Joseph continued their quest for a new home. The third apartment was in a really nice area near downtown, but the unit itself was very run down and smelled like mold. Lucy left there very quickly, highly concerned about the contamination to which she just exposed her toddler.

The fourth apartment was near Little Five Points, and was one of four units that were created by splitting up a big old Victorian house. Lucy was reminded of the place Kieran and his brother lived, and she really, really liked it from the outside, but it turned out that the second bedroom was actually a walk-in closet that could only be accessed from the real bedroom, and there were no washer and dryer hook ups.

Lucy thanked the last property manager, and still reeling a little from the loft bitch's treatment of her and her child, felt the last of the hope she started out with that morning puff out of her, and she went slowly back to her car to go home. She once again loaded Joseph back into the car, and as she pulled away from the curb, noticed that it was almost five in the afternoon, and became concerned about getting stuck in all of the traffic exiting the city.

Since she was kind of familiar with the area, Lucy decided to try and find an alternate route to get to the south side and back onto the interstate. She took a few turns and found herself back in midtown, in the Virginia-Highland area. Lucy heard about this section of the city, but was not familiar with it. She was pleasantly surprised at the character of the neighborhood, and amazed at the dozens and dozens of quaint little houses.

They varied in size and condition, some having been added on to and renovated and others still tiny but ridiculously cute bungalows. As Lucy meandered around on these fanciful streets and looked at all of the houses, she came upon a man hammering a for-rent sign into the ground at the edge of a postage-stamp yard. The house behind the yard was one of the older bungalows, and did not look as though it was recently renovated, but was still very charming.

Lucy pulled over, rolled down her window, and asked the man if he was the owner. The man, appearing

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to be in his early sixties, looked back at Lucy and said that he was. He told her he used to live there, but when the larger house next to them went up for sale, he bought it for himself and his wife and their growing family. Their kids were now grown, but they loved the space in the larger house and so continued living there while renting out the little bungalow next door.

He explained that the little house was currently empty because he waited to get another tenant until finishing some minor renovations, including pulling up the carpet and exposing and re-finishing the hardwood floors, replacing the major appliances, and redoing the one and a half bathrooms.

He asked Lucy if she would like to see the house, and she said yes and turned off her car and walked around back to take out the stroller for the fifth time that day. The man looked surprised and asked if there was a baby in the car. Lucy told him there was, then proceeded to procure a sleepy Joseph from his car seat, strapped him into the stroller, and presented him to the man, who made appropriately positive comments about Joseph. He asked if she was looking for a place for just the two of them, and she told him she was.

He then led Lucy into the house, leaving the front door open, and told her to take her time looking around, and that he would be back at his house next door, and to just let her know when she was done so that he could come back and lock up.

But Lucy, immediately interested in the little house, wanted to know how much the man was renting it out for. When he told her, she was a little shocked, as it was much more than the apartments she was looking at, but it was, after all, not an apartment but a house.

The man noticed her response to his rental price, and after hesitating for a moment, told her he would be willing to take off a couple of hundred dollars per month

if she wanted the place, seeing as it was just her and the baby.

Lucy thought of this, and of the amount of money she had in the bank, and surprised herself by asking the man if he would be willing to knock off another hundred per month if she paid for an entire year up front. The man looked startled, as Lucy definitely did not look as though she had the resources to do such a thing.

After mulling it over for a moment, the man said sure he would do that, but that he would need an extra month's rent as a deposit, and insisted that she take a look around before making any decisions. Lucy thanked him as he went back to his most recent dwelling, and noticing that Joseph was asleep in the stroller left him in the front room and did a walk-through of the house. She loved every aspect of it, and was delighted to see a screened-in porch off the kitchen at the back of the house, and a tiny little yard complete with a white picket fence.

Lucy laughed aloud at how much the house resembled something from a clichéd fairytale, and then mulled over her proposition about paying an entire year's rent up front. With a thirteenth month added on as the deposit, Lucy would still have over nine thousand dollars left from the cashier's check her mother gave her with which to furnish the house and cover utilities while she found a job.

Considering all of this, and thinking back a few years to when she was living in her car, Lucy made the decision to go ahead and rent the house. She wheeled the slumbering Joseph back outside and down the walkway to the sidewalk, then over to the house next door, and up that walkway. She eased the stroller up the few steps of the front porch, and knocked lightly on the man's door.

When he appeared, she officially introduced herself and told him she would like to go ahead and do the year-up-front rental. The man told her his name was

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Stan, that it was nice to meet her, and then went to get the papers for the lease. While she waited for Stan to return with the lease papers, Lucy sat on the porch swing and pulled out her brand new checkbook. She noticed how much she was shaking as she wrote out a larger amount than she ever imagined writing a check for.

Stan brought out the lease, went over the basics, and gave Lucy some time to look it over. It was a pretty standard lease, and Lucy signed off on it. She handed the check to Stan, who put on a pair of reading glasses that were tucked into his chest pocket, and when he saw the low check number in the top right hand corner, looked at Lucy over the top of his glasses. She grinned at him and asked when she could move in.

He grinned right back and told her he would let her know when the check cleared. Knowing this was not going to be a problem, Lucy thanked him, then loaded her sleeping baby into her car and happily spent the next hour and forty-five minutes battling the rush hour traffic back to Arbortown.

After a few weeks of travelling back and forth to Florida, Lucy's mother was also successful at finding a new home. It was a little condominium on the ocean near Panama City Beach, and she was ready to unload her house and get down there.

She told Lucy to take whatever furniture she wanted from the house, because she was planning to sell it all and start from scratch. Lucy, having abandoned all of her own furniture when she left the old apartment, walked through the house in which she lived almost her entire life.

As she went from room to room, Lucy stopped at each piece of furniture – couches, tables, beds – and checked to see if it elicited any sort of positive memories. There were very few pieces with which she felt anything

other than coldness, but even these were taken out of consideration for her new home by the bad memories that overshadowed the good.

When Lucy finished going through the house, she approached her mother and said she only wanted one thing: the piano.

It pleased Lucy's mother that she wanted that piano, and she arranged to have it delivered to Lucy's new home. After Lucy's check cleared, Stan told her she could move in at any time, but so far the only thing in the house was the piano.

Lucy decided that starting from scratch was a good idea, and she was being pretty choosy in going about it. The way she went through her mother's house searching for feelings associated with each piece of furniture inspired her, and she was using this method to choose the pieces that would go into her new home.

She traveled around Atlanta to antique stores and thrift stores and yard sales and estate sales, and within a month filled her house with furniture she loved. The only brand new items she purchased were linens, mattresses, the couches that were in the living room, and basic items for the kitchen. She surprised herself with a talent for haggling, and spent each penny carefully, and when all was said and done, was exceptionally pleased with herself and with the house.

Lucy waited until she finished furnishing her new home before moving in, and her mother's house sold the day after she moved out.

Lucy thought that she would have been upset once her childhood home was sold, as it was the only root she had in the world.

But it turned out that she was not.

On the last day in the house, she and her mother hugged fiercely, and her mother got a bit watery when she gave Joseph his goodbye kisses. It helped to know,

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though, that she was not going too far, and could easily be back to be present for major occasions. That would be soon, as Joseph's second birthday was quickly approaching.

Thinking of Joseph's birthday got Lucy thinking about the events of the past year, and realized it was almost exactly a year since she had seen or spoken to Kieran. He called her about a month after their meeting, but Lucy put off returning his call, though she still thought about it, and about him, quite often.

On Lucy and Joseph's first night in the new old house, Lucy felt anxious about being alone, but also proud of what she accomplished. After Joseph went to bed, Lucy sat on one of her new couches and tried to read, but her mind kept wandering back to Kieran.

Regardless of whether or not he had a girlfriend, she really missed having someone like that in her life. He made her feel like she was beautiful and smart and important, and she just really, really missed him. At the risk of interrupting him while he was having languid evening sex with his girlfriend (whom Lucy still hated), she decided that it was about time to return his call.

She got his number from where she was keeping it in her wallet and got her phone and sat down on the floor in front of the couch. Her hands were shaking again, but she now knew that shaking hands did not mean the end of the world and she used her trembling fingers to enter the numbers. The phone rang, and almost immediately a recorded message came on saying that the number was disconnected.

Lucy's stomach and heart both did a flip-thud type of thing, and then she felt panicked. That only lasted a minute, though, because she figured she could just call his stepmother again, and after getting her brand new smooth and thick-paged note pad and her fine-point marker from the table beside her bed, Lucy did just that.

She felt a sense of déjà vu when she spoke with Kieran's stepmother and they had almost the exact same conversation as the year before.

She felt déjà vu again when Kieran answered his phone after the second ring.

Lucy bumbled around her living room, positioning and then repositioning lamps and knick-knacks and the throw pillows on the couch. She took a dust rag and went over each surface in the room for the third time that afternoon. She put the dust rag away and went to check on Joseph, who was playing contentedly in the bedroom Lucy carefully constructed for him; he was so content that he did not even notice her. She went into the kitchen and over to the sink, but there were no more dirty dishes to wash.

Lucy went into her room and for the eleventh time that afternoon, looked at herself in the full length mirror. She was pleased with what she saw. She got some sun over the summer, and it was early enough in the fall that her freckles were not faded, but her freckles were one of the few things that never bothered Lucy about her personal appearance.

Her green eyes were very bright, having been brought out by both the light layer of blush Lucy applied earlier in the afternoon and her long-sleeved, V-neck blouse, which was the same color green.

She let her hair dry on its own throughout the morning, and continuously applied product on it so that by the time it was dry, the frizz was satisfactorily at a minimum and her curls were full and smooth. She did not usually leave her hair down, but for some reason liked how it looked that day.

She continued the inspection of her reflection and travelled down to her belly, which looked rather flat in her snug jeans. She also liked the way her ass looked in

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those jeans, which was unusual, and she thought again that she wished she bought ten pairs of the same type of jeans, but she only got one, and it was her favorite pair.

She was wearing her Doc Martin Mary Jane's, but they were somewhat clunky for wandering around the house, and she took them off and left them sticking out slightly from under the couch. She did not think they would be going anywhere, but she was ready to go out just in case.

Joseph was also freshly bathed and dressed in one of her favorite outfits for him. When she picked it out for him to wear that afternoon, she thought about how she should appreciate the fact that she got to choose what he wore now, because she imagined he would soon develop his own opinions about his clothes.

Lucy was about to do another round of repositioning everything in the living room when she heard a car door slam close by. She leapt to the front window and peaked out and saw Kieran locking his car and then walking around it to her front walkway. She could not believe how much he did not change since that first time she met him six years before. His hair was much shorter than the last time she saw him, but beyond that, he did not seem to age or even transform at all as the years passed.

Lucy watched Kieran check out her little house as he approached the front door, and then she could not wait any longer and went and flung it open. Kieran was a little startled, but Lucy did not care because she was so happy to see him. She was even happy enough to give him a big hug, even though she was not a big hugger, before he even had a chance to get in the door. Kieran laughed at her blatant pleasure in seeing him, and hugged her back.

As they both re-entered the house, Lucy closed the front door and stood back and they both stood there smiling at each other. Kieran laughed again, and Lucy

told him how good it was to see him. He told her the same, and she asked him to come in and have a seat in the living room. She just brewed a fresh pot of coffee and asked him if he would like any, and he said he would.

Lucy practically skipped into her kitchen to get the coffee, and then called back to Kieran to feel free to join her so that he could see her house. He walked into the kitchen as she was reaching up into the cabinet for mugs and she glanced over at him and smiled some more. She asked how he was, and he gave her a kind of so-so type of shrug. Lucy waited.

Kieran's feet stayed in the same spot as he looked around the kitchen and at the dining table and out the window and told Lucy he did not have a girlfriend any more. After making this declaration, he stole a sideways look at Lucy, who was trying to control her shaking hands as she poured the coffee. She asked him if he was okay about it, and he told her they had a pretty tough breakup, but that it was over six months since then.

Lucy, face flushing and breath shortening, considered this, and then Kieran told her he saw her on television back when Rodney entered his plea agreement in court. She told him she divorced Rodney very shortly after that, and he nodded his head as if he figured this out already. He asked her if she got the divorce because of how long Rodney was going to be in jail, and she looked at his face and told him she divorced Rodney because she never should have married him to begin with.

She shared with him how she was planning to leave Rodney that same night after Joseph's birthday party, and how much easier his arrest and subsequent felony convictions and prison time made divorcing him. Kieran considered this and seemed to be pleased, but told her he was sorry she had gone through so much. He also told her how pretty he thought she looked on television.

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At this remark, Lucy's heart skipped a beat and she stopped what she was doing with the coffee and stared at Kieran. He stared back at her. She said thank you, and handed him his coffee. He thanked her for the coffee and took a sip without his eyes leaving hers, then immediately spat it out onto the floor, shocking Lucy terribly. She asked what the matter was, and he was beet red with embarrassment, wiping coffee from his face and then putting his cup down and searching for her roll of paper towels.

He told her he usually did not take that much sugar in his coffee. Lucy tried not to laugh, but his reaction was so violent, and after Lucy figured out he was not hurt or choking, thought it was probably the funniest thing she had seen in a really long time. She lost her battle with the laughter as a big snort escaped through her nose, and then she just let it go.

Kieran, still embarrassed and sheepishly cleaning up his mess, thanked her for her concern, but her laughter was so spontaneous and pure that he could not help but begin laughing, too.

Just then Joseph, obviously curious about the loud carousing going on so close by, toddled into the kitchen. Lucy said hey to her little boy and watched him as he took a minute to check out the strange new person in this strange new place. Joseph then trotted over to Lucy and held his hands up for her to hold him, which she did, and he looked back and forth at Kieran and Lucy.

Kieran said that he could not believe how different Joseph looked since he last saw him, and that it was as if he had gone from a baby to a little boy. Lucy considered this and agreed, then added she already had a difficult time remembering when he was first born.

Joseph wiggled to get out of Lucy's arms, and she set him down on his feet, and he stared up at Kieran

again. Kieran suddenly jumped sideways into the living room with a shriek that scared the shit out of Lucy.

She thought Joseph was going to start screaming in fear, but he started laughing hysterically. Lucy, who never heard Joseph laugh like that, filled up with joy at the interaction between her son and her old friend, with whom she happened to be quite in love.

After Lucy moved in, she took a week to simply enjoy her new home. Now that week was up and she had to start looking for a job. She got very antsy about not working, but was not at all looking forward to putting Joseph in daycare.

After investigating several different places, Lucy settled on a smaller, less corporate type of operation that was about five minutes from her house. On the first day of her job search, she got Joseph all ready to spend his first day ever in the care of people other than his close relatives, and had to fight hard to keep from crying.

When she got to the daycare and brought Joseph in and gave him kisses and handed him over to his teacher and started walking out of the room, Joseph started crying. Lucy turned back, and his teacher waved her on and brought Joseph over to some toys in an effort to distract him. Lucy hurried from the building and got into her car and went straight home and cried and cried. After about an hour she called the daycare to see if Joseph was okay.

She was connected with the same teacher she so recently left him with, and who said he cried for about thirty seconds, and then began to play with the toys. He also was enjoying the company of the other children immensely. Lucy thanked her and hung up the phone.

She stopped crying, and while she was a little hurt that Joseph was not missing her as much as she was missing him, felt very relieved that he was doing so well.

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She got herself together and reapplied her makeup and put on one of her new professional looking outfits and left the house for her appointment with a staffing agency. Once there, Lucy filled out the typical employment applications, and then was taken into a separate room to take a typing test. Lucy aced typing in high school, but was a little worried because it had been so long since she had any cause to type anything.

Once she got started, though, she quickly figured out that she simply had to stop thinking about it and her brain and hands pretty much automatically spit the words she was typing out onto the computer screen. The people at the staffing agency were very impressed, and their next question was whether or not she could pass a drug test.

Lucy told them with much confidence and a smile that yes, she could.

They gave her a form and told her where to go the following day to give a urine sample, and that once they got the results back, would start looking for a placement for her. Lucy smiled broadly and thanked them, then went back home and ate lunch. She decided to call Kieran, who she knew would be home at that hour because he was still working nights at the same restaurant. She told him of the morning's events, and that Joseph was okay at the daycare center, and Kieran was happy for her.

Then Lucy asked him if he wanted to come over. Kieran took a second, then told her okay, he would like to come over. Lucy smiled into the phone and told him she would see him soon.

It took Kieran about seven minutes to get to Lucy's house, even though he actually lived twelve minutes away, and she was very pleasantly surprised at his speedy arrival.

She went to let him in the front door, and then they went and sat down on the couch, and after about two

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minutes of forced conversation, Lucy leaned over and kissed him. Kieran kissed her back.

The next morning when Lucy took Joseph to daycare, he began to cry a little as they entered the building. He was a smart kid and was pretty sure his mother was about to leave him again. Lucy brought him in and left him with the same teacher, who again immediately tried to divert Joseph, and this time he stopped crying and started playing before she was even out the door.

Lucy spilled a few tears, and then swallowed the rest and headed to the lab for her drug test, which came back clean. Lucy knew it would, but still experienced a tiny bit of completely irrational anxiety when she handed over her pee in the little test cup. The lab immediately notified the staffing agency of her drug-free status, and then Lucy went home to wait for a job to become available for her.

It was still a little early for lunch, so she sat down and called Kieran and told him about passing her drug test. Then she asked him if wanted to come over again. He did.

The third day Lucy took Joseph to the daycare, he took off running toward his classroom. Lucy felt this was a good indication that he was doing well with the transition, and she went back home to wait for a call from the staffing agency.

It was still early, and Lucy called Kieran and asked if he would like to come over for breakfast. He did. He also wanted to eat lunch there, too. Kieran had the night off work and when late afternoon came around, he went with Lucy to get Joseph from the daycare, and then came back home with them and cooked them all dinner.

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It took four more business days for the staffing agency to place Lucy with a job, and she and Kieran spent as much of that time together as possible. On Lucy's first day of work, she cried again because the past week was the happiest time of her life, and she already missed Kieran and Joseph.

Her new position was in a criminal defense attorney's office, though, and she did not experience a dull moment all day, and Lucy was grateful that it passed quickly.

Lucy was very pleased with her new job, and her new employers were very pleased with her as well. She and Joseph eased into a comfortable daily routine, and Kieran would come over for dinner on the nights he had off. This went on very nicely for a few months, past Joseph's second birthday, through the Christmas holidays and into the New Year.

One evening after Joseph went to bed, Lucy and Kieran were playing a fiercely competitive game of Scrabble at the dining table. While Lucy was waiting for Kieran to take his turn, he mentioned that his job had a day shift open.

If Kieran switched to a day shift, Lucy knew there were a number of ways it could change their relationship, and this frightened her.

Lucy looked at Kieran and asked him if he wanted to take the day shift, and he said that he did. Then she asked him why, and he told her he wanted to spend more time with her and Joseph.

Lucy stood and began to pace the kitchen, and Kieran, alarmed, watched her. After a couple of minutes, Lucy stopped and looked at Kieran again. She loved his beautiful face and the happy expression that lit it up whenever he looked at her after any sort of absence, even if she was just re-entering the room he was in.

She also loved how he made her feel; she actually believed she was beautiful when she was with him.

Lucy considered their past and how much had happened in the time since they first met those years ago, of the innocence that was ripped from her and how just the sight of Kieran brought her so much comfort in her darkness and pain.

She thought of how frightened she was when she did not know if he would speak to her after all of the horrible things she did and how overjoyed she was that first time he said her name after two years of her silence, then again after yet another year of her silence.

She thought of how horrible it was for her during the times he was with another girl, and wondered if it was as hard for him to see her with another guy.

Lucy thought of all that she lost, of when she had nothing in her life to love and did not even know that she could feel the way she felt when she and Kieran finally kissed the first time. She thought of how much his friendship meant to her, and wondered if that friendship would survive if they pursued their romance and it did not become what they both hoped for.

The thought of this, of losing not only Kieran's current place in her life, but of losing his friendship altogether, frightened Lucy to the core.

This fear was behind her hesitance in responding to his news about wanting to spend more time with her and with Joseph.

And now he was sitting at her dining table, and though she knew he was having a hard time with her silence, he was waiting patiently for her to gather her thoughts.

She knew there would never be anyone like him in her life ever again, and that he was it – the one, the person she was always supposed to have been with, and even though Lucy did not believe in soul mates and

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thought the whole idea of true love was a bunch of hokey bullshit, she knew when she looked at Kieran that she was wrong.

She took all of these thoughts and said to him, “Kieran, you are who I am supposed to be with.”

After waiting for what seemed to be a very, very long time for her to respond, Kieran smiled at her words. He stood up and walked over to her, and held her hands in front of him, and bent his head to touch her forehead against his, and then he kissed Lucy very softly for a long time.

EPILOGUE

The whole notion of “happily ever after” often conjures images of completely unrealistic serenity and bliss existing constantly between two people.

This is not what happened with Lucy and Kieran.

After dating for about five years, Lucy and Kieran got married, and they had another little boy. Over the years, they experienced very difficult situations, as are inevitable in life, and they also experienced very wonderful situations, which they appreciated greatly because that was what they chose to do after having been through so many of the difficult situations.

They fought every now and then, and had problems with money and stress about the kids and with their jobs, but they stuck together throughout all of it.

They knew that no matter how difficult things got and how much their lives changed that neither of them was going anywhere without the other.

That is what happened with Lucy and Kieran, and to them, they were living happily ever after.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rebecca A. Raymer is a survivor of rape, incest, torture, and child exploitation. She lives in her hometown of Atlanta, Georgia, surrounded by people who love her and whom she loves right back.

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