

Leave No Trace

The cold steel penetrated the thin cloth of Mia's dressing gown, numbing her lower back, a welcome feeling compared to the pain.

"You're doing fine," the doctor said, his eyes meeting hers for a moment, the rest of his face hidden behind a standard green surgical mask. "We're almost through."

She closed her eyes and tried to let her mind drift to someplace safe, someplace not here, not in this doctor's office, her insides being suctioned away like so much dust off the floor. It seemed her mind would only return to the same images: the spots of blood that dotted her white lace panties, the frantic look in Tim's eyes when he met her at the restaurant, the half-painted nursery, chipped away Swiss coffee on two walls, the other two slapped with clean coats of lilac.

She felt the sharp tug, the release, what must be the remains of her child swept away. She couldn't help but wonder how this hideous cramping might compare to giving birth, then realized she might never know for sure.

Tim had asked to accompany her into the room, to hold her hand, and she'd noted the redness of his eyes behind his wire rims. She'd refused, wanting to keep this experience for herself, to exclude him from the pain that was exquisitely hers. She could not watch him try to go through this with her, to be her partner in misery. She could not bear to share the responsibility of this with him. It belonged to her alone.

"We're done." Dr. Gelbart shifted his eyes toward her. She stared back at him, wondering how often he had to do this, whether or not the process meant anything to him or if he was immune to it.

"The cramping and bleeding will subside over the next few days. It will be like having a heavy period."

Mia nodded and pressed her lips into a tight, thin line, breathing in and out through her nose, trying to focus on something other than the knots forming in her uterus. She lifted her head slightly, trying to see over her knees, where she knew the nurse was quickly cleaning up the remains, trying to quietly dispose of them before Mia could think about this.

“Should we tell Tim to come in?” Dr. Gelbart stood beside her now, a warm, gloveless hand on her shoulder, thawing her frozen skin for a brief moment.

Mia shook her head and watched the nurse cross the room, the contents of her hands hidden from view. “Was it a girl?”

“These things usually happen for a reason. Something wasn’t right.”

“I felt like it was a girl.”

“I don’t know that this is helpful for you.”

“I want to know.”

Dr. Gelbart squeezed her shoulder, then moved across the room, untying the surgical mask as he walked away.

“I’ll get Tim.”

Mia closed her eyes and placed a hand on her belly, still slightly round, the phantom quivering still insisting the baby’s presence.

“We liked the name Lilly,” she said to no one.

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She stands in front of the stove, but forgets what she has come in here for. She has found herself doing this often now, making several trips a day into various rooms of the house, returning to the right side of the sofa, worn and dented where she has planted herself day after day, with nothing to show for her temporary vacancy. Yesterday she stood in the middle of the living room, the remote control in one hand, a glass of water in the other, frozen in place, trying to recall what it was she had planned to do next. She stood like this through the entire 21 Jump

Street rerun and for the first 10 minutes of evening news, stood there until she heard Tim's car pull into the driveway, heard the door slam, heard his keys inserted into the lock. He had only looked at her briefly, before dropping his coat on the armchair and retreating to his makeshift office in the den.

She stands now and almost misses the light rapping on the kitchen door, the door that leads into the courtyard, the one with a view into her other neighbors' lives. She turns toward the noise like an animal would, and listens again. It is louder and a bit more insistent now. So she hasn't imagined it.

She can see through the parted curtains that it's Maggie again. Maggie and her toddler, Dylan, with his arms wrapped tightly around his mother's neck. Maggie gives a little wave with her free arm, the other supporting Dylan. Maggie is too full of life, too round and bubbly and messy. Mia wishes she hadn't been in the kitchen, wishes she could have sat in her spot in the living room, in front of the TV and pretended not to hear the door. Too late for that now. She unbolts the latch and pulls open the door. Dylan practically jumps from his mother's arms and pushes past Mia into the kitchen.

"Dylan!" Maggie looks quickly from her son to Mia and back again and feigns exasperation. "That's not polite, honey. You have to be invited first."

"Caw I come in Mi-Mi?"

She still isn't used to the sound of his voice, the way it crawls inside her head and twists her up inside.

"It's ok," she says running her hands nervously through her hair and stepping aside to let Maggie enter.

"You sure we're not bothering you?" Maggie says. Mia wants to laugh at the way Maggie continues to pretend that she is imposing on Mia, that Mia has some sort of relevant existence outside of her visits.

"No, I was just....". She doesn't actually know what she was doing, of course.

Maggie is quick to fill in the blanks. “Getting ready for dinner? Or is Tim bringing something home? God, I hate this housewife crap, but as Brad reminds me, I was the one who wanted to stay home full-time after Dylan was born. I have a damn casserole in the oven, if you can believe that.” She laughs with her whole, fleshy body shaking – the one she laments has too much baby-weight left, no matter how many exercise tapes she stacks in front of her ancient VCR.

Dylan is in front of the refrigerator rearranging the myriad of pictures and documents stuck to its front with magnets. Mia watches him slide the magnets across the smooth stainless steel surface, delighting in the simple movement of the objects.

“So, what’s for dinner at your place?” Maggie says, dropping into a kitchen chair. She looks so hopeful, Mia thinks. She vaguely remembers feeling that way once.

“I haven’t really thought about it.” Mia turns away and begins shuffling dishes from the counter into the sink.

“You’re lucky Tim doesn’t expect a hot meal waiting when he gets home.” Maggie pulls her hair back and deftly twists it into a bun, secures it at the back of her head in a knot. Mia watches, thinking how soft and shiny it looks, how Tim used to run his fingers through Mia’s hair and tell her how beautiful it was.

“Mommy, wook!” Dylan has arranged the magnets in a line and is zooming them race-car fashion across the refrigerator. The papers and photos have fallen and scattered across the floor.

“Dylan!” Maggie rises and begins gathering the items. “That’s not nice,” she scolds, grabbing his hand and pulling him away from the refrigerator.

“It’s ok,” Mia says. Dylan looks up at her with wide eyes, a pout beginning to form on his lower lip. Mia wants to smile at him, but she can only stare into those eyes. He begins to cry.

“Oh god, Mia, I’m sorry,” Maggie says. She begins stacking the papers and pictures in a little pile, but stops and holds one photo up for further inspection, while Dylan whimpers and tucks his head under her free arm. “You look gorgeous in this picture,” she says, turning it toward Mia. “Wish my tits looked half this good. Where was this?”

Mia in a short black dress, pearls draped around her neck, Tim’s arm wrapped around her shoulder, his eyes shiny. Her second month. She was nauseated, but glowing, her cheeks pink, her lips full and red. She remembers the dress being tight, but she was excited to squeeze into it, to have some evidence that she was growing. She remembers her hand constantly drawn to her slightly protruding belly, wanting to detect some sign that this was really happening, that she was really going to become a mother. Then the slightest doubt creeping in. Could she handle this? Were they making a mistake? They had wanted this, hadn’t they? Would she and Tim be the same couple afterwards? It was the doubt. She was sure of it. She should never have given into it.

“It was the doubt,” she says aloud.

Maggie’s brow furrows. “What?”

Mia shakes her head. “Sorry, I mean, we were at a party. For Tim’s work. I was.... about two months.”

Mia does not want to look back at Maggie. She feels the eyes upon her, the pity directed towards her.

“I’m sorry,” Maggie says. “I didn’t mean to —”

“No. It’s fine.” She lets out a fake laugh. “I looked better then, it’s true.”

“You just need to get out of your freakin’ house once in awhile,” Maggie says. “Come over tonight. Bring Tim. We have plenty of casserole. I’ll open a bottle of wine. We’ll get sloshed and gossip.”

“No, really, it’s fine.”

“Come on. It’ll be fun. Besides, if Brad drinks enough he’ll pass out early and I’ll only have to deal with one kid for the night.” She reaches for Dylan in one, swift movement and throws him against her hip in another. His tears subside into sniffles and he drags a trail of snot across his face with one hand, wiping his wet cheek across his mother’s shoulder.

Mia manages a tight smile. “Not sure I feel up to it tonight. Another time?”

“Sure thing. But if you change your mind –”

“I’ll let you know,” Mia interrupts, walking towards the back door. Maggie shifts Dylan to her other hip, oblivious to the puddle on her shoulder. She opens the door, then turns and gives Mia a quick smile.

“I’m always home. If you want to talk or have a drink or, you know. Whatever.”

“Thanks. Really.” Mia’s voice trembles a little. She can feel it and yet she can’t seem to do anything to control it. The voice in her head tells her to just let them leave. *Let them leave and you’ll be fine.* Maggie nods and walks out. Mia closes the door, but not before catching a glimpse of Dylan, his chin hanging over his mother’s shoulder, studying Mia with those wide eyes. Those damned eyes.

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Tim sits in bed, glasses perched low on his nose, remote control in hand, flipping through stations every few minutes. ESPN sports center, CNN Headline News, ABC Family showing some movie about a horse. Mia lays under the covers, eyes on the TV, but not really watching. Underneath the covers, she runs her hand across her belly, flat and smooth now. She has studied her bare belly in the mirror, looking for a few early stretchmarks, a bit of sagging skin – something to indicate that she’d actually been pregnant at one time, but there is nothing. No one would ever know.

“Mia!”

She turns toward Tim. He is staring at her, glasses slipping down his nose, his eyebrows raised.

“What?”

“Didn’t you hear me?”

“No. Sorry. What?”

“I asked if you were watching this.”

Mia turns slowly toward the TV screen again. Images of a horse running across a green field, a man chasing after it with a rope in his hand.

“No,” she says.

He shakes his head and sighs, turns the TV off. A flicker and the picture fades, the room emptied of all the noise that filled the empty spaces.

Mia is aware of Tim’s eyes on her. Aware that he has removed his glasses, set them on the bedside table and turned toward her. Waiting for something. He is always waiting for her to say something, but she has nothing to say.

“I want you to see someone,” he says, finally breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?” She knows, but wants to hear him say it anyway.

“You need help. It’s not normal for you to be this way for so long.”

She laughs and turns to him, her eyes locking with his for the first time all night.

“Normal? You think that anything about me is normal?”

“Mia.”

“No, really. I want to hear you explain what normal is.”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, Tim, I don’t”. Mia is aware that her voice has become shrill, high pitched and noticeably louder. It is filling all the empty spaces now. “Why don’t you explain to me how a woman is supposed to act after she loses a child? What is the normal reaction, Dr. Taylor? Tell me, please. I’m dying to know.”

Tim turns away from her, flicks his bedside lamp off. They lay in darkness, the only sound a dog barking in the distance.

Mia feels exhausted. Speaking to Tim is overwhelming, like running a marathon in her bare feet.

He clears his throat. "I can't do this anymore."

"Then don't."

Tim seems momentarily stunned. Mia breathes in and waits for his response. Maybe she has answered too abruptly.

"You don't care about us?" His voice is calm, but she can sense the hurt.

"I don't know what I care about anymore." She knows it's a lie, meant to ease the pain. The truth is that she cares only for the baby, the one who was suctioned away, the one who held all the promise, the one who was going to be the center of their universe.

She can hear Tim's breathing, shallow, despondent.

His voice is like a whisper now. "I just want us to move on, Mia."

Move on, she thinks. Move on and you move away from me.

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Mia is running in an open field. The grass is lush and green and soft on her bare feet. Something or someone is chasing her, but she's not the least bit frightened. In fact, she slows her run to a light jog, waiting for whatever or whomever it is to overtake her. When she begins to turn, to look over her shoulder, she hears Tim shouting her name from the other direction. She sees him up ahead, motioning for her to hurry. *Run faster*, he calls. She smiles at him and stops, dead in her tracks. When she looks over her shoulder again, a wave of green grass, as tall as a redwood is folding over her. She lifts her arms up, reveling in the soft comfort of the grass. It pushes her to her knees, lays her flat on the ground, buries her deep within the earth. She hears Tim screaming for her, knows she should be frightened. Yet, she feels only warmth and comfort. She hasn't felt this calm in years.

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Mia wakes to an insistent wrapping on the back door. She sits upright and shields her eyes against the bright sun. Tim has opened all the blinds. She glances at the clock. It's after 10 and she knows that Tim left for work hours ago. He has stopped trying to wake her up, stopped bringing her steaming coffee in bed, the way she used to like it, dark with a single spoon of real cream. Stopped nuzzling at her ear with his mouth, purring words of affection, stroking her hair, until she pulls him on top of her, begs him to come back to bed and inevitably makes him late for work. These things are all part of a distant past they once shared.

The rapping hasn't stopped and is becoming louder. She hears someone calling her name. She throws her legs off the bed, slides into slippers and pulls a robe around her. As she descends the stairs she hears Maggie's voice, slightly panicked, calling her name louder. She rushes to the kitchen and opens the back door.

"Thank god you're home." Maggie is in sweatpants and a long t-shirt, her hair bundled on top of her head in a messy bun.

"What is it? Is Dylan ok?"

"He's fine, but I need you to watch him." Mia notices that Maggie is breathing hard, the color drained from her face.

"What's wrong?"

"My brother. He was in a car accident. I need to get to the hospital. I tried calling Brad, but he already boarded his flight to Denver."

"Oh god," Mia says. She runs her hands through her hair and tries to think. There must be someone else who can do this. She is unfit to watch someone's child. Unfit to be even a substitute mother.

"What about Mrs. Jensen? She loves to watch Dylan."

"Out of town. Visiting her niece. Please, Mia. I need you to do this for me."

Mia cannot refuse Maggie and her pleading eyes. There is no way around it.

"Ok. Yes. Sure."

Maggie throws her arms around Mia suddenly, knocking her off-balance for a moment. “I’ll just grab his things,” she says.

She watches Maggie scamper across the courtyard, throw open her door. She thinks about how she must look, standing there with her slippers and robe, her eyes squinting against the late morning light, hair askew. She doesn’t know how she’ll make it through this day.

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Dylan cries for nearly an hour. Well, screams, really. Nothing Mia does seems to comfort him and she knows this is confirmation that she was not worthy of a child, should never have thought about having one.

Maggie had said he was going through “separation issues” when she pried him off her leg, begged him to go with Mia, promised him she’d take him to the park and let him sit on the big-boy swing later, if he’d just be good for a little while and let Mommy go and see Uncle Ted. Dylan’s response was to lay down on the floor and kick his feet, screaming “Mama!” at the top of his lungs while Maggie slinked away, shaking her head apologetically.

Mia slumps against the sofa now, watching Dylan’s tiny chest heave up and down as he lies across the floor, eyes closed, fists clenched, the tears drying on his red cheeks. He has worn himself out finally.

“Feel better?” Mia says.

He shakes his head from side to side, but opens one eye to look at Mia.

“We can play a game when you feel better,” she tries. “Or maybe we can watch Sesame Street. Would you like me to turn that on for you?”

Dylan says nothing, but both of his eyes flutter open, carefully studying Mia’s face. He watches as she goes over to the coffee table, picks up the remote and flips on the TV. She searches for the local PBS channel. It’s not Sesame Street, but something like it with animated voices and funny-looking characters.

“There,” she says. “Want to come watch on the sofa with me?”

Dylan rolls himself over onto his belly, then onto his knees to get a better look at the TV screen.

“Not ses’ me,” he says putting a thumb in his mouth, but watching the screen intently now.

“I know. Sorry about that. But this is ok, right?”

He says nothing, but scoots closer to the sofa on his knees, wobbling along, thumb still inserted in his mouth.

Mia sighs and drops onto the sofa. She glances at the clock on the fireplace mantle. She wonders how long she’ll have to do this. She has Maggie’s cell, of course, but she can’t bring herself to call the hospital and bother her. At least Dylan is quiet now and seems to be engaged in the program. She can get back to – well, whatever the hell she does by herself every day. She is always surprised how easily the seconds, minutes and hours of the day go by until it is nighttime and she is ready to sleep and begin all over again.

After a few minutes, Dylan climbs up onto the sofa. He scoots himself right next to Mia and she holds her breath, feeling his warmth and his distinct toddler smell – some sort of sweet mixture of tears, baby powder and something else she can’t name. He lays his head in her lap and she tenses her muscles. *Oh God.* The tears well, but she stops them before they drop. Dylan resumes sucking his thumb, intent on the singing characters parading on the screen in front of them. Mia lifts a shaking hand from the sofa and places it on Dylan’s tiny head. She closes her eyes. His hair is silky, softer than she’d thought. She lets her fingers lie there and Dylan doesn’t move them, just snuggles in closer to her, content now to sit and watch his program. Mia leans back against the sofa, eyes still shut, and finally breathes.

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Dylan asks for Mommy a few times, but other than this, he is like a different child after the TV program. He scampers through the house looking at objects, asking Mia what they are, if he can play with them. He is infused with an energy that she cannot possibly match even on

a good day, but she gives it her best. The idea of getting ice cream comes to her. Ice cream before lunch, even – something a good Mom would probably not do regularly, but might consider once in awhile as a treat. Something Mia might have done with Lilly on occasion, whispering conspiratorially to her not to tell Daddy. She has her own memories of being taken to the local Dairy Queen, being handed the cone with the swirly, creamy vanilla. Trying to make it last as long as possible.

Dylan jumps up and down when she tells him they can go to 31 flavors. He grabs at her leg and pulls it. “Now, Mi Mi? Caw I get spwinkles?” She nods and he wraps his arms all the way around both of her legs and squeezes. Then he lets go suddenly and tears around the living room in a broad circle, his arms to the side like he is mimicking an airplane. Her chest aches as she watches him, a dull ache that travels across her limbs and weighs her down.

It takes more than a few minutes to get him into a fresh pull-up, to pack his diaper bag with extras, with some cheerios and a sippy cup of juice, just in case. She packs his stuffed animal – a raggedy, blue rabbit he calls “Bobo” and puts socks and miniature, toddler versions of Converse sneakers on his tiny feet. She is a bit concerned about the car seat – Maggie left it by the door, without any instructions – but after a few minutes of twisting and struggling in the back seat of her Honda Pilot she manages to get it strapped in. She picks Dylan up, the weight of him cradled against her and stands there for a moment. She is overcome with emotion – a feeling that he belongs to her, is relying on her.

“Go go go!” he says patting her back with both hands.

“Ok, ok,” she responds, swinging him into the car seat and buckling him in.

She climbs in the driver’s seat and starts the car. She realizes she hasn’t been in the car in more than a week. The last time was to run to the drugstore for tampons. She had forgotten that her period would eventually resume, that she would need them again. She suddenly feels free. She turns to look at Dylan who is bouncing up and down in the seat and waving his arms

wildly, chanting “ice cweam, ice cweam.” She laughs and the sound of it stuns her momentarily. She hasn’t heard herself laugh in months.

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The inside of the Baskin-Robbins is bright, awash in fluorescent lighting, and like always, freezing cold. Dylan grasps Mia’s hand and she shivers from the sudden warmth of it against her skin. The girl behind the counter can’t be more than 17. She has a pierced lip and bright purple streaks in her black hair, and looks like she’d rather be anywhere than behind a case of 31 flavors. At first Mia is confused, thinking the girl should surely be in school. But then she remembers Tim tearing off pages of the calendar that hangs in their kitchen – something she used to do – and the little “oh” that came unexpectedly from deep within her when she realized that two months had passed since the doctor’s office. That it was summer now and school is out.

Dylan lets go of Mia’s hand and runs from case to case, pressing his face and hands against the glass to assess his options. An older woman in plaid pants and a red shirt that nearly matches her hair color is the only other customer in the store. She pays for a single scoop of butter pecan in a cup, then watches Dylan as he points to the case and yells, “How ‘bout dis one?”

“He’s adorable,” she says to Mia, her eyes still on Dylan. “How old is he?”

“Two. Well, two and a half,” Mia replies remembering that Maggie talked about the difficulties of planning a birthday party for a child with a late December birthdate.

“I’ll bet he keeps you busy.”

Mia feels slightly dizzy. It’s an odd, but not uncomfortable feeling. She looks at Dylan, his eyes lit with excitement, then turns to face the woman. “He sure does,” she says.

The woman pats Mia on the shoulder and smiles. “Well, you enjoy him. They grow up so quickly. You’ll see.” She gives Mia a wink.

Mia doesn't correct the woman. She just smiles and nods, then turns her attention to Dylan and the heady task of choosing a flavor.

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She hadn't realized how long it would take for one two and a half-year old to eat a single scoop of rainbow sherbet ice cream with rainbow sprinkles on top. Her own half-eaten scoop of mint chip melts in the trademark pink and brown polka-dotted cup and she swirls the soupy mixture with her spoon while Dylan plays with an individual sprinkle on his finger, then pops it into his mouth.

"Dylan, it's getting late. We should go soon."

"Why?" He grabs his spoon with his entire hand, dips it into the cup and shoves a bite of the multicolored mess into his mouth. Rainbow streams drizzle down the sides of his mouth.

Mia grabs a napkin, reaches over to wipe his face – a constantly moving target as he struggles to avoid contact with the napkin.

"Why?" he asks turning his face away from her. "Why we have ta go home?"

Mia sighs and looks at her watch. 12:35pm. She reaches into her purse, checks her cell phone. A text from Maggie: *Ted unconscious, but stable. Everything ok there?* Mia texts back: *Dylan's fine. Having ice cream. Take care of your brother.* She slides the phone back into her purse and stares at Dylan, cheeks covered with rainbow streaks. He suddenly looks up and starts giggling. Mia shakes her head, then smiles at him.

"What's so funny?" she asks.

"I dunno," he says, giggling so hard that he starts to hiccup a little.

"Slow down," Mia says. "Take a deep breath."

"K," Dylan says. Another hiccup.

Mia looks at Dylan's shiny blue eyes, the rainbow streaks across his fat cheeks, the wispy blonde curls falling over his forehead. She feels the dizziness overtake her again. They grow up too soon, the woman had said moments ago. Or not at all. What if they don't grow up

at all? How is it fair that this child is all Maggie's? How is it that she, Mia, can take such good care of him, deliver rainbow sherbet and sprinkles and yet Dylan can not – can never – be hers. That she can possibly never know what it is like to have a Dylan or a Lilly for herself. Dylan hiccups again. "Do we have ta go home, Mi-Mi?"

Mia smiles. "Not yet, sweetie. Finish your ice cream. We'll go for a ride."

The car speeds down the highway and Mia feels peaceful. They have been driving for more than an hour. First there was the park. She had pushed Dylan on the "big boy" swing until he was dizzy and laughing. She had chased him around and up the slide, caught him in her arms at the bottom, as he came slipping down. She had held him up so he could touch the monkey bars and pretend to climb across them, moving one hand, then the other, in slow motion while Mia carried him. She hated to admit that she was more exhausted than he was at the end of it all, but as she buckled him back into his car seat, she felt revived. Alive. As she climbed behind the wheel, Dylan sleepily asked about Mommy for the first time since Mia's couch that morning.

"Mommy will be home soon," Mia reassured him, but her heart was beating fast in her chest and the thought of going back to the apartment complex, back to the stifling rooms she'd barely left in the past month, back to Tim and the endless repercussions of what they had lost, seemed unbearable. She glanced at her phone. A new text from Maggie: *Ted doing much better. On my way home.*

Mia's fingers hovered over the touch screen of her phone. She knew she should text Maggie back. Explain that they'd been out having fun all day. That they were heading home now, too. Instead, she drove forward, hearing only the crunch of the gravel under her tires, the voice in her head urging her forward. Mia steered the car onto the highway in the opposite direction of home.

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She has no idea where she is headed, but she can't bear the thought of coming to a stop. Dylan is sound asleep in his car seat, his head tipped to one side, mouth open, a thin strand of drool emerging on one side. Mia sneaks a glance in the rearview mirror. His eyelashes, impossibly long, flutter slightly. She wonders what he is dreaming of. She trains her eyes back to the road, asks herself for the third time this hour: *What am I doing? Just drive, a voice tells her. Just drive.*

Rolling hills, an array of cars of varying sizes, shapes and colors, and the white line down the middle of the freeway roll past her and she continues to drive. The sun is low in the sky, casting a pinky hue on the horizon and still she drives in silence, in a cocoon. She thinks of Lilly, encased in her womb, kicking against her sides until there was no kicking, just silence and an absence of movement. A beautiful, terrible silence. She doesn't know how long she is absorbed by the silence, disturbed only by the roar of passing cars on the highway.

Mia looks at the indicator and sees the needle inching past E. Dylan is stirring in his car seat and she glances in the mirror and smiles at the tiny face, still groggy with sleep, eyelids quivering, his tiny hands grasping Bobo. She has to get gas. She glances at her phone on the passenger seat. Six texts and two missed calls. She puts on her blinker and carefully moves to the right, exits the freeway. She's in a town she has heard of, but has never been to.

As she pulls into the first gas station she can find, she notices her car lights are on. *It's dark.* For the first time, she thinks about her absence from home and begins to feel a panic gathering, mixing with the rumblings of her nearly-empty stomach. *Where did they go?* Those hours that have ticked by. *How did he get here?* The child in the back of her car who is starting to awaken, rubbing his eyes.

"Where Mommy?" she hears from the back seat, as she pulls the car in line with a gas pump.

"At home," Mia says, her voice shaking.

"I'm hungry."

“We’re going to eat very soon. I just have to put some gas in the car, ok?” *And think. I need to think about this.*

“I want Mommy,” Dylan whines. He grabs his Bobo tightly to his chest and squirms in the car seat.

“I know. Soon.” Mia tries to still her shaking hand as she extricates herself from the car. As she pumps gas on the passenger side, she waves at Dylan, watching her from the back seat and tries to smile. She sees that he is beginning to cry. *Dylan is crying. He doesn’t want me. Lilly didn’t want me either. How can I blame them?* And then Mia feels the hot tears streaming down her own face as she watches Dylan.

Dylan’s sobs become audible through the closed car. Mia’s hands continue to shake as she detaches the nozzle from her gas tank, tiny drops of gasoline splattering on the ground below, some of it spraying her shoes. She is waving at him frantically now, and muttering words she thinks will help. “It’s ok. Almost done. Nearly there. We’re going to get food and see Mommy.” She wonders if her own tear-streaked face is upsetting him more.

When she opens the car again, Dylan’s face is red, but he stops crying. She turns to face him, extends her arm and pats his leg.

“Do you want to eat?” she asks.

“Want Mommy.”

Mia breathes deeply and looks into his eyes, searching for something. Dylan looks back at her, eyes wide. *What is it? Is he afraid?*

She starts the car and navigates to the parking spaces in front of the attached convenience store, grabs her cell phone and stares at the texts. She knows what they say. She doesn’t have to listen to the missed calls either: three from Maggie, one from Tim.

“I wanna go home,” wails Dylan.

“I know,” Mia says. “We will.” She digs in his diaper bag and finds the cup of juice, passes it back to him. He grabs it from her hand and immediately drinks. She picks up her phone and dials Maggie, who answers on the first ring.

“Oh, my god, where have you been?” Maggie screams into the phone. “Why didn’t you answer?”

“I’m sorry. Phone battery died and I couldn’t find my charger,” Mia says. She is almost proud of her quick thinking.

“Where’s Dylan? Is he ok?”

“He’s fine. Right here with me.”

“Ok.” Mia can hear the uncertainty in Maggie’s voice. She wonders if Maggie thinks she’s insane. She couldn’t blame her really.

“We’re in Wellsborough.”

“Wellsborough? What are you doing all the way out there?”

Mia pauses. She should have thought of a good reason to be nearly 70 miles from home with a child who doesn’t belong to her. *Who will never belong to her.*

“I – I was looking for a park I know. That I thought Dylan would like. I got a little lost and didn’t realize how late it was.”

Silence on the other end. She knows Maggie is trying to determine the best response, whether Mia is in her right mind, can be trusted. She hears a familiar voice in the background. Tim. He is asking to speak with her. She can’t bear it. Please don’t put him on the phone.

“I just wish you’d called me,” Maggie says. “You have no idea how frantic I’ve been. First my brother, then this. I thought something terrible had happened to you and Dylan. Here, Tim wants to talk to you.”

Before she can resist, there is Tim’s voice, tired and hoarse.

“Mia.”

The tears begin to fall again. She tries not to snuffle, shuts her eyes tightly to stop them, but she can't.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"I know. It's ok. But you need to come home."

"I can't."

She can hear Tim breathing. Thinking.

"I'll come and get you, then. Just stay put, ok?"

She nods her head, but says nothing, lets the tears fall. From the back seat, she can hear Dylan slurping the last bit of juice from his cup. He throws the cup on the floor of the car.

"Hungwy, Mi-Mi."

It's the last thing she remembers before Maggie is pulling up beside them, Tim in the passenger seat of the car. In the pitch black, she can just make out Maggie, throwing the passenger door open, running towards the back of Mia's car. And then Maggie is yanking Dylan from his car seat, hugging him so tight, the poor child. *How can he breathe?* Maggie doesn't understand, Mia thinks. She doesn't know how quickly a living, breathing child can be snuffed out. Can exist and then cease to exist, like she was a figment of your imagination. Like she never really existed at all.

Tim emerges from the driver's side of his car and Mia hears murmured conversation. She is slumped over the steering wheel, wondering where she has been for the past few hours, the past few months, really. *Where did I go? With Lilly, perhaps. I'd like to be with Lilly.* She imagines Lilly as a toddler, Dylan's age, with brunette curls and a wide, toothy grin, laying in that same green grass from Mia's dream, waiting for the comforting wave to roll over her in a sweeping caress. *Hush, baby. Mommy is here. Everything is fine.*

"Mia."

Tim is in the passenger seat of her car. Mia raises her head and looks in the rear-view mirror. Dylan is gone. The car seat is gone.

“They left. I sent Maggie home with Dylan.”

She nods, places her forehead back on the steering wheel.

“You’d better let me drive,” he says. She doesn’t disagree, just raises her head and unbuckles the seat belt. Opens the car door and switches places with Tim. They bump into each other on the exchange but she can’t look at him. She knows the pained look on his face already, has seen it so many times in the past few months that it’s etched into her mind. His disappointment in her. That she could not bring their child into this world.

“We need to talk when we get home.”

Again, she nods, but there will be no more talking.

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Driving down the highway in the early hours of that same morning, she feels nearly weightless. She always imagined it would be hard to walk away from her life, even if she no longer felt compelled to live it.

She’s lucky that Tim had allowed her to sleep on the couch. She’d said she didn’t want to disturb him, just wanted to sleep. He said he understood, that they could talk in the morning. She’d heard him speaking on his phone in hushed tones. She knew that nothing could be the same, but it had already been so long since anything was.

She doesn’t feel sorry for herself, anymore. She drives on. They are better without her. Tim. Her parents. Maggie and Dylan. She will drive until she can’t. Until, like the remains swept away by the nurse, like the phantom kicks that persisted, but then disappeared slowly, there is no trace of her left behind.