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September 2005

The computer makes a chirping noise with every new email that shows up in my inbox. I really should mute the stupid chirping. My phone rings just as a coworker knocks on my office door. I notice a post-it note while I am talking on the phone...damn, I forgot my daughter's parent-teacher conference again.

I am like everyone else: I get up in the morning, eat breakfast, get dressed, and get the kids off to school. I remind my husband that it's his turn to take our daughter to her dentist appointment. I load up our youngest in the bike trailer and drop him off at daycare, then ride another few miles to work. I sit at my computer, go to meetings, talk to people. I smile. I sort and organize. I keep the door to my office propped open, but the air still feels thick and stifling. Pink and yellow post-it notes cover my desk, my keyboard, my phone. They are everywhere. I write lists, it is important to have lists, to read them every day, cross things off, add new bullet points. That is how I know things have happened.

I rock on an open sea as the storm screams and the frothing waves crash. The captain has fallen asleep, rocked by the calm of the storm. I try to navigate, but I misread the charts and mistake the ocean for land. There are so many oceans....

May 1974

Papa King and the little girl are going for a walk. She is small and pale, with white kneesocks and a pleated skirt, and he really is a king. Maybe it is Sunday, or is it Saturday? Papa King isn't working today, he has the whole day off. It's a special Papa-afternoon because Mama has a baby in her tummy and needs to rest. Little Sparrow is excited to take a walk with Papa King, it's a special day. They walk hand-in-hand up a little hill to the water tower. The little girl does not know where they are headed, she does not dare ask, but she is just happy to walk hand in hand with Papa King. She hums and sings as she skips by his side. Sometimes she peeks up at him and sometimes he looks down at her and gives her a warm smile. *You and Me and Happiness, Papa King. You and Me and Happiness.*

She knows that he really is a king. Really, for real. He talks about things that she doesn't really understand, wise stuff about the world and people. He talks about important stuff that he wants her to know, things that other people don't usually talk about with her. About a boat and waves that are bigger than skyscrapers. Maybe he talks this way because he really is a king.

Where are they going? Are they going to the park to play?

Hardly. Papa King isn't very good at playing, but he is strong and sometimes he pushes her on the swings. Nobody can push her on the swings as good as Papa King can. Sometimes he pushes too hard and she swings too fast.

Are they going to the little cafe up by the water tower? Maybe they'll ride the fun lift and look down at all of the tiny houses of the city where they live? And maybe eat cinnamon rolls and drink soda? It's so fun when the soda bubbles tingle on her tongue.

Maybe they were supposed to go to the water tower, but no, that's not where they go today. They turn left into a yard across from the water tower instead. Papa King runs into some friends. They are big men with knitted sweaters, standing in their yard. Papa shows the men that he has his Little Sparrow with him. Little Sparrow the Princess. The men are not really used to little girls in pleated skirts and they're not really interested either, but they are glad to see Papa.

Papa's friends invite them in and give Little Sparrow a piece of candy from a tin. The candy tastes strong and isn't very good, but she doesn't dare spit it out. Papa King looks at a big bottle on the kitchen floor. Little Sparrow has never seen such a big bottle. It's almost as big as her but wider. It has a strange top. The men take a hose and red juice runs out of the hose into a glass for Papa King and the men. The juice is red like blood. Redder than blood-water.

The men and Papa talk and talk. Papa sits on a chair near the bottle. He sits up straight, facing forward, with his glass in his hand, because he is talking about something important. Little Sparrow stands and stands, she gets tired of

standing. She tugs on Papa's hand a little. Papa pulls her up on his lap. She sits a while on his lap, then climbs down and tugs on his hand again. She tugs and tugs, but Papa King doesn't notice her, he still talks and drinks the juice. He takes some more juice.

Papa King likes the juice. He really likes the juice.

Little Sparrow is thirsty too, but she doesn't get a glass. She doesn't want the juice anyway, it smells gross. She waits and waits. She wants to go home now, home to Mama, but Papa just talks and talks. He talks louder and louder. He doesn't hear her when she says "home". Papa King doesn't hear anything besides his own voice. Nothing else matters than the juice and his voice.

Finally she gives up and stops tugging. She doesn't say anything because there is no noise in her throat anymore. She doesn't have anywhere to sit so she leans a little on Papa King. She thinks that they might never go home, but she wants to go home so badly, home to Mama. Suddenly, Papa King stands up, he takes her hand and they walk out. Finally they leave. Out of that house, out of that yard, out into the sunshine, down the little hill towards Main street.

It's not fun anymore to hold Papa's hand. He's swaying from side to side. His grip on her hand is loose, but she keeps trying to hold her little hand in his loose grip. She holds on hard. She tries to get him to walk straight. They don't see anyone, not a single person. She's glad because she thinks it probably doesn't look right for a king and a princess to look like this.

In the middle of the street.

Staggering back and forth.

Mama is so mad when they come home. She starts to shout and yell at Papa King with a shrill voice. Little Sparrow sits down next to the toy chest in the living room. She can see Mama and Papa King through the crack in the door. Papa King walks around the kitchen on his wobbly legs. He almost trips over a toy car and runs into the table leg. He gestures and talks with a loud voice, an unfamiliar voice that says unfamiliar words. "And you're related to Torkel, but I walk my own line." He takes a plate with cold food and sits down, Mama keeps shouting. "And the child, she's only four! Responsibility. Responsibility. Means NOTHING to you!!"

Little Sparrow doesn't like it when Mama yells. It scrapes her ears, it scrapes her lungs. Scrapes and scrapes. She sits quietly and carefully takes some toys out of the chest. Stop yelling now Mama. It scrapes and scrapes.

Papa King raises his fork to his mouth but the food falls to the ground. If she looks really closely, she can see that Papa's crown is a little crooked on his head; and it doesn't look right for a king and a princess to walk down the street staggering from side to side. It doesn't look right.

Someone might have looked out their window just then and saw them. Someone might have seen Papa King and Little Sparrow. Staggering down the street.

September 2005

It is hard to tell whether I am awake or asleep, maybe I am somewhere in between. I can hear noises coming from the kitchen, but I am unaware of the reality that surrounds me. My eyes are shut, I try to open them but my eyelids will not cooperate. Behind my closed eyelids is another world; there is an old, deep, dried-up well, and at the bottom is a little baby sparrow. Submerged in the darkness. I see her slender body, her pale complexion. She does not want to look at me, but the therapist told me to talk to her, to let her crawl onto my lap. She holds the answer to why I am the person I am; the person I am not. The way out of this darkness. She holds the map in the palm of her little hand. But it is too early to ask her to sit in my lap. She is too far, and I have caused her harm.

I saw the well. I saw how deep and dark it was. Dank walls of stone, the slimy bottom covered in gravel, dried leaves, and pine needles. I watched her fall, fall, fall down into the darkness, like a slow motion film sequence. Her pink

purse falling a few seconds in front of her body. Her hands reached for the walls in vain, reaching for the steel ladder. The thump as her body hit the ground. She laid still for a while, like a corpse. Unconscious, frozen on her back.

I waited for the scream, the crying, but not a single tear ever fell, even though it must have hurt to fall that way. She got up, brushed the dirt and leaves from her red tights, and looked with determination up toward the sliver of light peeking from way above. She was completely alone, so little and frail. She smoothed out her blue dress, grabbed the straps of her

pink clutch purse and threaded it over her head. Then she walked toward the ladder and began to climb.

I owe her so much, but it is a long way to climb.

Somewhere a child cries. Not the dead child, not the child in the well. A living child. My child. I need to get up, I need to get out of bed, but I cannot remember how to put one foot in front of the other. Up woman, get up. I can't, but I must. I shuffle towards the bathroom. I look at myself in the mirror and realize that I am not a pretty sight; I look old and worn-out. Dark circles hang under my swollen red eyes. My hair is dull and lifeless. When did I get so old? When did I get all of these wrinkles? The deep grooves on my forehead look like recently plowed fields.

I feel sick. The pill that finally helped me fall asleep also makes me feel like I'm in a fog. Half of a 50-milligram tablet that slowly melted in my mouth. It was sweet and it felt good as it dissolved on my tongue. It took about a half an hour, then I fell asleep on the couch. At some point I must have transferred my body to the bed. Half of a 50-milligram Remeron tablet numbs my mind. It feels as though a part of my brain that has not rested for hundreds of days has finally gone to sleep. Now it's asleep.

Why am I so tired even though I slept the whole night? My body is heavy, my brain is even heavier. Everything spins around me as I sit down at the breakfast table. I try to focus on the familiar contours of my kitchen, my family. My youngest child screams. He doesn't want that sandwich, he wants something sweet. With a hand that barely has the energy to lift itself, muscle memory helps me spread butter onto a piece of banana bread. My husband asks why I'm giving

in. Are we going to give the child everything he wants? I know, it's wrong, but I don't have the energy to care right now. I can't take the whining.

The refrigerator is covered with drawings and important reminders, the note from my doctor is there too. Shame creeps over me as I gaze at the note. How could I? What's wrong with me? It says three weeks. No, just one week, I think to myself. I just need one week. I just need to sleep.

The new database, I think. Classes. Planning. Deadlines. I need to get back right away. This won't work, it will be worse if I stay home.

What am I going to do the whole day, everyday? Clean? Should I clean? Wash the windows maybe? They do need to be washed actually.

Sleep, sleep, sleep. Really, all I want to do is sleep.

What am I going to say? I should have been able to handle it, take care of everything, just like everyone else. Why is everyone else able to handle it, but not me? How can I be so frail? The daughter of an alcoholic. That must be why. A low tolerance for stress. But, the therapist said that actually the opposite is true, I have a high tolerance for stress since I am so used to surviving chaotic situations.

I am a survivor. I am a rhododendron in an alpine crevasse, a violet in the asphalt. I dance with a wooden leg, but at least I dance.

How did I lose my grip and let myself fall? Break down like this? I have failed. I stumbled just before the finish line. We need to go on! That's all we can do. We need to carry on and we need to die. That's the way it is. Work is an honorable thing that we must endure.

Where is my honor now?

We work, or we cry and work, but we work as flawlessly as possible. Please darling, try to be good now. You are such a good girl, such a good girl.

I realize that I probably won't be capable of going to work in a week. My brain has turned to mush. I don't know how I'm going to get it working again.

But the email. I need to check my email. We have a little laptop computer on the desk in our home office, but it's not connected to the internet otherwise we would be tempted to work from home. I can't check my email.

Once I've gotten everybody off to school and day care, the darkness comes. I fall down into the bottomless well again. She is there. The chirping sparrow.

She's there, then disappears. She's there, then disappears.

I lie down but I know that I need to focus. Before the kids come home, I will need to get dressed and look as normal as possible. I get up an hour before they come home, put on clothes, and write a list of everything that needs to get done at work over the next three weeks. I write the list, just in case, in the event that I am not able to go to work by Monday.

I feel a little better after I've written the list. I feel more organized and structured. I get back some control. I need to get out of this darkness. I give the girls a snack when they get home from school, then I pick up my son from daycare. For the most part, I look normal if I just apply a little mascara, a touch of blush on my cheeks and some lip gloss. I once read in a magazine that women look younger with lip gloss than with lipstick, so I only use lip gloss these days, even though it makes my hair stick to my lips whenever I bike in the wind.

After several days, the crying starts. Once I realize that I am not going back to work on Monday, the crying starts. I cry. I really cry. Where are all of these tears coming from?

My husband looks at me with concern. Was it really such a good idea to take this sick leave? You felt much better when you were working. *Don't cry my love. I do everything for you, everything for you.*