

To Sir, Five Thousand

I wanted the *AudioMax 5000*. The buttons lit blue, little dots of clear skies, and the girl from the cubicle beside mine said I could use it to play anything. Radio, my MP3 player, and the old, scratched CDs I kept because I liked the pictures. It came with two speakers and a remote, and my flyer from the paper said the money I spent would also build houses for the needy.

I imagined a tall wooden home painted white but always clean, with purple weeds kept alive in the yard, redeemed by their color. My stereo built that whole house and spread the weeds through the grass. It fed the family of five inside, the Beckers, two men and three adopted girls younger than seven. None seven, all younger – and all were thankful to me for their house and their purple weeds and their food.

The torn, beige, leather seat of my car burned my fingers pressed flat beneath my thighs. I stared at the electronics store and fantasized about my life with the *AudioMax 5000* as the Becker family started pulling purple weeds. With the *AudioMax 5000*, there'd be little blue dots of sky and smooth jazz. After a blink, I removed my keys from the car I'd already turned off, taking in breath and reminding myself. I wanted the *AudioMax 5000*. It was all I wanted – blue skies and perfection.

Doors slid open in jerks as if they weren't sure of me. Something in the gears chewed broken glass when the doors moved to hide themselves, but I jumped through, hitting my hand on my thigh to stop my own erratic movement. I saw Erica Becker, the youngest of the daughters, run crying to Daddy David and Daddy Tyler, her hands purple and her skirt purple, weeds ground in her hands and stuck in her fingernails. David's arm around her back, Tyler's hands framing her cheeks.

The electronics store tried to swallow me as I stepped inside. I kept my feet planted, though, and forced myself to read the signs before moving. Would it be in 'Home Theater' or 'Audio & MP3'? A short woman with tall heels trapped behind me said, "Excuse me, sir?" like a snake hissing, and I smiled like I loved her before letting the store take me into 'Cameras,' getting out her way as fast as possible. The Becker girls found a frog in their weedless front yard and wanted a pet, but it escaped. Tyler found it in his dress shoes, panicked, memories of trauma rushing, drowning, and David took a toy away from each of the girls. He yelled at them first. Tyler couldn't look at them.

Cameras sat in circles around each other sharing evidence of vacations they'd never taken. I touched one. I picked it up and took a picture of my wrist. Before I could be proud, an oddly placed button deleted my wrist without asking for confirmation. It wasn't a very good camera. A saleswoman started to notice me, so I set it back on its pedestal and turned away, looking again for a sign to welcome me.

People crowded 'Home Theater,' an extended Hispanic family choosing a new TV, and I almost liked them better than the Beckers. But the three adopted daughters wrote letters to each other in sparkle markers, exchanging them without addressing them, and papers scattered their floor. I liked them again as the TV-shoppers began arguing in another language. The Becker girls laughed at their own secrets.

I froze in place as I passed a television broadcasting my face. The display demonstrated the quality of both the television and the video recorder that grabbed me. My bottle glasses, my sweaty nose, my skinny shoulders. Someone else set this up to look at me, to pin me on a screen. I thought of the digital camera that deleted my wrist, but at least I'd taken that picture myself.

As I escaped toward ‘MP3,’ David and Tyler fought. One of them bought something expensive without asking the other – a photography kit – eager to pursue some forgotten hobby, determined to have the best equipment so as not to forget again. I found a group of stereos and smiled, anticipating the feel of the box in my hands as I took it toward the cashiers. Off to the end, the *AudioMax 5000* winked at me with little blue bits of sky for buttons. We liked each other.

“May I help you, sir?” The store swallowed again, catching me this time.

“No,” I said, one shoulder recoiling back too much. I smiled. “No, thank you.”

“What are you looking for?” he asked then, sure of himself, his mouth open in a smile verging on laughter.

“The *AudioMax*. But I see it right there, thank—”

“The *5000*? But this one’s much better!” he insisted, shaking his head, putting his hand on my shoulder as he pointed off behind me. He liked a larger model costing almost twice as much with dozens of black buttons. It wouldn’t play CDs.

As he explained the benefits, Dot Becker turned seven. David helped her with her math homework. He’d never graduated high school, never used math, and worked two shifts that day as a grocery store cashier. His manager shouted at him in the break room after he’d been bragging about the yellow color he planned to paint his house. Dot and David grasped in vain to understand something foreign to both, the air around the kitchen table thickening as Dot flared her nostrils and David set his jaw.

“I don’t really need all that,” I said, wishing the salesman would take his hand off my shoulder and stop pointing at black buttons. “I just want the *AudioMax*.”

“I just want to make sure you get the best system you can. How about this? Try our audio test with both and see how much better this one sounds. I told you what the speakers are capable of doing. The *5000* sounds like plates scratching together in comparison! Just listen.” He picked up his model and brought it near my model, fooling with cords and cables as I looked off to the side. It felt wrong to watch him. I put my hands in my pockets.

One of the girls wasn't their daughter – wasn't a Becker. Tyler's sister replaced too much blood with heroin, and Katie came to stay in the white house now yellow. Yellowed. She called them Daddy but knew she hadn't been chosen like Dot and Erica. It made her dig thick, long lines in the sandbox David built over the grass, digging, digging, digging.

“Now listen,” insisted the salesman, putting large headphones over my ears as I raised my hands, trying too late to guide them myself. “This is the *5000*.”

A woman's disembodied voice sang the words, “If you wanted the sky, I would try to paint the stars,” but he switched the audio before she could finish.

“And this is the *Extensia*.” He made an appreciative grunt as if he could hear what I heard. “Isn't it so much better? Don't you hear that? The clearer audio quality, how much more enhanced the sound. You hear better with this model than if you were in the studio.”

It sounded the exact same. “If you wanted the sky, I would try to paint the stars,” sung by an invisible creature without any difference at all.

“Yes,” I said. A miserable imitation of his grunt. “Yes, I can hear that. Wow.”

“So the *Extensia* then? We’re even running a ten percent discount! You’ll never get sound like this anywhere else, not for this price.”

“Yes,” I said.

David lost his job. The manager caught him stealing cigarettes. After the fight over the photography kit, he and Tyler agreed to share all their expenses. He wasn’t supposed to smoke anymore, but he never stopped. Tyler always smelled it on his lips but took revenge by caring too little to say.

“Yes, the *Extensia* is better.”

Katie’s mother took her back when the hospital released her, and the three Becker girls were never together again. The purple stain never came out of Erica’s skirt, but she missed it on her hands.