

Somebody's Giant

Water bubbles rose in a pot on the stove. It was tight in the kitchen, with just enough room for one adult and a little one. Hot dogs sizzled on the pan and basked in vegetable oil. Next door, the Airbnb renters hooted and hollered as they partied on the balcony. A harsh ocean breeze sent palm fronds throughout the eight-hundred-square-foot backyard. The song "True Colors" came from the television while little Bailey watched the movie, *Trolls*. She sang the love song, mimicking Poppy's dance moves. I wouldn't admit it, but the scene reminded me of her father, Lucas, my boyfriend. He could be so pessimistic at times that I would smother him with love, just as Poppy does to Branch.

Bailey laughed uncontrollably. "He's scared to sing, just like Dad!"

Lucas and I used to eat spaghetti cooked in a teapot on the campfire or split a bag of chips for dinner. Now, Bailey's request for tonight was mac and cheese with hotdogs. I shave broccoli into the cream. The wind howled in the house like the song in a seashell, filling up the space and pushing on through. Bailey and I sat at the edge of the bed on top of maroon sheets. Bailey stared mindlessly at the TV. I hated that Lucas was gone all day. If we did something else, I could let go of my tension—click.

"Dinner is almost ready. Let's put on some music," I said, grabbing the new CD player. I popped open *The Change I'm Seeking* by Mike Love, and the first song to play was "Permanent Holiday." Bailey knew the words to the song and danced around on top of the flea-ridden casino carpet. I turned off the stove and ran to the restroom in the far corner of the house. The house had a living room/kitchen, that's where we slept, and then a bedroom with a bathroom. Bailey got the bedroom. The bathroom was covered in graffiti tags that I needed more time to paint over. Bailey came to us overnight. One second we fought for her custody, and the next, she was with us full-time. In the mirror, I was no longer the same person I was a few months ago; my hair was healthier, and the bags under my eyes had faded.

The two sister cats, Whiskers and Ashes, lay on Bailey's bed, cuddling closely. Through the doorway, Bailey stood with scissors halfway through her shirt as she cut toward her face. "Fuck, Bailey, be careful! You've ruined your shirt!" The fright pulled through my skin, and my hair rose. Not only did I frighten her, which could have made it worse, but I'd also cursed, and now Bailey thought she was in trouble. I ignored the antagonizing itch to call Lucas.

Bailey watched, confused, and began to cry. I took the scissors away and shouted, "Those are mine!"

Did I say that? Fuck, I didn't mean to say that. "I'm sorry." I hugged her. "Thank you for letting me have them. You scared me. I have child-safe scissors over there that we can use after dinner."

I couldn't believe I left out the sewing scissors. The consequence of hemming the skirt weighed heavily on my shoulders. That could have been the end of Bailey's life, and it would have been all my fault. What would I have done if something had happened? I placed Bailey's bowl in front of her. She took a bite and smiled with half-chewed noodles between her teeth after a few munches.

"This is yummy. You make it the best," Bailey shoveled bite after bite into her mouth. I'd used the recipe on the box.

Where was Lucas? The wall clock read five forty-five. He wasn't even off work. Bailey rubbed her eyes from above her bowl. "Let me put dinner away, and you can—"

Bailey stood up and walked away. She went to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. It was nice to see that this was already in her routine, surly set by her grandmother during the year she was away from Lucas. I stood next to her and began brushing my teeth, too. We watched each other in the mirror, smiling. She was much shorter and had to stand on a wooden stool to see into the mirror. I spit into the hand basin, and the saliva was mixed with blood.

"That's gross," Bailey said. "Ew!"

So embarrassed, I nudged her arm. "Come on, that's not nice. One day you'll bleed from your gums." It probably wasn't true. She would always have perfect teeth. I chipped my nail at the graffitied paint on the wall with the toothbrush still in my mouth while she finished and washed up. "All done?"

"All done!" She smiled.

It began to rain, and the partygoers moved inside. A red plastic cup fell from the balcony and into the backyard. The windows were the best part of the living room. The windows covered the southbound wall, and the door had a windowed hexagon with light-colored glass. Zed, a terrier mix, nudged at the entrance until I opened the door, and he bolted inside. The rain came down hard, and the ocean's musk and bone-chilling air filled the room. As I closed the door and looked behind me, Zed soaked the sheets with dark wet spots.

"Let's play a game!" Bailey loved playing with dolls, Uno, or Chutes and Ladders. She walked right past her baby doll and surprised me with Twister. Not my favorite.

"Sounds great," I played along. I kicked off my DCs and sat with her on the floor. She pulled the Velcro apart on her pink sneakers and placed them next to mine, hitting the floor hard to flash the lights. I was officially someone's giant.

I spun the arrow. I didn't want to admit that I wasn't playing. She placed her hand on the red. Then I spun again, this time her foot on green. Right hand on yellow. Bent on all fours, she fell when I called left on green.

"You lasted much longer than I could have." I spun again.

"Please, play with me one time!" Bailey pulled at my sleeve. Her small hands had a good grip while she pulled me to the mat.

I flicked the pointer. "Left-hand green." We faced one another and placed our palms on the green. I spun again, "Right leg yellow." And again, "right-hand red." This time, I quickly took my hand off to turn the arm and put my hand back on red. "Left foot yellow" then "right-hand blue." Our feet made a line of yellows, and our hands stretched to opposite sides of the board.

"Left-hand red." Our arms crossed, and her boney body leaned into my armpit. " Right foot green." I forgot why I disliked playing. This game was a form of yoga.

I held my weight on the balls of my toes in a squatted position. "What does it say, Bailey?" I spun the dial behind me, making sure not to shift my weight and fall.

"Left foot red." She wiggled her foot from underneath me. She was going for the closest, which left me with the red on the opposite side. With my left hand already down on red, I kicked my leg over Bailey. My foot didn't catch the floor as my leg came down in a beautiful ballerina plie, and my back came crashing down.

"You won!" I giggled at my loss. "Do you want to play again?"

"It's okay." Bailey yawned. "I'm tired."

She moved over to the bed and placed her head on Lucas's pillow.

"Okay. I'll stay up till your dad comes home." I put on *Ancient Aliens* because that's what we used to watch when we were trying to sleep. The words of the paleontologist drowned out as I sank to the floor and rested my head against the mattress. Bailey's and Zed's snores became my own kind of counting sheep.

I woke up, and it was dark in the room, illuminated by a light blue glow from the streetlights out front. Lucas was asleep. He must have put Bailey to bed when he came home. I couldn't believe I fell asleep. We hardly got any time together. In front of the house, a high-pitched female's laugh rang louder than the others. I tried to close my eyes and rest.

I woke up again, this time to the words "Shit, shit, let's go" from people traveling on foot across the empty lot on the north side of the house. It was unnerving. Something about the way the people were walking. It's odd how a person can tell someone's intentions by how they walk or run without seeing it, just by listening. I couldn't go back to sleep.

I shook Lucas awake. I was not one for sleepless nights or night terrors.

"Did you hear that?" "It's probably a trash panda," Lucas said as he turned away.

The whistle of the city whirled through my ear canal. I followed in my mind the cars from blocks away—their every stop, acceleration, or tight turn. Suddenly, a woman's shrill scream broke the silence of the night. The walls were so thin I could hear her tears and the cry of sheer terror. She was in front of our house, the house that housed our child, which helped us gain custody. The place that was supposed to keep her safe no longer felt safe. Everything we'd worked toward seemed like it could all go away in the blink of an eye.

Bailey continued to sleep. I sat on her bed and watched her in the moonlight that seeped through the window while she slept through the sirens and the hysteria. Lucas stood outside and smoked an American Spirit for what seemed like hours as he kept an eye on the commotion.

"Someone died," he said when he finally came in. He was cold to the thought of death, which made me more unsettled than the chaos in front of the house. "In their car, parked in front of the house."

"Should I go out there and tell them what I heard?" my voice quivered.

"No. You don't want to associate yourself with this at all. If it were an overdose, there's a good chance someone wanted him dead. You don't want that person coming after us." Lucas turned the lights off and went to sleep while I watched the shadows shift with the car lights that drained through the window.

The following day, the block was roped off with caution tape. A tow truck removed the small black Toyota Corolla from the street parking spot in front of the house. My Cherokee was stuck in our driveway with no way to move. Lucas had to walk to work early.

There were groups of people huddled together on the sidewalks. Some took shots from a tequila bottle while others bent over crying. Cops wove in and out of the blocked-off road, holding yellow tape and notebooks. The cops talked to a select few, but the cops didn't speak to us. People continued to come until the road resembled a block party of lost souls, a chaotic gathering of mourners who couldn't bring back their dead.

"Maddie, what happened?" Bailey asked.

I hesitated for a second. I reached Bailey's eye level and placed my hand on her shoulder. "Somebody died in front of our house last night. I don't know what happened. Your dad warned us not to talk to them, okay? Just let them mourn."

"That's sad," she said. We walked past the crowd, invisible to the men in chains, covered in tattoos, or the woman in skulls and fishnets. Bailey and I walked two miles to the coaster which would take forty minutes to get to the school. We'd kept her in the same daycare she was in before so the transition from grandma's to our house would be easier for her, even though that meant we had to travel further. Some days I got the car, but more than not, we took the coaster. We brought an old Eeyore doll with us. It sat next to her in the blue train seats. I'd gotten Eeyore from Disneyland when I was six, only a little over a year older than Bailey was now. I passed her a banana, and she took a large bite out of it.

"Smile," I said as I got out my camera phone.

After working a few hours on the house, I returned to the coaster to get Bailey. When I got home, the street was full of people and classic lowriders that had come to honor the man's death.

"Spider was a good man. Yolo, pour one out for the homie." A large man in a Tupac shirt dumped the liquor onto the ground. The cops were gone, which left room for more visitors to arrive. They weren't very social. We followed behind a woman with a low-cut shirt and a skirt walking in heels toward our house. She cautiously bent over the memorial of flowers, photos, and beer bottles and placed a red candle, which she lit, and a picture of herself on the lap of a large man. In the photo, they were both laughing. I closed the wooden gate behind us, blocking us from the sixty-plus people and the mariachi music.

Through a hole in the wood, I could see some surfer guys approach a group of mourners. "Did someone die?" one of the neighbors asked, his friends close behind him. A man

with a rosary turned his shoulder to the neighbor, closing the circle until the neighbor and his friends walked away.

Cars left, and new ones took their spots. People poured out of an SUV, and a new wave of strangers and tears took on the night, accompanied by music and candles.

"Maddie, what happens when you die?" Bailey said as we sat on the porch, looking through the wooden gate.

"You get a second chance, and all the good stuff you do determines where you end up," I spoke without question.

"This guy must have been really good if he had so many people that loved him. His second chance is going to be epic."

"Yeah, Bailey. I'm sure it is," I said.

I picked a book from my childhood off the small wooden bookshelf. *I Love You Forever* by Robert Munsch; my mother had given it to me, and I read it to Bailey. The words of the story always predicted I'd grow up but could never have prepared me for the love and commitment of being a mother. I held back tears as I finished and kissed her cheek. "Good night," and I turned off the lights.

Lucas came home from work. He was breathing heavily from the walk home. He sat on the bed and kicked off his shoes. "My coworker doesn't do anything. He sits on the toilet and talks to girls on dating apps."

"I'm sorry, that must be rough." I'd spent the day picking up cigarette butts and broken bottles from the backyard, and I painted the ceiling until my arm wanted to fall off.

"Yeah, it was." He kissed my cheek and neck—the smell of freshly smoked cigarettes and a full day of sweat from lifting soil. My mind lingered on Spider and how his death had affected so many people. Whose kid looked at him as a father, or young kids that thought of him as a brother, or how many people would be without their dope? How many people had his dope

killed? Lucas's hands were soft on my skin. He slipped under my blouse and pulled it over my head. He kept kissing me harder until it came to my mind to kiss him back.

"You don't even seem like you're into this," he said while he got out of bed. He held his head in front of the lamp. I pulled his body closer to mine, frail like a flower but rooted. I kissed the stubble on his chin and pulled his pants to his knees. He entered me from under the blanket, and a moan escaped my lips. I wanted to relax, but my mind kept racing. In the corner of the room, I could see a shadow moving.

"Bailey," I whisper into the night. Lucas pushes off me, and I wave her over to us. We scramble to get our clothes on underneath the sheets. I kicked my legs deeper until my big toes found my pajama bottoms, and I pulled them up.

"I can't sleep," she said. Of course, she can't sleep. I was probably being loud.

"There is a giant in my dreams who's going to stomp me like the man outside," she said. Through the thin wall, someone whistled out, breaking our conversation, followed by loud chunks of intoxicated dialogue.

"That man wasn't stomped," but I couldn't explain further. All we knew was that it was a drug overdose and he was a well-known dealer. If he was killed or if it was just an unlucky hit, we would never know. "Do you want to sleep in our bed?"

She nodded her head and climbed into our bed. I remembered having bad dreams as a child and wanting to sleep in bed with my mother. I might not have been her mother, but I'd let her sleep with us.

"Maddie?" Bailey said in a high-pitched four-year-old voice. "Can you sleep on the floor?"

I grabbed a blanket and made a spot on the casino carpet. I let Bailey get all the cuddles from her father that I had stolen for the past year.

The room was silent, except for Lucas's piglet snores. I missed his touch. A fuzzy animal crawled under my blanket, and Zed cuddled against my belly, above where my legs cupped. He

reminded me of having a baby in my belly, and I pet his back like a pregnant woman might her stomach. The room faded, and my body sank into dreamland.

In the morning, I made waffles with bananas and cinnamon. Lucas had already left to work by the time I woke up Bailey. "It's a school day. Get ready."

She shuffled between the rooms, grabbing a bow for her hair and socks that matched the pink in her clothes. She liked her independence and being able to dress herself. We brushed our teeth, and I braided her hair. We moved quickly. We had already missed the coaster and would have to take the bus. Together we raced down the street of condos, past the shopping corridors, and behind the movie theater where the bus stop was.

A man in holey black jeans and a shirt, holding a dirty blanket over ragged hair, was screaming in front of the bus. His eyes bulged, and he pointed at me, shaking, "Cunt, you stole my child, cunt! Fuck! Pedophile! Freak! You stole my child!"

I took Bailey's hand, and we walked past him. The bus driver took my money and waved us on. We sat in the middle of the bus, Bailey by the window. The man from outside got on the bus. Fear trickled over my skin as he pulled out a bus pass. The bus driver waved him on.

"You can't let him on here," I said. "Did you not hear what he said outside to my daughter and I? Please don't let him on."

"He has a pass," the bus driver said, like there was nothing he could do but let the man on the bus.

He sat up a few rows across us, staring at Bailey, slapping his lips together. His mouth formed the word C-U-N-T as he yacked his lips. He kept trying to get our attention, but I held Bailey close. "Don't look," I told her. In his hand was a small Mcdonald's bag, and he took a condom out of it and tore it open with his teeth as he continued to make a long smacking gesture with his lips.

The bus came to a stop, and I got off with Bailey even though it was only a few stops down. A kid with scraggly dirty blond hair approached us. "Can you buy me some vodka?"

Please? I'll give you five dollars." I shook my head, and we continued walking past a diner with an American flag advertising "Veteran Specials." A fitness model passed quickly ahead of us in high-rise jeans, a crop top, and a large sun hat, gossiping on the phone. A skateboarder held a pizza box in one hand and a dog leash in the other as a bulldog hauled him under the beats of the palm frond's shadows. A man in all black with a mohawk danced to heavy metal in his headphones while flying a sign for AT&T. Further down the street, after Baskin Robbins, was a hydro store with a spray-painted sign and exotic plants. Finally, somewhere familiar, closer to Lucas.

"Downtown is busy today," I told Curt behind the counter.

"Is that Lucas's daughter? Hi, Bailey." Curt approached her from behind the counter and held out his hand. Curt's shirt hung loosely, and his brown hair was slung over his left eye. She took his hand and shook it.

"It's nice to meet you. Lucas's in the back, unloading soil," Curt said.

Bailey was usually shy, but she took to Curt and talked to him about the plants on display. She quickly returned to my side as I headed to the back of the store. "Hey, Lucas," I yelled into the back.

I could hear him talking to some coworkers. He walked around the soil piles, towering over them like a tree. Bailey broke away from me, ran, and jumped into his arms. Lucas's eyes squinted his lips in a smile. He loved being with his daughter.

"This guy was harassing us at the bus station. The bus driver didn't do anything about it," I said.

"I'm sorry to hear. You guys want to take the car the rest of the way?" he asked. Bailey nodded her head, and Lucas handed me the key.

"Thank you for stopping by. I'm glad Bailey met Curt. He's our newest employee," Lucas said as a heavy-set man approached him and patted his shoulder. "And you remember Drake, don't you?"

Of course, the one who's always on the toilet sexting. "Hi, Drake. It's a pleasure to see you again.

"Hey, Maddie," he said, shaking my hand before bending to Bailey's level. "And this little stinker."

"Drake!" she smiled.

"Your daddy is always talking about you and Maddie," he said, giving me a quick wink as he pulled a lollipop out of his back pocket. I wouldn't have taken it.

"Yum! Thanks." Bailey unwrapped the candy and put it into her mouth.

"Thanks, Curt," I said, ready to leave. "Hey, did you hear about a Posole who died a few nights ago? I think his name was Spider."

"Never heard of him. What happened?" Curt said, concerned.

"He overdosed in his car in front of our house. You know we live close to the underpass by the beach. He was probably meeting someone there. I woke up that night to some people talking. They said something like, "Oh shit, we got to go," and afterward, there was just screaming when his girlfriend found the body."

"Sounds like something you all want to avoid getting involved with. Don't worry too much about it, Maddie. Just keep a bat by the bed."

"Thank you, Curt," I said while taking Bailey's hand and walking away. It was nice to talk to someone about Spider and almost shocking to think there was someone who didn't know him. I felt like Spider had been the center of the universe.

These days went by quickly. Transporting Bailey to and from daycare three towns away was becoming a hassle. I needed to call her grandmother and tell her it would be easier if she went to school closer to us. I could get a job at the diner, and we wouldn't have to take public transportation as much. The bad encounters were becoming more frequent. I spent the day spray painting the outdoor furniture, so it had a fresh layer of color that would surely chip after a

prolonged rain. Bailey was excited when I picked her up, and we decided to return the car to Lucas so he could get home faster when he got off.

"Are you sure? I can walk," he offered.

"No, it's okay. It's a beautiful day. We can walk the last fifteen minutes." It was more like twenty-five at Bailey's pace, but I preferred he have the car, so he would get home faster. I was desperate for quality time.

We walked the rest of the way along the coast. The waves crashed close to the walkway, separated by large rocks where crabs and starfish hid in the cracks. There were fewer people along the boardwalk than on the busy city streets. A woman jogged by wearing headphones, and a man in band patches rode past on his bike. The waves played the beat of their drum, and it was nice to be close to the most natural element in the city.

"I like it out here. Can we go to the playground?" Bailey asked. Opposite the eroding beach was a playground among a grass field. Children played on the swing, slides, and monkey bars. The playground was a good stop. Bailey ran ahead to join the kids going down the slides. Next to me was a tall blond with inescapably large breasts in a short tennis skirt.

"How's it going with Jimmy? Lucy?" she repeated to get the woman next to her to pay attention while petting her daughter's head.

"Oh, he's still playing fantasy football every Thursday. Work trips on the weekend, man's hardly home," the woman, Lucy, responded, wearing brown pigtails and a puma jumper with a matching baby bag and sneakers.

Bailey ran up the stairs with the other girls, nagging them to tag her and coaxing them to play. The kids weaved through the play structure. One girl tripped and started to cry hysterically. Her mom attended to her, and the cries turned to sniffles. The other moms called their kids over, and suddenly Bailey was alone on the playground. The other children and moms huddled in a circle with their blankets and strollers, an afternoon mom's club.

When it was time to go, Bailey started complaining, "This walk is so long. Are we almost there?"

We were close, but I knew three blocks seemed far for a child. "We will be there in no time."

The house was between some condos and a dirt lot that led to a trailer park. Dirt and stones paved the driveway. The paint was chipping on the house, covered by two large bushes and some dahlias. The wood fence was tattered and weathered. The house had character. They told us when we moved in it was an old mailing house and wasn't meant to be lived in. Before we moved in, it was a bachelor's pad or a trap house.

I had been painting it navy blue and a dark forest green in Bailey's room, with gold highlights throughout the house, plus a maroon ceiling and dark purple walls for the living room. The porch had a gothic elegance, with wooden newel posts and rusted outdoor decor, the metal statue I spray painted gold, and the Venus fly traps hanging from the awning. Lucas and his friends had spray-painted the outside walls a year before I came around. Even with the spray-painted flowers and smiling sun, the house was deteriorating. Rats endlessly crawled through the attic, and nights were bone-chillingly cold. But the home made it possible for us to live together. I put the kettle on the stove, ripped two hot cocoa packets open, and poured them into mugs.

"Let's play a game!" Bailey shouted.