

CanStruction

The bee buzzing sound stopped, making way for the silence that signaled the end of the day at the food bank. Really just the beginning for Tilda, though. This was the moment she waited for. First, she listened for the hum of the lights to stop. Then she waited the forty-five seconds it took to be knee deep in total darkness. She knew it took only forty-five seconds because when she was seven she used to count up from zero until the lights automatically shut off and the alarm activated. Now, at ten, she practiced little rituals in that less than a minute time; sometimes running along the far wall of the warehouse as fast as she could to see where she'd end up. Her legs were longer now, so it was a real competition for her, now. To one-up herself.

But today, she went straight for the storage room in the far-east corner of the warehouse. She crossed her fingers and looked down at her feet. Step on a crack, break your father's back. She loved that rhyme. It was fitting for her father since he ran this place. Dale Bond, CEO of Dented Cans. She'd given him this nickname one night when she'd been looking around the warehouse and noticed how many cans there were and how many had little imperfections. Imperfections made them perfect according to her father. She wasn't sure where he got that idea from.

There was one long thin crack that ran diagonally along the warehouse's concrete floor, stopped and then started again. She avoided it like the plague. The more good luck the better when it came to her first food sculpture. Three nights ago, Tilda placed the beginnings of her sculpture on four pallets that she could easily pull in and out of the dark storage room. She reached for the pallet jack that Johnny, the warehouse manager, had given her. He'd shown her how to press the little red button and maneuver the handle so that she could pick up multiple

pallets at once. This, he'd said to her, was just a precautionary measure in case she ever needed to use it.

Her skills with the pallet jack were improving and she brought her sculpture to the center of the room easily. It was really coming along. Early on, she'd decided to stack her tuna fish cans at an angle so that each one didn't quite sit directly on top of the one beneath it. She liked the effect. She'd begun to form a partial plate with her cans and glued them together with a metal adhesive to make the sculpture easier to transport.

She'd spent the last couple of days thinking about how to make her sculpture really big. She wanted to be able to fit in the middle of the plate with one side touching her head and the other touching her toes. A life-size sculpture, just like at the Baltimore Museum of Art. Tilda knew she would need 200 more blue label albacore tuna fish cans to finish her plate. But she had plenty of Del-Monte mixed fruit cups for the utensils that sat beside the plate. Like all place settings, there would be a silver knife, a spoon and a fork. Now, which side to put the utensils on? She closed her eyes to picture the place-settings her mother made for family dinners. Nothing. Gone. Lost to the year since she'd last seen her. Her dad never set the table. They just ate on paper plates or with napkins. Anyway, pizza and sandwiches didn't really need a knife or fork. She still couldn't quite remember whether the knife was on the left or the right.

She'd begun thinking about this project a week ago, after her class had visited the Baltimore Museum of Art. They'd spent the day talking about the material artists like to repurpose for their sculptures. The idea came to her instantly. She would make something out of cans of food that they could display in the building. She'd worried initially about wasting the food; but over the course of the sculpture's creation, this began to bother her less. Her sculpture was coming along so well that she just figured it would live in the food bank for generations to

come. An advertisement for what food is truly needed to feed the hungry. She'd even thought about doing another project--art made out of food that was not good to give the hungry. A good/bad sort of thing.

Tilda closed the storage room door and began to absentmindedly peel the label off a fruit cup. She loved to drink the sweet syrup in the can, before she even touched the fruit. But she wouldn't be eating this tonight. This can had a higher purpose—art. She was hungry, though. Is this what they meant by starving artists? She giggled.

“Tilda, what the hell?”

Her hands froze mid-peel. Shoot. She hadn't been aware of her actions. She faced Johnny, who was closing up the warehouse. For a second, she replaced his face with her cat Amar—both—had pointy features and friendly eyes. He was saying something, but all she could hear was Amar's gentle purr. She focused on his lips, but still only cat sounds. She shook her head and placed her finger in her ear to clear out any clutter. There, now, she could hear him.

“Are you stealing food?” Johnny's accusation came out soft, but it caused her to open her mouth wide and shake her head.

No. Certainly not, but Johnny wouldn't understand. She decided to lie boldly. The words came out easier than they should have. “I forgot to pack my lunch for school.” She gulped, “I spent the entire afternoon thinking of fruit syrup.”

Johnny frowned. He placed his hand on Tilda's shoulder, causing her to jump. Tilda decided to say something that would rid her of any responsibility, whatsoever, especially in this place. “I was hungry.”

He adjusted the simple black frames on his face, shifted his weight from his left to his right and made a pointed, exhausted parent-like sigh. He loved to act like he was her father.

“Why didn’t you say anything this morning? I could have made sure you had something.”

She took a breath, then another, “I didn’t even know until lunch.” She looked up at Johnny. Fake hunger or not, she was off the hook. “It was okay, though, my friend Missy shared some of her lunch with me.” She looked at the half peeled can of fruit Johnny had in his left hand.

Johnny popped the lid open for her. “Next time you forget your lunch you come to me. You can’t go around taking food out of this place.” He made her face him. He had onion-breath. “You remember Mrs. Norma Jean?” She nodded. “She orders 150 of these fruit cups every week.” He paused and handed her the fruit cup. “Before you take one think about that.”

Johnny let go of her shoulders and stood up. He smiled and she could see that he still had those friendly eyes. “How late do you think tonight will be?”

Tilda lifted the can of fruit to her lips to taste the syrup before responding. She would have to wash her face; the fruit cups were so sticky. “Don’t know. Last night we left at 9.”

Johnny began to leave. “I’ll remind him about school. Maybe he won’t keep you so late.”

She watched as he reached the heavy office door and slammed it shut. That was close. She began to pick up various fruit pieces out of the fruit cup and dangle them above her mouth until the syrup dripped down her throat. She needed to be more careful. She dumped the rest of the fruit in her mouth and chewed greedily.

Tilda listened to the silence. Then she made her own noise, “I’m the Queen of the Warehouse!” She felt better after her syrupy concoction and relieved that her art project was still hidden. She took a moment to run around the warehouse screaming. Tilda banged her hands

against the shelves that housed boxes of packaged product ready for soup kitchens. She watched as one rack lurched forward as she ran full speed into it. She expertly placed her hand on the frame to stop it from shaking.

Time to get to work. But first, her flashlight. She loved this flashlight. It was the flashlight her mother used during power outages or attic rummages. It made a cool clicking sound when it needed more juice, and had to be wound up. Juice was her mother's word. She juiced up her flashlight and aimed it at the bins overflowing with glitter, handwriting and an assortment of non-perishable goods.

“Food Drive!” People went all out when they were collecting jars of peanut butter or macaroni and cheese for the hungry. The first food drive box she aimed her flashlight on had flowery cursive script in a bold purple pen. Tilda examined the script more closely. She often imagined that she recognized the handwriting on these boxes; that she was intimately connected with the people who collected this food. But, the writing did look familiar. That strange loopy "f" looked just like her mother's. She'd tried to imitate her mother's handwriting. Never got it quite right, though.

Where was her mother now? Tilda wondered when the last time she'd eaten food cooked by her. She knew it had been at least a year.

It used to be that when Tilda got home from school, her mother greeted her. Or rather the sound of her mother's chopping knife hitting the cutting board greeted her. The kitchen was near the front door and the sound meant her mother was cooking for her. Her mother was a chef and worked evenings, but there was always a delicious home-cooked meal left for Tilda and her father. Usually, the meal was ready well before her mother would leave for work, so Tilda could

sit down with her and eat. Then, hours later, she would eat again with her father when he got home. Two dinners in those days, not bad.

When her mother cooked, she'd place her long black hair in a ponytail and tie an apron around her waist. But on this day, Tilda noticed that her mother was in the kitchen and barely dressed. She was in a silk night shirt with no pants and bare feet. Her hair was flowing around her face, forcing her to pause to tuck it behind her ears. Her mother's head was down and her hands moved unsteadily. Mumbling too. When Tilda stepped closer to her she could make out four words. Stupid, stupid, stupid Ann. Tilda wondered what Ann had done.

Sitting next to the cutting board was her parent's wedding album, partially emptied. She watched as her mother pulled a picture out of the album and carefully began to julienne it, first using the knife to cut the white border around the edges and then chopping it into small strips. After this, she grabbed the strips that were sitting on the side of the cutting board and put them in the blender. She then mixed this with other more desirable canned food-- processed cheese, peanut butter and tuna fish.

There had been an argument between her parents when her father came home. All she really remembered was the physicality of her father's response. She'd watched her father enter the kitchen and was shocked at how wide his eyes went and how red his face became. He clutched his chest and didn't move for at least two minutes. Both she and her mother looked at each other when he stopped moving. Tilda thought he'd had a heart attack— that he was going to die in front of her because her mother had wasted food. Then he blinked, and Tilda's mother retreated to the bedroom.

Every piece of fruit, vegetable, dairy, cheese and jar of food had gone into one of three entrees. Wedding Album Carrot and Apple Soup; Wedding Album Peanut Butter and Cheese Pie

and Wedding Album Pork Tenderloin. There was no last conversation between Tilda and her mother. Nothing. The next day her mother was gone.

Now, Tilda pointed her flashlight at the cursive again. She inspected it carefully. Nope. Upon closer look it certainly wasn't her mother's.

“Blimey, where to start?” She looked at the rest of the food drive. She liked to talk to herself and loved rolling r's under her tongue, or pretending she had a British accent, which she'd discovered because of one of the volunteers, Roy. She also discovered that she liked words like blimey so she tried to use it as much as possible. She wasn't sure what it meant, but she was pretty sure she was using it the same way Roy did when he said it.

The food drive bins were hit or miss. Some of the stuff was really good like the albacore tuna she'd been using for her sculpture and other stuff was just, well, crap. Back of the pantry food sucks. She'd decided a week ago that she wasn't going to use any of it for her plate because she wanted the sculpture to represent food bank staples. She wanted people to look at it and know exactly what to donate.

She really did hope her father would like this sculpture. She hoped he would see its importance as a piece of advertising for the food bank. They could use it to show volunteers what type of food they really needed. She was creating this sculpture out of love. It was useful and she really wasn't destroying anything. The tuna fish cans were intact; the Del-Monte fruit was too, minus a couple of labels. She wasn't doing what her mother did, ruining the food because she was upset and angry. This was a gift.

Tilda wanted to finish her sculpture soon, which meant that she might have to forego picking out just the blue-label tuna fish cans. Chunk light tuna, here we come. She liked to preoccupy her mind when she was working on something creative. Sometimes she would sing to

herself or talk; but with this sculpture she said four words to herself. "Stupid, stupid, stupid, Ann."

She didn't know why she was repeating these words. Of course, Ann was stupid. Tilda couldn't stand her. She was too skinny and smoked too much and frowned too often for anybody to really like her. But she knew her father thought differently, though, so she usually just tried to deal. Tilda wondered how long she would be stuck with her.

She'd seen Ann just a couple of days ago. This was not unusual. Very often, her inherited parents were the more responsible guardians: Johnny, her father's right hand man, and Ann and Rudy, the two women her father developed the concept of food banking with, ran her to ballet and swimming lessons; whoever was available took the job. Johnny might drop her off at school and Ann or Rudy would pick her up at the end of the day. Rarely, did she see her father. And her mother was gone.

Tilda was used to seeing the dented dark blue minivan sitting outside the school's front entrance. This was an in-between time for Ann. The door to the blue minivan always stuck, and she had sticky fingers from an art project earlier that day. Tilda held up her hands, showing Ann her palms when she couldn't open the door. Ann removed her sunglasses and frowned. Tilda shrugged her shoulders.

Ann leaned over the passenger side and opened it for Tilda. "What's wrong with you that you can't even open a simple door?" Although what she said had her usual bite to it, her tone was friendly. Tilda relaxed. Good mood Ann.

"Glue," Tilda hopped into the minivan and dumped her backpack on the floor in front of her.

“Glue?” Ann lit a cigarette and leaned her body against the driver’s side window. She smoked slowly and deliberately. Like a dragon. Sometimes Tilda imagined that instead of smoke, actual flames came out of her mouth.

Tilda rolled down the window. “You know you shouldn’t smoke around children.”

Ann exhaled and put the van into gear, “Oh yeah? What do they say about smoking around smart asses?”

“Not them either. Are you going to drop me off at home?” Tilda smiled at Ann in that sweet, fake childish way that showed her teeth and scrunched her eyes.

Ann tapped out her cigarette and leaned in close to Tilda, “No.” She pulled the van out of the school parking lot and then hit the gas so quickly that it almost flooded the engine. “Roll up your window.”

“God,” Tilda said to Ann more out loud than she’d meant to.

“Your dad’s running the dinner at Helping Hands Mission today. You know.” She paused to shift gears. “Mrs. Norma Jean’s place. He wanted me to drop off some stuff, and bring you by. I told him it was about time you saw her operation.”

Tilda rolled her eyes. Ann was so dramatic. Tilda knew what they did; she’d grown up around it her whole life. She didn’t need to see it. The car lurched forward again. There was something wrong with this car. Tilda felt every bump in the road on the top of her head. “Ouch.” There was always something wrong with this car. No money to fix it, unless it wasn’t running. More money to spend on the hungry that way.

It was a long drive to Mrs. Norma Jean’s place in the ghetto. Her friends were always teasing her about the ghetto. As in why is your family always hanging out in the ghetto? Was it sunny in the ghetto today? It’s sure sunny outside the ghetto.

As Ann drove, the streets began to change. It was easy to tell where the ghetto started in the city. The first sign was the concrete. A lot more concrete and a lot less trees. The trees disappeared when you got to the poorer parts of the city. Concrete replaced grass and nobody was ever outside. Not a soul. Just trash rolling around empty streets.

In the ghetto, the few people who were out always looked more worn and tired than normal people, liked they'd jumped out of bed and had no real time to get ready before leaving the house. Sloppy. From a distance they looked normal, though. But then upon a closer look you might see the symptoms of poverty as her dad called them. For one thing, nobody smiled. People sometimes pushed around whole carts of stuff, carrying everything they owned with them. Sometimes it would look like a lot, but she knew if it could fit in a shopping cart it wasn't very much for real life. Or you would see a young woman and she might have one or two children. The children always looked cute, usually happy. Not aware of what they'd been born into. Tilda felt like them. They'd been born poor in America and she'd been born to someone who served the poor. She was poor by her parent's choice. That's much worse than being poor.

"Ann, do I have to go? Can't you just drop me off at home?" Home wasn't that far away from Mrs. Norma Jean's anyway. It was in a safer neighborhood, just across York Road, but still near the action. She was getting tired of this whole ghetto-thing; tired of feeding these stupid poor people. She wished they'd just go away and feed themselves; then her life could be normal.

It was too late. They'd already pulled up near the Episcopal Church off of Cold Spring Lane. She saw volunteers pulling food out of the food bank's only truck. Her father directed traffic.

Tilda recognized her father's business-mode. It was at these times his tall lean frame looked bulkier to her. Like he'd grown some muscles overnight. He nodded at Tilda, giving her a wink and addressed Ann.

"You've got the mac and cheese, right?" He touched Ann's elbow. She giggled. Tilda frowned.

"Sure do," Ann opened the van door and pulled out huge aluminum trays.

Right now her dad was talking about the salad and the types of dessert they'd have after dinner. Boring. Boring. Boring. He was leaning in close to Ann so that their noses were almost touching. Her dad always did this with Ann—talked too close. This made her cringe; there was something going on there and she didn't want to know anything else about it. It seemed wrong to her. Ann was so ugly and mean.

Tilda didn't want to be here. There had to be a place she could go. The church was connected to a rare tree-lined street. She watched as a robin, carrying a worm, returned to its nest. The robin added real color to the street. She decided to get a better look.

The street ran perpendicular to the back entrance of the church and Tilda crossed the parking lot to reach it. Trees created a canopy effect that provided some shade. This was Baxter Way.

Houses closest to the church were well taken care of with bright white siding and decorative cornices that led to well-put on roofs. These houses had painted doors covered with iron screen doors that looked like gates. The first screen door she saw had five vertical bars across the entire length of the door. Even with the front door open, it would be impossible to see out.

Tilda walked further down the block and saw number 1924. 1924 was her address, only she lived at 1924 Rolling Court Way. This 1924 was a brick house, just like hers, but the entire front of the house was burned. It looked like a fire had hit a number of houses on this street. Had it been one fire or many? This 1924 had dark black brick stretching from the far right window on the top floor to the window above the door. She wanted to go inside.

Her 1924 was lined with azaleas her mother planted years ago. Those bushes were blooming now. This walkway wasn't surrounded by flowers or color. The front door was covered in plywood, nailed tightly to the frame, but she saw a couple of places where somebody had pulled out the nails, loosening the wood considerably so she could fit inside. Okay, here goes.

The light struck her first. The dark wood paneling and dingy walls were lit up like daylight. She looked up to see that the roof barely existed. Her eyes landed on the staircase that led upstairs. This was the same staircase with the same railing in her house. Only, this railing had huge gaping holes, so that half of the stairs were unprotected. Portions of the steps were crumbling, leaving her with the impression that the top of the house wasn't fully connected to the bottom. Even through the dark wood paneling and the boarded up windows she saw her living room. She wondered if there was a bathroom tucked right near the top of the stairs. She sniffed. Smokey. She could see how the fire moved through the front room. A large draft blew personal papers and magazines and plywood and big pieces of house off the ground every so often. She spotted a pair of baby's shoes under the dart board on the wall. She shivered.

She wanted to examine the house to see if she could learn something about the family that lived here. What if somebody died here? In Baltimore there were always house fires because when it got cold people who had their electricity turned off would light candles or run

space heaters and then fires would start. She wondered if she'd heard about this particular fire on the news. She imagined that at least four people died in the fire. Including a baby.

She heard footsteps upstairs. Somebody else was here. She knew that sometimes people squatted in these burnt up old houses. She looked down on the ground for more clues as to who these people were.

Then she saw it.

A needle on the floor.

This was bad. In all her time with her father, she'd only ever heard about the types of drug abuse some of the poorer parts of Baltimore had succumbed too. She'd never actually seen it. While, maybe, once or twice, she'd see somebody swaying back and forth or rocking out to themselves, and then she'd wonder if they were on drugs.

Toilet flushing. She imagined the squatter. In her mind, she saw a young white man with stringy blonde sweaty hair and wild eyes. Arms with track marks all over them.

Time to go. She moved quickly underneath the plywood and ran. Her father and Ann would be crazy to be helping these people. She would never go to Mrs. Norma Jean's again, never.

Now, Tilda stretched her arms deep into the bin in search of tuna for her sculpture. For the last couple of days she'd been feeling guilty about running. Abandoning the poor because she saw a needle. She'd also gotten in trouble for it. Her father had to leave the dinner service to find her. This was part of the reason she was working on this sculpture. She wanted to prove to him that she could help, to show him this art project could make a difference and make people think about the food they donated to the food bank. She'd even imagined going on TV and showing it

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off. Her dad did TV interviews and they were always looking for good visuals. This was going to be a great visual.

Turned out there was plenty of tuna in the three bins. She would need a good couple of hours to glue the cans together and finish the set up. But, she'd be able to finish it tonight.

Hours later, her sculpture shimmered like the ocean and she was pleased with the effect of combining the green and blue tuna cans. She wished she had some glitter, but maybe next time. She'd decided to place the knife on the left side and the fork and the spoon on the right. The symmetry just looked right to her. It had been a little bit difficult to create an oval spoon, so she'd made a spork instead. Her utensils were a knife, a spork and a fork. She realized that sporks covered the category of both spoon and fork, so you probably didn't need both. Still, pretty good.

Tilda signed her name boldly to the construction paper.

The cracks in walls were growing. Each morning Johnny noticed a little more sunlight pushing its way through the walls. He had to convince his boss Dale that the wall needed to be gutted by a contractor.

"The wall just needs a little patch up." Dale smiled, "besides, this warehouse could use some sunlight."

"Not like this." Johnny pointed to a spot fifty feet in front of him. "We'll be lucky if the whole building doesn't need gutting."

Then both men turned the corner and the cracks in the warehouse were lost to them. Tilda's food sculpture was covered in a radiant light and imprinted with her name. Johnny couldn't quite figure out what the sculpture was a replication of. The silver cans caught the

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sunlight in a way that was ethereal, and blinding. Mostly, blinding. He waited for his eyes to adjust. Johnny closed them and in that moment between eye-closed and eye-opened, he felt a sadness open up in Dale. It was a true and unbearable sadness, and it sat comfortably on his boss's face, creating lines and creases more damaging than the fissures in the wall they'd come to fix. The girl had done it this time. Didn't Dale watch his daughter when they were together late at night? Give her dinner? This seemed like an impossible task for her to complete on her own without getting caught.

Johnny finally saw what Tilda had intended them to see-- a place setting. There were certainly plate-like qualities to the sculpture, most notably the concave layer of tuna fish cans covered by a single jaggedly round piece of white construction paper. It was that white construction paper that Dale knelt upon now. His shoulders were slumped and he was methodically counting each can his finger touched. It looked maniacal to Johnny, the way he kept counting. He'd move his body clockwise over and over, again. Counting in perpetuity. Good thing the girl was in school. Far away was good right now.

"Boss?" Johnny placed his hand on Dale's back.

"There's like a thousand cans here." Dale rubbed his temples. He tried to lift up a can. Nothing. "She's glued them all together."

Johnny shook his head.

Dale began to jump on the sculpture. "It's not budging." He was panicking. He gestured for Johnny to hand him a hammer. Johnny shook his head, put his hands up and backed away.

Finally, Dale stopped. "She's just like her mother."

There's that sadness again. "Maybe not."

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Tilda's father stepped out of the sculpture. He looked Johnny straight in the eye. "This is a waste. A complete waste."

Johnny noticed that Dale's eyes contained none of that radiant light that was beaming in the room around them. Dale shook his head. "Take it apart. People need this food."

Johnny nodded. "If I can't?"

Dale put his hands to his face and rubbed his chin. He began to pick at his stubble with his fingers, pulling his beard out, hair by hair. He stopped for a long time, didn't move even. "If you can't salvage it," he turned from Johnny and began to walk away, "throw it out."