

New Chapter

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My journal holds a four-year gap. Blank pages since March 12th, 2014. My hands have gone just as long without lighting a candle. Smoking a joint. Opening a book. The duvet spends its time crumpled at the foot of the bed, rearranged at night to swathe two bodies. The sheets are permanently untucked and tangled up in the heap of the duvet. The china arrived in boxes wrapped with ribbons and piled up with the other wedding gifts. Those plates enjoyed the company of silverware and meals for two for just over a year until they were unknowingly washed for the last time and placed behind glass on the top shelf. Replaced with baby bottles, rubber spoons, and plastic dishes. The flowers in the vase on the table slouched, died, rotted. It took weeks for the smell to reach our noses and another month for us to care. I pitched the water. I put the vase on the table. I didn't buy flowers.

Now the two children are asleep; they have been for hours. Hours already? These hours pass like minutes, solely because the minutes are mine. These quiet minutes may be mine, but they are not enough. If only adults didn't need sleep, if bedtime was a tale made for children. Better yet, if only I could forgo sleep. I'd have a foot in the closing door of time, just enough of a crack to slip inside and stop it. When the sun came up, I'd hit play again, push the door open, and step back outside to join the rest of the waking world. But there is no door, and I do

need sleep, and they'll be sure to wake me earlier than I'd like. What I'd give to press snooze all day on my human alarm clocks.

No such snooze button, I remember each morning. "Mama, Mama!" works its way to my consciousness. It is March 18th, 2018, four years and eleven months since the day I became a mother. The name Mama should be mine by now, yet most days it presents as an unfamiliar sound to my dreaming mind, when the part of me responsible for these children is still asleep. Given the chance to wake up, that part will fill her role and fill it well. She just needs a little reminder, that's all. Then her feet find her slippers, her arms cradle the pajama-clad children, and her hands slide steaming plates across the countertop. Her entire body knows the procedure; it is muscle memory by now. March 18th is a Saturday, a sunny morning with fresh stacks of pancakes and syrup.

Sticky Saturdays. Syrup and Saturdays make for sticky fingers. I am tactful, washing dishes and wiping the griddle clean, but really I stand guard. Ready at any moment to defend against the syrupy sets of hands that threaten my kitchen each weekend. My mama-senses are tingling this morning—I scoop up my book on the counter from a rapidly approaching OJ spill. A close call, but the hardcover is saved. I decide to place it out of harm's way in the living room, only to return to World War III in the kitchen. The second cup of juice fell, as it

was destined to. This cup, however, spilled all over the children. It took them an entire four seconds to begin wailing; at their cold, wet clothes, at each other, and of course, at me. Saturday morning concluded with two screaming naked monsters being dragged into the laundry room.

Moments like these bring me back to sixteen, holding the child of another couple as they waved goodbye on their way to a friend's wedding or some other event. I had to work extra hard during those fifteen awkward minutes before they left us alone. Pretending not to mind the baby's grubby hands and face, or acting like baby-talk came naturally. The mother would debrief me on the child's recent meals and naps, heels clacking while she threw keys and lipstick in her purse. She'd stop to kiss her child in the high chair, offering him a slice of banana from the tray locking him in place. He would take it, entertain the thought of actually consuming the whole piece, but would inevitably drop a slobbery chunk back onto the tray. To my dismay, the mother would coo and eat the mushy piece of fruit herself. She'd leave, I'd suffer through a dribbling dinner and diaper change, then my mother would pick me up afterwards. Despite her explanations, I never did understand the appeal of half-regurgitated food. I don't care if it's my own baby; I don't want its drool! I stood by that at sixteen. It's only fitting I stand by it now.

Infants spit up across their mother's shoulders. They gum everything: necklaces, hair, clothing, literal batteries if you're not careful. Toddlers wail publicly over mismatched socks or separation from their emotional support stuffie. Makes you wonder what they cry about in private (the wrong bedtime story or a Cheez-it hitting the floor, I've learned.) And yet, not even halfway through our twenties, my friends swooned. I learned baby fever was real. Not only real, but a plague, infecting all women of childbearing age. Man, did biology hit them hard. They were evolutionarily whipped.

Today I am by the lake. July 5th. My towel is bone-dry and has not yet been breached by the sand. I lie still, my toes flirting with the end of the towel. The book rests beside me. It is the same book that I saved from the orange juice months ago. The same unopened title that has dutifully accompanied every lake day, car ride, and picnic since its purchase years ago. When it isn't traveling with me, the book sits on my bedside table or on other various household surfaces. It has morphed from a novel in a bookstore to a simple prop. Today it will morph back, I've decided. Today I will read it. I just need a few minutes to close my eyes first. I'm still recovering from the Fourth of July celebration last night. Cookouts and hotdogs and pinwheels and ice cream and not least of all, fireworks. Any attempt to convince four- and five-year-olds to miss a fiery display is completely futile. Believe me. It's easy to give in to their pleas, but when the sun doesn't set until 8:30 and the show barely concludes ninety minutes later, it makes you wish you'd tried a little harder. Other holidays are simpler, thank God. Christmas is easy; they want to go to bed immediately after setting out milk and cookies for Santa. New Year's Eve just requires the age-old changing the clocks trick. Last night, however, was rough—exhausted toddler tantrums the second we got in the car; not a single quiet minute for me.

No. No. No. My hand reaches for the book, but it's too late. I can hear the slap of skin against wet beach turning to sifting treads in the sand approaching my towel. Three pairs of feet, two small and one large, circle like vultures. Friendly vultures, I should say. Not so beady-eyed and malicious. Actually, these birds are closer to full-grown puppies with overflowing energy who haven't yet learned to control their limbs. And the puppies are soaking wet, threatening a head-to-tail shake at any moment. It's imminent; they attack with dripping hair and swimsuits. The mother shrieks and giggles at their cold hugs. She protests, but the three pairs of feet

easily convince her to run down to the water with them. The four dance in the shallows for hours.

The book, however, stays on the towel. Abandoned after yet another broken promise to turn its pages.

It's February 9th, the worst time of year. The sun only visits for a few hours, but the days are still so long and I'm so tired. Single-digit degrees keep us all inside. Still, the children's energy has to go somewhere, and today they choose a short-lived indoor game of tag. You're it! And like everything these days, it goes south quickly. The vase on the table tips and rolls to the edge, shattering after a quick trip to the floor. The collision practically ensures flowers would never decorate that table again. Meanwhile, the book collects dust by the bed. The journal remains starved for words, confessions, any signs of life.

I'm in the car. The dashboard now reads 7:22 p.m. The once-frigid car is blasting hot air from the vents, and my skin pulses from the uncomfortable heat. I'm sweating; it seems I've been driving longer than I thought. Fumbling, I press buttons and turn dials to adjust the temperature, accidentally shoving the yellow CD into the player. Jack Johnson and Friends plays without permission. The peppy intro to "Upside Down" fills my car, and Curious George invades my head. That damn monkey. I smack the controls. The music stops. Curious George stays put, though, running and hooting around.

I quit driving aimlessly and pull into the first hotel I see. A king-sized bed, please, I tell the desk clerk. I pull the tag off my plush bathrobe, a birthday gift I haven't had time to enjoy. The robe, room

service, and a rented movie help banish Curious George for the night.

I sleep in late, waiving the need for the human alarm clocks today. This Saturday is mine, for sliding a different CD into the player on my way to the bookstore. I donate the untouched book and select a new one. I find a new cafe and spend some uninterrupted time with Chapter One. It's good. I dip into Chapters Two and Three as well. The glassware shop is closed on the weekend. I'll be back for the vase in the window. And although it's the dead of winter, the grocery store still has flowers. The petals are beginning to brown, but they'll do. I choose a bundle of white strawflowers. They go perfectly in a jar on the table.

I'm back home now, locking the door quietly behind me and rolling my suitcase through the mudroom. The children — my children—dash into the kitchen once they realize I'm there. "Mama, Mama!" their mantra continues. They make up for the morning I missed with overlapping shouts. Where did you go? Who are those flowers for? Can we have waffles tomorrow? Daddy gave us oatmeal today! Come look at the fort we made!

Why are you crying? The smaller one halts the onslaught. I shake my head. Promise them I'm not sad. I'm just happy. Happy in a world of nursery rhymes, of baby clothes and tiny shoes, of chicken nuggets and high chairs, runny noses and bedtime stories, fireworks and Sticky Saturdays. I hug my children and hold their soft heads until they squirm for me to release. I take their hands. After a full eighteen hours to myself, I'm ready to be Mama again.