“Mamaaaa!”

My God, his voice is so shrill. I love the boy but I honestly cannot wait until he hits puberty. Of course, he’ll probably be slow coming around that mountain too. Gotta tell ya, my favorite part of the day is hearing those little tennis shoes pound up the steps, and our bright red door slamming against the inside of our house, shaking the whole thing. My boy is so full of enthusiasm it amazes me, astounds me, how one small person can have so much energy.

He races through the kitchen and I swear to God I can feel a strong wind hit me as he passes. His bright pink backpack is like he brought the whole sun into the kitchen with him - if the sun was pink, people would think he was carrying it on his back. He picked that out by himself. He ignores all the shit he gets from his daddy, and that impresses me more than anything else. He loves that pink backpack and he loves his daddy and that’s all he knows.

“Mama. Mama listen to me, look at my eyes, look look look.”

“Yes, baby. I can hear you.”

That’s all. He doesn’t even finish his story, and I turn around and I see that look in his eye, like he can see something just for him. I turn back to the dishes in the sink and let him enjoy this moment. He looks so damn content with his two pink lips resting against each other and his eyes, bright and wide, enjoying this movie, or picture or whatever it is. When his mind goes somewhere else, it doesn’t usually come back to the same place he left us. We’re getting used to being left behind.

Couple minuets later I can hear his unusually loud feet clomping back to the front door. Honestly its wild how much sound he can produce. Peeking around the door, I see him hang up his jacket and his pink backpack on the pegs under the mirror, line his shoes up next to his daddy’s, and smile at himself real big in the mirror before going outside and promptly slamming the door behind him. I know it’s Caroline he’s going to see, because she’s the only one who smokes outside, so the whole neighborhood can get a whiff – like she thinks she’s givin’ us all a gift.

I gotta tell you, I do not understand his infatuation with that women. She’s trouble, everyone knows it. Baby knows it, but I think he likes it. I think he likes listening to this woman, because he doesn’t have to talk. She can talk and talk all day and he just sits and listens. That boy could sit in a room all alone with radio and be just fine. I lean out the window to yell at her. Not that it’ll make any difference, Lord knows she doesn’t listen to anybody.

“Caroline, honey, you know you shouldn’t be smokin’ while you’re growin’ a life.”

“Yeah, except I probably shouldn’t even be growin’ a life. The life probably won’t even be here in a couple days.”

I leave them outside with their one sided conversation and walk back into the house. Summer’s a bitch, honestly. It’s even worse when you don’t have air conditioning. My shirt is sticking to my back – it’ll be stuck there when I go to bed tonight, and it’ll be stuck there when I wake up in the morning. The dishes soak in the water and the soap, and when they’re done, all I’ll have to do is wipe them off, and then we’re set. I’ll start dinner just to get the damn things dirty again. That’s my life. It’s one routine, one charade, and the only surprises I get are from Baby. He was my one good surprise, and he’ll be my good surprise until the Lord surprises me and takes me to sit with him. Then I’ll watch my baby and continue to be surprised, because that boy doesn’t stop for anybody. In my five years of mothering, that’s the one thing I’ve learned – life doesn’t stop and my boy is more full of life than anyone.

Tomorrow is the busiest day of the week, and thinking about that day causes me more stress than when Baby comes home crying. Every week, the day comes, and the next day is my one day of relief before the stress starts again. Walking down the street, I’m the least suspicious person you’ll ever meet, walking on the straight and narrow is what I was born to do. Trouble is something I’ll never get into, trouble is unnecessary, and it can be avoided if you’re not an idiot. That’s what I always told myself, until I found out that trouble is not a soccer ball that falls into your lap, that you can just throw to someone else, kick out of your way and go on, feeling good. No, trouble is fog. Trouble something that creeps toward you, something that looks interesting until you’re too overwhelmed to get out.

I check behind my cookbooks to make sure that the box is still there. I can’t imagine anyone will ever find it because God knows I am the only one who even looks at those cookbooks. I never wanted to do this. Everyday I think that this’ll be the day I just throw the box away. I think this’ll be the day that I wake up and I’m strong enough to tape a note to the box. I don’t know what the note says – I’ve never thought that far ahead. That’s when I remember that trouble doesn’t go away that easily

Caroline always kinda smells funny but it is not a big deal. My daddy smells kind funny too sometimes, but it is a different kind of smell. Smell does not mean anything. Caroline and my daddy smell weird but I still love them. Just because you smell good does not mean you are good. I look at Caroline and her hand is resting on her tummy. She does not look happy or sad or anything. She does not look anything. She looks like she is okay with the person inside her. Just okay with it.

“Baby! Get your skinny butt in here and help me make dinner!”

Sitting at dinner with Baby and his daddy is always a tense half an hour. It’s tense for me at least. Baby doesn’t say anything – he just watches his daddy and mimics him almost perfectly. His daddy alternates between trying to make eye contact with me and trying to avoid eye contact with Baby. Sometimes you make eye contact with Baby and he’ll smile at you and put his hand on yours real gentle, and the innocence makes you want to cry. Sometimes you make eye contact and you realize he’s looking right through you.

I can feel his daddy’s eyes burning a hole in the top of my head, and I know he wants to say something but won’t until later when Baby isn’t here. When Baby’s asleep is the only time we even look at each other. Sometimes he comes home from work and he brings me flowers and it gives me butterflies, until I see his eyes and they’re not as soft as they were when brought me flowers and genuinely wanted them to make me happy.

The bitch won’t even look at me.

Baby’s eyes look up at me from the bed, and I can tell he’s tired. I get it, being awake is hard, being alive is hard. My whole body hurts from my conversation with his Daddy and Baby opens his mouth to say something, but quickly shuts it when he hears the earthquake that his Daddy makes when he walks by a room. Baby lifts his arms so I can pull the blanket up to his chin, and then rolls to each side so I can tuck the blanket under him before I lay next to him. Suddenly, he grabs my hand and squeezes, and when I squeeze back, I look at him and he stares back with his eyes half open, the shadows making the bruise on his cheek look darker than it actually is, and he whispers, “I’m a burrito.”

“Mama.” Nothing. “Mama.” The blankets shift.

“Yes, baby?”

I want to make sure she’s still with me. She my person, and sometimes I think she wishes she was a person somewhere else, so I need to make sure she stays with me.

“Nothing.”

Baby’s breathing is so slow. It’s always slow, not surprising. Ever since he was born, I’ve slept near him so I can make sure his slow breathing doesn’t come to a complete stop. I slide off the bed, and touch my toes to the ground, surprised when the wood flooring is chilly. I slide past my old bedroom, the one that his Daddy sleeps in now, just to make sure I’m the only one awake, before I go downstairs and grab the box and some shoes. The bright red door looks like the color of blood at night, and it always seems like an omen, even though I’ve always come back just fine, and three hundred dollars richer.

I leave the box under the same slide I always do, and grab the money taped onto the bottom side of the slide and stuff it into the back pocket of my jeans. Playgrounds look sad at night, you see them during the day and they look like so much fun, because you can hear kids laughing and their feet kicking gravel, and occasionally you hear someone crying, but those are all sounds of life. At night, there are no sounds. It’s just a bunch of plastic and you realize that the park isn’t fun. The kids that play there are fun, but kids would be fun even if the playground didn’t exist. If this playground was torn down, would anyone notice? They’d probably just find a new park.

The city is nice at night. It’s quieter. It’s quiet enough that you can think without getting worried that you’re completely alone. The sound of feet pounding on the is a satisfying, solid sound. It’s reliable, so I just keep walking until I find the shelter that more homeless people use than people that actually use the bus that stops here. The homeless women sits next to me and hums. I think she thinks I’m a prostitute, because all I’m wearing is a nightdress and some sandals, but what kind of prostitute uses the bus?

The bus pulls up and that’s it. I don’t think I could get off and go back even if I wanted to. Even if Baby walked all the way here himself and asked me to stay. This was not the life I was supposed to have; I wasn’t ever supposed to be this person who has to carry boxes just to pay for food. This isn’t my life. My poor Baby isn’t supposed to have this life either.