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Story About a Family

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Story About a Family

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THIS IS HOW THE FAMILY LOOKS in 1988: a husband, a wife, a daddy, a mama; two girls, two sisters, two daughters. One daughter is 5. The other is 2. They both have white-blonde hair that turns green in the chlorine at the country-club pool. The older daughter, the 5-year-old, takes swimming lessons there in the summer. The younger daughter, the 2-year-old, almost drowns one day when she falls into the big pool while the daddy isn't looking. He gets her out with plenty of time to spare but he loses sleep over the image of her little body turned upside down under the water and the feeling of his bare feet trying to gain traction on the wet cement as he runs to her and the searing smell and taste of the chlorinated water rushing into his nose as he jumps in and her cold, wet bathing suit against his arms as he leans into the side of the pool crushing her to his chest while the 5-year-old cries watching from the fold-up lounge chair wrapped in a big towel.

After everyone is dried off and calmed down, he takes the girls to the clubhouse to get burgers and fries and Cokes. Their green hair is combed still wet against their skulls.

Before the second daughter was born, the first daughter and the daddy used to play a game in the early mornings. They would collect all of the daughter's tiny toy people and arrange them in a line across the top of the sofa, one by one. The cheerleader next to the policeman next to the baker. Now, her toys are sequestered in a cupboard that was built to be a home bar. She climbs up onto the counter, rests her feet in the dry sink, draws the folding door closed, and plays there in the half light: My Little Pony and

other things, out of reach of the 2-year-old.

The 2-year-old wears special shoes to correct the inward twist of her feet that the doctor calls “tibular torsion.” The wife calls the white buckled shoes “cloud hoppers.” The 5-year-old hears “cloud hoppers” and repeats it regularly, and no one ever corrects her because she so rarely makes a mistake that they enjoy hearing the malaprop, which itself seems oddly appropriate anyway.

On Saturday mornings, the family watches *Pee-Wee’s Playhouse*. They always dance during the opening theme song.

Get outta bed, there’ll be no more nappin’!

The 2-year-old does a weird dance up on her toes, kicking, rotating her diapered hips to no discernible rhythm. The 5-year-old flails wildly and does the voices and hits every word. The husband and wife, he in too-short sweatpants and she in an oversized white flannel nighty, dance together and pick up their girls one by one to twirl around the room.

Things the 5-year-old is afraid of: fires; getting kidnapped; her parents getting kidnapped; her grandma’s mean German Shepherd and other big dogs.

Things the 2-year-old is afraid of: nothing yet.

Things the wife is afraid of: driving on the highway; going to the doctor; making a mistake raising her girls; hurting her husband; ruining her marriage.

Things the husband is afraid of: disappointing his recently deceased father; not being enough of a man; dying like his father while his girls are still young; being seen as a quitter; losing the things he feels he has earned — money, authority, family.



When the mama was little, there was never any clean laundry. On photo day for Girl Scouts in 1968, she wears short black socks because she can only find one of the brown kneesocks that are supposed to go with her uniform. She and her brothers and sister come and go as they please, always with a twinge of anxiety, wondering when one of them will do something that angers their mother. They all wet the bed until they are practically

teenagers. Their father buys something called a Wee Alert to rid them of the habit. It is a white pad that goes under the sheets on the mattress. If the Wee Alert senses the heat of urine, it sets off a buzzer that is hooked up to the parents' bedroom. Whenever it goes off, the father leaps out of bed and strides down the hall to see which of the four beds contains the culprit. Everyone gets woken up every time with a rough jab in the shoulder and a "Did you piss?" Before their heads are cleared the father is stalking back to bed, leaving them to clean up wherever it is needed. During the day, the father wears a suit and works at the steel mill. The mother stays back in bed a lot, so much so that one of their friends once asks whether she has any legs. She reads and talks on the phone and watches her soaps. After school, she yells for them to come back there and bring her food or rub her back or tell her stories. The room is dark and stale, with patterned curtains blocking the sun. In the bathroom the shower is filled with clothes, some lying over the side of the claw-foot tub, others hanging around the curve of the shower rod.



This is how the family looks in 1989: Everyone is a year older. They live in a different state. The husband makes more money. The wife fixes up the new house. They surprise the daughters with their first pet: a white bunny with pink eyes. The younger daughter is a preschooler. Her preschool has a big wooden replica of Noah's Ark. The older daughter is a first-grader. Her parents were advised by her teachers, when they moved, to let her skip a grade, but they decided it was better to keep her with kids that were her own age.

The older daughter goes to school, makes friends, sees other people's houses: a mountain of Barbies and Barbie clothes and Barbie cars in the basement of one house; a secret passageway in another that leads from the closet in the bedroom to the cabinet below the sink in the bathroom; the way her reading partner's arm looks without its prosthetic hand to complete it.

The family's new yard is bigger. The daddy needs a rider mower to take care of it. They have a tree house with a rope ladder, a tire swing, and a slide. One day the daddy rushes the girls out to the tree house and tells them to get on their bellies and look down through the cracks between the floor planks.

There is a robin's nest in the branches beneath them, inches from their faces, and together they watch the baby robins being born.

There is a Chow dog next door who will be put to sleep if he bites one more person. The older daughter establishes hiding spots for herself around the big yard. If he comes at her in the front, there's a tree to climb. In the back, there's the playhouse. She hopes he can't climb the rope ladder or walk up the slide the way the neighborhood cat can.

The husband and wife fight more often in this house. The first-grader can hear them whispering viciously as she lies in bed at night and stares at the triangle of light coming in from the hallway. She starts listening to tapes on her Walkman after she goes to bed, memorizing the lyrics to patter songs from musicals.

Any sparerib that I can spare, I'd be glad to share!



The daddy was the first of his parents' four children; when he was born, his mother quit her job as a kindergarten teacher. His family lives in a town with lots of hills. He spends every daylight hour outside. He is always moving. He builds forts, plays baseball and football, climbs trees, helps his mother in the garden, roams the neighborhood and surrounding woods with his friends. They stop and get whoopie pies at the corner store. They fish in the creek down the hill from their row of houses. Every night he comes home and his mother helps him scrub down in the bathtub. The toughest place to clean is under his fingernails. They are still small, and the dirt gets way down in there. The daddy's father works hard. He smokes two packs a day. He teaches his sons how to catch and throw a baseball, how to shoot a basket, how to field a pass, how to tackle, how to bait a line, how to clean the oil from the crevices at the sides of their noses so they don't get blemishes there. He comes home from work silent and reads the paper with a scowl, but the children catch him smiling at the sound of their mother singing in the kitchen. The daddy's mother collects blue-and-white china. She breeds Tonkinese cats. In 1968 her name appears in the index of Cat Fancy. In the kitchen door there is a small flap made of rubber; the cats can come and go as they please.



The older daughter is a picky eater. She likes only: cut-up hot dogs, cut-up pizza, salami sandwiches with no crusts, Cheerios, onion dip. One night when she is 7 and a half, she refuses to eat her cheesy scalloped potatoes. She says they gross her out. The mama tells her she is not allowed to leave the dinner table until she finishes them. The daughter sits there, her plate clean save for the congealing, shiny potatoes. The daddy and younger daughter go about their evening. The mama fills the kitchen sink with hot, soapy water and puts all the dishes from dinner in to soak. Then she leaves the room. The daughter sits at the table, looking anywhere but her plate. Later, the mama comes back. She takes the plate away, scrapes the potatoes into the garbage — they all slide off together in one big leathery mass — and lets the plate descend into the cooling dishwasher. She sits down next to the daughter and says, “I’m sorry honey. I don’t know why I did that. I thought it mattered but it really doesn’t. OK?”

The daughter nods, surprised, trying to recognize what’s in her mother’s eyes.



The husband thought about studying architecture in college, but ended up studying business instead. His university goes co-ed two years before he starts as a freshman, in 1975. Every Friday he puts all of his dirty clothes in a big white bag with his dorm room number on it and sets it in the hall. On Monday the bag is returned there, filled with his cleaned, pressed and folded laundry. At the beginning of his sophomore year, his roommate is diagnosed with non-Hodgkin lymphoma and dies. When he graduates, the husband asks the wife to marry him. He takes the first job he is offered and feels lucky to get it in such an economic climate. She quits school and they move to the state where the job is located. On the day his first daughter is born, he buys fifty newspapers and sends a telegram to his old football coach.



One night in 1989 they are fighting. The daughters are still awake, cotton pajama-ed, brushing their teeth. The husband has just come out of the master bathroom, where he's discovered there is no more toilet paper, only an empty roll, which he's holding up in the air like a fossil. The wife sardonically offers him Kleenex, and he stomps around, shaking his head and muttering. Finally he works his way up to yelling, "If you want to live like a pig, go ahead!" Then he hits the wall with an open palm. She feels a red, acidic hatred for him rushing against her chest, sees out of the corner of her eye that the girls are there now too, watching, wants to stop herself but doesn't. She grabs a throw pillow from the couch and hits him with it, in the face, as hard as she can. If it had been a brick instead of a pillow, she worries later, she still would have done it. The stunned look on his face breaks her heart. Her daughters with wide eyes standing in the doorway break her heart. She doesn't know what to do so she sits down. The girls go to bed. The husband goes out to buy toilet paper. She sits in the dark of the living room, looking out the window to the trees beyond the yard, listening to the traffic from the highway beyond the woods. She wonders why he wants to be with her, what she makes him feel.

She goes to see a psychic. She doesn't tell him about the problems in her marriage. She feels unknowing: Her body is numb, unable to identify instincts. She is angry at herself for allowing her girls to see them fight; she is angry at her husband for being arrogant and unforgiving and not having a high opinion of anyone but himself; in the midst of it all she feels a dull and debilitating pity for the him because she is afraid he can't change and she knows how much it means to him to have a family and a wife to grow old with and save him from being alone. She feels terror at the thought of hurting him. But she doesn't see how she can continue to live with him: She recognizes herself as demoralized and warped now — sometimes that rising physical urge to hurt him, sometimes deliberately doing or saying things she knows will anger him — and she can't imagine why her daughters won't end up the same way if she stays.

The psychic looks like a librarian. He wears a ratty cardigan over a collared shirt. His glasses are thick, but so are the wife's. She is legally blind.

His office is in his home, just a few doors down from the family's house. The woman who recommends him says he's lived in the neighborhood for years and is not a kook. Working without context, he begins with simple questions. The wife answers with some humor, not fully masking her hunger for an answer to help her comb out her feelings and illuminate her options. Finally she mentions her husband, and the psychic asks his name. When she tells him, his eyes squint up, and he nods his head and pinches the top of his nose, where his glasses rest.

"Ah, yes," he says, smiling. "This is a unique man. He is very, very special. Contradictory. Surrounded by archangels. But he is hell to live with."

A sob escapes the wife before she can stop it. She draws a breath. "Yes, that's true," she says.



This is how the wife decides to leave the husband: It is not overnight; it is not clean.

Things that finally present themselves as undeniable: First, she picks up a set of pictures from the developer and notices her daughters aren't smiling in any of them. Her family is not happy. Her older daughter, that strange little bird she struggles to understand enough to raise, is afraid to go to bed at night; her younger daughter, who as a newborn looked like a wrinkled pink thumb, is sick all the time, her baby lips chapped scarlet and her nose runny. Second, when they host the husband's family for Christmas, her mother-in-law takes her aside and says that she is uncomfortable with the way the husband and wife speak to each other. She says they are mean-spirited. Things the wife feels in that moment: shocked, angry, embarrassed, and aware that it is true. Third, the husband has been growing marijuana in a far corner of the backyard. He won't stop. He shakes his head and laughs when she tells him it is illegal and he shouldn't do it. He looks at her with derision.

She talks with a friend who is a lawyer. The lawyer tells her to make sure she's taken care of if she does decide to leave. To have a plan. She goes out to the edge of the big backyard and photographs the unmistakable plants in case it comes to that, though she guesses it won't be hard in that particular

way, to leave him.



This is how their last day together looks: The older daughter has a ballet recital. Her first. They all get up early. The mama weaves a complicated double braid in the older daughter's hair, pinning in the lilac that goes with her costume. They all get dressed up and drive to the performance hall. The daddy blows bubbles with the younger daughter while the mama takes pictures of the older daughter in her tutu. There are pictures of the older daughter playing Frisbee with some other small ballerinas, and one of her reading a book backstage that the mama takes from above to make sure the hairdo is documented. School is over for the year and the air is warm and gentle. After the show, they pack up and drive to the beach to visit the mama's mother, whose mean German Shepherd has fortunately died. The daddy will leave after a few days to go back to work, but the mama and the girls will stay all summer. Only the mama knows they will never go back.

Here is how the mama tells the girls: At the end of the summer, she gathers them on her towel at the beach, under the weeping willows, and tells them that she and they are going to live with grandma. The older daughter is going to start second grade at the neighborhood school.

The younger daughter asks, "What about Daddy," and the mama says, "He's going to stay where he is but he'll come visit on weekends and you girls will get to stay at a hotel with him when he does." She tells them it will all be OK.

The girls visit the daddy back at the family house, where he takes them out in the yard and cries a little while he hugs them and talks to them. The younger daughter helpfully cries along with him. The older daughter just wants it to be over. She feels she is definitely not being the way the daddy wants her to be.



Here is how it works at first: The daddy does a couple of weekend visits staying in a cabin at a rustic hotel nearby. The girls stay there with him, but there's nothing to do there and they eat food that's supposed to be fun but

isn't and they both feel scared and sad and guilty because they'd rather be home watching old movies in bed with their grandma.

After a few months, the mama finds a house to rent. The house has: a bookshelf filled with books other people have left there and toys in the closet. There is a rubbery T-Rex their aunt makes sing to the girls whenever she comes over, which is often because she lives just one big hill away. She favors familiar melodies with made-up words.

Oh Danny Boy, I love you so, I think your head is like a bow.

A threatening groundhog lives under the storage shed in the backyard; the girls never actually see him but they know he is there. They sleep in bunk beds in the back bedroom. The mama sleeps in the front bedroom. It's a summer rental house, but the landlord lets them stay there longer. The daddy pays the rent, which is at a good rate. He starts staying there instead of a hotel when he comes to visit, on a pull-out couch in the TV room.



This is what the ex-husband looks like in 1991: He is in good shape because he works out every morning and has a good metabolism. He wakes up at five o'clock every day without an alarm and heads to the gym, where he lifts weights and plays pickup games with his gym friends. Then he showers and dresses for work. He eats lunch in the cafeteria at his company, the same company he's worked for since college. He eats whatever he wants: sometimes chicken noodle soup, sometimes a grilled cheese, sometimes cold cuts.

For dinner, he usually orders in; he doesn't like cooking just for himself. He takes walks around the neighborhood. He can hear football games happening at the nearby school in the fall. He does yard work for his landlady: mowing the lawn, trimming the flowers along the side of the house, and maintaining the ivy that grows on the red brick walls. She gives him a discounted rent for it, but he does it because he likes to. His apartment has two bedrooms, one with the queen-size four-poster bed he once shared with his wife, and one with two twin beds and a trunk of toys for the girls. He puts all of his spare change in a giant glass bottle that stands in the hallway. He lets his daughters take quarters from it when they visit.

Things he is afraid of: living alone; that he will always hope his ex-wife will come back; that his daughters will stop loving him; that they don't want to visit him; that he will never be able to truly know them now. He is afraid of not knowing what is happening to them when he isn't around. He is afraid his ex-wife will never come back, and that he will never stop loving her. He is afraid she will turn the girls against him.

Mostly he is afraid the girls will grow up like her instead of like him.

Every weekend he gets in his car and drives three hours to the town where his ex-wife and daughters live now. He wonders if the girls notice he is sleeping in the bedroom with their mama instead of on the pull-out couch they help him make up every night. They never ask about it. He wonders what the sleeping arrangement means, but he doesn't ask because he doesn't want it to end. Every Friday night he arrives at the rental house, sometimes with a loaf of zucchini bread, sometimes with a video, sometimes with flowers from his landlady's garden. Every Friday night he hopes he'll be packing his car to the brim with his girls and his woman and bringing them back home with him. Every Sunday afternoon he drives away with a good-bye his daughters toss to him with a soft, easy pitch. His ex-wife's eyes won't hold his. He drives home, disappointed, but already looking forward to the possibility of the next Friday. For years, he makes no effort to train himself away from this.



Here is what the ex-wife's nights are like: That first summer at her mother's house, with the girls asleep next door where her brothers used to be and her mother downstairs watching TV or talking on the phone, she stays alone in the bedroom she used to share with her sister. From this room, on the phone, the wife tells the husband the marriage is over. Here, over the phone, they have many nighttime conversations, dictating the language of being apart. She keeps the window open while they talk. The big tree right outside screens her face as she looks down onto the street; the sounds of her childhood nights muffle her voice as she talks and listens even though she feels there is really nothing left to say or hear.

That fall, in the rental house, the ex-wife's room has a big window

looking out onto the street too, and here too she keeps it open at night, until the air gets cold. When the ex-husband comes to visit, she resolves not to let him step into the bedroom, but things sometimes get confusing. Neither of them is dating. Her mother tells her not to sleep with him if she doesn't want to reconcile, but she finds herself doing it anyway, from time to time.

Things she fears: One of the girls will fall out of the top bunk; a raccoon will get into the house; she will accidentally go back to her ex-husband; she will never slog through this moment in her life; she will never make any money; a tramp will break into the house in the middle of the night and kill them all; her ex-husband will turn out to be right.

On the night Bill Clinton is elected president, she quits smoking. Every night, when the girls are in bed, she sets herself up on the couch in front of the TV and thinks about smoking. She has a beer. She opens the windows. She reads and writes. One night she starts holding her pencil like a cigarette. She suspends it between her knuckles, puts the tip in her mouth and lets her lips relax around it. The trick turns out to be a good one. It gives her peace. She never smokes again. She switches to non-alcoholic beer. Her thoughts turn to the future, and she dreams about what she'd like to do to the house, how she would like her daughters to feel when they come home to it. She imagines herself independent and successful at some unarticulated enterprise. She reads books about positive thinking and child rearing and nutrition. The house gets put together step by step, painted and carpeted, but daily housekeeping is not her thing. A vacuum cleaner enters the picture one Christmas, but mostly stays shut up in the closet.

More things she fears: Bugs will infest the house; the girls will make new bad friends whose parents let them do anything they want to; the girls will begin to realize she is a hypocrite; she will never get a job; she will go back to smoking; Bill Clinton will not win a second term.



When the older daughter is in fourth grade, she makes her first best friends. One of them lives just over the hill, in a two-level house sprawling across a low swell in the land, with a trampoline and a pool in the backyard. The first time the older daughter is invited for a sleepover, the mama says

yes but the daddy says no.

This is how he puts it: “I am driving three hours every Friday night and I want to spend time with my daughter.”

The daughter sits on the steps of the living room, looking out the window at a pair of birds locked in battle, while the mama and daddy talk it over. The mama argues that it isn’t fair to keep the girls from doing normal things they want to do on weekends just because the daddy is there.

Ultimately, the daddy agrees. He walks the daughter over the hill to the sleepover, meets the friend and her parents, and, as the evening gets darker and a nip comes into the air, walks by himself back to the rental house. The daughter feels, again, that she isn’t being what he wants her to be. And she doesn’t like the look of him walking away alone.



Eventually, the daddy brings the bunny with the pink eyes to live with the mama and daughters. It is too cold to keep him outside in his hutch in the winter, so they put him in the garage. The mama and daddy fight about who should take care of him — refresh his food, clean his cage, keep an eye on his teeth and claws. The older daughter worries about whether she should be doing it and, after awhile, she avoids the garage and the smelly cage and the twitchy rabbit altogether.



The younger sister is 6. She loves playing with the boy with the straight black hair from her class at school. Sometimes she goes over to his house, a giant one right on the beach. He is the youngest in his family, too. He has three sisters and two brothers, which the younger sister thinks is the coolest thing. His mom and dad are both loud and funny. His family yells and laughs and runs around a lot.

The black-haired boy teaches her how to fight. He runs past her and swipes his leg roughly against the backs of her knees, throwing her off balance. He licks his index and middle fingers and smacks them hard against her forearm. He pulls her hair and tugs her clothes and throws things at her: wiffle balls, books, bugs, food. They run as fast as they can down the beach.

They try skipping rocks at each other. They tumble in the waves on the roughest days when the younger sister knows her mama wouldn't let her into the water if she was there. But the black-haired boy's mom is lying in the sand reading a book and she tells them to just not go in past their waists, and sometimes she comes in with them and throws them in the, air as the biggest waves swell toward them.

One time the younger sister gets taken by a too-big wave. She doesn't see it coming because she is looking at the black-haired boy as he rolls around at the shoreline, barking like a dog. She sees him look out at her, sees him squint, sees his face go slack and his eyebrows raise.

He yells her name and says, "Dive!"

Instead she turns around — her body does it without her permission, makes this decision to see for itself what's coming — and before she can rotate fully, it hits her. Her mind holds the image of the black-haired boy and the shoreline and the familiar houses behind him as she is pounded by the water from above, into the sand beneath her, and she can't tell which is hitting her, the water or the ground, and she can't find her limbs and she hears dull thuds and scratches, and she knows to blow out her nose like she's doing a somersault underwater and finally she feels the scrape of the tiny rocks that pile up near the shore, reassuringly painful, and she flops down one more time as the water recedes, leaving only her wilted self on the rocks as evidence of its strength.

The black-haired boy is yelling, "Woah, woah, woah!"

She is still sitting there dumbly when his mom reaches her and grabs her arm.

"Jeez, honey, are you OK," she yells. Then they all sit there next to each other, three in a line with their butts in the water, and laugh about it. The younger sister feels battered and brave.

Later they go back up to the house and make milkshakes and watch *Saved By the Bell*, and the mom sprays Bactine on the daughter's scrapes.



The older daughter is 11 and she is in love. He is 23. She gets to see him three times a week for the whole summer because the mama is in a musical

with him. A rock opera. He plays the lead role. The daughter knows all the words and all the dances; the mama has been working hard on them for months, saying she has to put in extra effort because she's never done this before. She lets the daughter practice with her, in front of a mirror set up against the wall in the basement. The mama freezes in position and lets the daughter press play on the tape recorder. The daughter presses it with the very tip of her longest finger, her body stretched out, toes pointed, so she can get to her spot before the music starts. As they dance, the mama sings the high part, which is the melody, and the daughter tries to pick out the low part, which she does easily since she's been teaching herself songs from musicals since before she could read. They both sing as loudly as they can, but the mama's ear is greener, and her talent is duller, and her missed notes clunk irritatingly in the daughter's ears until the daughter stops singing the low part and just dances. Then the mama yells, "Come on, you have to sing or I can't practice holding my part!" They shimmy and spin and kick, faces slack, unfocused eyes on the mirror.

Only wanna know, only wanna know now.

Once she's seen the play enough times, the daughter starts drifting out to the lobby early in the first act. She can picture the scenes in her mind, and out in the dark open air she dances along with the live music. When the man she loves sings, she sometimes peeks her head in the back door to watch, but sometimes she continues to dance and pretends she's onstage with him. At intermission she takes him back a plastic cup of Mountain Dew from the concession stand.

When he sees her, he always yells, "There's my girl!" He can never believe she's remembered his favorite drink. He asks her how the show looks tonight, and she always says it looks great, and she's not lying. It does. In the noisy hallway where all the actors hang out during intermission, he sweeps her up and gives her a hug. His body is warm and sweaty. He smells really good, but she doesn't know like what. It's not like her dad, who just smells like himself or like soap. It's different. She can still smell it as she walks back around the outside of the building. Back in the lobby for the second act, she sits on the steps and watches the fireflies until it's time for him to come back onstage.

The night of the last performance, the daughter is allowed to go to a big party at the theater. Everyone is excited, like they always are after a show. They are drinking and eating, and playing loud music. The mama and the daughter have a secret plan. The mama is going to ask the band to play the finale from the show, and they are going to do the dance together. The daughter thinks about it as she gets dressed early that evening in a white top that wraps around her body and ties in the back. She practices it out in the lobby while it goes on in the performance that night. She is ready.

At the party, she sees the man she loves. He is slow dancing on the stage with one of the dancers from the show. They are moving closely together, their hips rounding. The dancer is laughing and talking and every once in awhile she looks around with a glowing face. But he looks only at her. The daughter watches him watch the dancer: He's smiling a small, constant smile. The daughter hasn't seen that kind of smile on his face before. She stands by the food table, eating celery and watching the dancer's body move in tight black pants and crop top, and her long, dark hair collecting in little damp curls around her face. The air is humid.

I watched you suffer a dull, aching pain.

The daughter realizes suddenly that he has noticed her watching. He raises his eyebrows, scrunches up his nose, and blows her a kiss. He waggles his fingers at her, a doting wave. She smiles involuntarily, regrets it. He brings that same hand down and its fingertips touch the dancer's thick, dark hair, pull gently at her curls, glide down to rest on her swaying hip. He puts his face close to her hair and she reaches up and strokes his head. The daughter finally turns away as the song changes to something fast. Her tired, foggy eyes see the mama bending over to whisper to the drummer of the band. They are both smiling, and the drummer lifts his head and looks for the daughter. When he sees her, he gives a thumbs-up. The daughter gets a sick feeling in her stomach and runs over to the mama. It takes some convincing, but finally the mama believes the daughter really doesn't want to do it, and the dance is called off before anyone else knows about it.



Things the mama and daddy fight about for years and years, even though

they aren't married anymore: how to store the garbage so the raccoons won't get it; how to handle money; whether car sickness is a real thing; how to keep the younger daughter out of trouble; whether it's dangerous to leave the girls in the car with the motor running and the doors unlocked; whether it's safer to drive on the expressway or on two-lane highways; what temperature the thermostat should be at; when the lights should be on and when they should be off; whether the girls should have jobs; whether it's a good idea for the older daughter to spend so much time at the theater; how seriously tornado warnings should be taken.



The summer the younger sister gets her driver's license, she and the older sister play Rock Paper Scissors to see who drives to and from rehearsal each night. On the way home, they roll all the windows down and play loud music and complain about the director of their show. On one of the younger sister's driving nights, in the middle of all this, the older sister sticks her head out the window and bellows a drawn-out "F--- YOU!" into the sweet lake air. They scream and laugh until their stomachs hurt, then decide to keep driving and see if Dairy Queen is still open.



This is what the family looks like later: The mama's serious boyfriend is now her new husband. The daddy's serious girlfriend is now his new wife.

The mama and her new husband enjoy: doing community theatre (he directs, she performs), fixing up the house (he builds, she decorates), trying new slow-cooker recipes, going to his Little League games (he umpes, she watches), going to the beach, watching Court TV (she talks back at the commentators, he sleeps). The new husband has three grown kids of his own and a hearty baritone laugh. He cries easily.

One day, they are all getting into the car to take the younger daughter back to college, and she slips on the ice and takes a bad spill. He helps her up and she cries in front of him for the first time, because she's hurt and embarrassed and already homesick.

The daddy and his new wife get married at the courthouse. He calls his

daughters the next day to tell them about it. They buy a big house in the town the daddy has lived in all these years, that's three hours away. It is too big for them. The daddy says they've both lived in apartments for years and they deserve to have some space. The older daughter feels a distant but clear implication that she should one day bring babies to this giant place.

The daddy's new wife is set in her ways. She takes a long time getting ready in the morning, soaking in the tub and talking on the phone, her loud droning voice echoing throughout the cavernous house, bouncing off the slippery wooden expanses of floor.

The new wife gets offended when: the older daughter doesn't use the pink lotion she leaves on their guest beds; the younger daughter talks too much about their mama. The daddy doesn't want to fight. He tells the daughters what to do and what not to do in order to keep her happy.

Each year on the twenty-third of December, the mama takes the daughters to the train station to go spend the holiday with the daddy. Ice crystals form on the rearview mirror as they wait in the car for the train to arrive. She tells them not to worry about her, back at home with the new husband. She tells them she doesn't care as much about holidays as the daddy does.

At Christmas in the daddy's new house, the memory of old traditions, before the divorce, before the new spouses, hang in the air. The daddy grows morose and irritated.



The daddy knows how things are supposed to be, how things are done; the mama calls it his Should Book.

The family should decorate the Christmas tree together, all in one go, and they should play Christmas music while they do it: Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby and Burl Ives. On Christmas Eve, the girls should each open one present, and then they should watch *It's a Wonderful Life*, read *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*, and go to bed. In the morning, the rest of the family — aunts and uncles and grandmas — should come over at exactly the agreed-upon time so they don't keep everyone waiting. The mama should make breakfast. Everyone should be in their pajamas.

Everyone should watch the daughters open their presents first. Someone should be in charge of keeping a garbage bag handy for all the discarded paper and tissue and Scotch tape. The daughters should give him presents that are thoughtful, personal, and handmade but still legitimate. For the rest of the day, everyone should lounge around the house, playing with their new toys, looking at their new books, trying on clothes, eating cookies and chips and dip, drinking Coke. The television should stay off. They should call their faraway relatives on the phone. The daughters should come in to the kitchen while the daddy is getting dinner ready so they can learn how to do it. They should go for a walk with him outside once everything is in the oven. They should have a snowball fight and do snow angels and go sledding. They should laugh and sing and smile.

They should reject all of their mother's ways except the good ones. They should be soft, not hard. They should manage their money well, and get good grades, and never stay blue for long. They should not get too caught up in politics. They should not be too sensitive. They should spend their money on experiences, not materials. They should appreciate sunsets and other beautiful moments in nature. They should never go to the movies on holidays or sunny days. They should cut his new wife some slack. They should take everything the mama says with a grain of salt. They should learn how to play sports they'll be able to play into their eighties: golf, tennis, etc. They should have hobbies. They should read the classics. They should not read too much. They should have some physical activity in their lives. They should have a balanced diet. They should not disrupt his cooking plans with their diet restrictions. They should use therapy, if they use it at all, as a band-aid, not as a perpetual crutch. If they want to live a certain way, they should figure out what job will support that way. They should not expect everything to be handed to them. They should not pity poor people. They should donate generously to charity. They should not be taken in by liberal rhetoric. They should be realistic. They should see that some stereotypes exist because they are true. They shouldn't judge his new wife for not wanting to live anywhere where there are blacks or Mexicans. They shouldn't want to raise their children on the West Coast or in the city. They shouldn't want to live anywhere that is too lax or liberal in its attitudes. They

should stay in the Midwest, in small towns. They should not rent apartments. They should own property. They should not expose him and his new wife to beliefs that are uncomfortable for them. They should keep topics pleasant.

Their husbands should be providers, masculine and sensible. They should like to drink but not get drunk. They should know how to play, watch, and discuss sports. They should be good drivers. They should have good jobs at which they are indispensable, unable to be replaced by a machine or an Indian person. They should be strong but defer to him. They should always be faithful to the daughters but never too solicitous. They should help around the house, but never encourage the daughters in taking after the mama in her lazy and ignorant housekeeping. If they don't already vote Republican, they should acknowledge that they will switch over someday. They should have children and bring them back to his house for Christmas but they should not interrupt the plans of the day with feedings or naps or tantrums. They should teach their boys to play ball and enjoy all the sports-related toys the grandpa will buy them, and teach the girls to read and devour all the books he buys them. They should eventually start hosting Christmas at their own houses. They should take him in when he is old and lonely. If he becomes terminally ill, they should assist him in dying with dignity like Jackie Kennedy's family did for her. None of them should ever be offended by anything he says. They should come to him for advice on all of their big life decisions and all of their deep personal challenges. They should take his opinions to heart.



The younger sister is a teacher. She spends her weekends before the school year opens getting her new classroom ready.

First, she cleans everything out: The desk is filled with old calendars, planners and leaflets, used pens and pencils with no erasers, loose change, pocket-size yearbook pictures of her predecessor's son, coupons, blank permission slips, an empty tub of Carmex.

The closets are ridiculous, she tells the mama on the phone: stuffed with science fair boards, broken shelves, equipment for sports and experiments

and art projects, nothing organized, nothing loved, everything shoved inside out of order. She finds a television, a slide projector, and a never-used pair of men's galoshes lined with wool, which she brings home for her boyfriend.

She wipes everything down with paper towel and Windex. She makes a WELCOME sign out of construction paper and glitter, using fall colors: brown, red, orange.

At her desk, she lays down her desk pad calendar — a gift from her sister — stares at its blank squares, and smiles.



The older sister lives with her boyfriend. They share a two-bedroom apartment in a three-flat. They take in a stray cat, a black-and-white beastie with fleas and an elevated temperature. They spend money on him, get him shots, administer a minty-smelling oil to the back of his neck to rid him of his parasites. He gets better quickly; his fur grows lustrous, his mouth pink, and they marvel every day at the little creature who lives in their house and knows who they are. He ignores the cat bed they buy him, sleeping instead in a green fold-out rocker inherited from the daddy's mother, as if he knows the number of happy cats it has cradled over the years.

When the animal elects to nestle down in her lap or in the crook of her leg, or when she sees him sleeping in the windowsill across the room as she works, the older daughter experiences something new. The feeding of him, the brushing of him, the clipping of his claws, the care unending: It feels to her like some profound puzzle is clicking into place, like it's the most right thing in the world. ■



Erika Schmidt is a graduate of Northwestern University and the School at Steppenwolf. Her “Story About a Family” won the 2013 Nelson Algren Short Story Award. She practiced writing at Northwestern with Brian Bouldrey, John Keene, Mary Kinzie and Christian Wiman, and at StoryStudio Chicago with Baird Harper and Lee Strickland. Acting credits include work with The Gift, Northlight, WildClaw and Genesis Ensemble. Her essays on film and television for the magazine Bright Wall/Dark Room live on that website and, along with other updates, on her own fledgling website, whaterika-does.com. She now lives in the San Francisco Bay Area.





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