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The Getting Through

A girl's small feet, sheltered in seamless socks, swing back, forth, back, in time with the tick, tick, tock of the clock on the wall. The clock, a bright white plate with vegetables rather than numbers and utensils instead of hands, seems foreign and out of place even though it has been in the family longer than the girl has. But the quiet click of the fork moving from carrot to broccoli is the loudest thing in the room, and it feels intrusive. So the girl just stares at it, although she can't tell time, until the quiet is pierced by the wail of a telephone.

The girl, her brother, her mother--all jump. The mother races to the phone and snatches it off the receiver. She starts to say "Where have you been!" but is cut off by an automated voice. Just a sales call.

"If Dad's not home in ten minutes we're leaving without him," the mother tells her children. She is still unsure if she should be mad or worried, but in the name of wishful thinking she's going for mad. Mad is easier.

The girl, the type of child who is attached to her mother's hip, tries to go for mad as well. She isn't entirely sure what's going on, so mirroring her mother's emotions seems like the best solution. And anyway, she is mad, or disappointed at least. Her dad was supposed to be home early so they could all go to the mall together. She was hoping to see the ice skaters at the rink in the food court and listen to the way the their laughs echoed off the tall walls. But even if the family leaves now, it will be too late to hear them.

Each second that the clock doles out brings the question "why isn't he home yet?" clearer into all of their minds. The mood in the family's apartment sways dangerously towards worry. Soon, the worry cracks open to reveal panic, which turns into "kids let's get in the car."

The girl's legs swing from her booster seat, faster now, like a metronome gone haywire. They can sense that something is wrong.

After double parking at the Jewish Community Center Pool, the mother pulls the girl by the hand. Her brother follows silently, a fifth grader too old for hand holding.

When her worry has boiled over into panic and dread, a mother might say something that terrifies her children. Something like "The lifeguards here--they're not very good," which might flood a

young girl's mind with images of her father gasping for air. It might make her notice how the trees are closing in on them, trying to swallow her family whole. Or not whole.

Still dragging her daughter along behind her, the mother asks the rotund woman at the front desk for the visitor's log. She flips through it to find that her husband's name is not on it. But her husband's name is supposed to be on it, has to be on it. The girl sees this in her mother's face and begins to cry.

Hearing her daughter wail triggers something in the mother's memory. The wail of sirens. She remembers hearing them on their drive over. And lights, ambulance lights, just on the other side of the JCC, on the road her husband would have biked to get here from work. She asks the woman at the desk to watch her children. The woman says "sure honey," in the thick accent of a New York Jew, and the mother runs off.

The girl cries harder.

Her brother keeps silent.

The woman at the desk goes back to typing.

A clinical, black-rimmed clock keeps time above her, but the girl has no idea how long it's been since her mother left. She just sits, legs swinging at a progressively slower rate, on an old, green, pleather chair. When her mother gets back the girl is still crying, but silently now. Resigned.

On the short drive back from the scene of the accident, the mother thinks of a million ways to tell her children what she herself can not process: that their dad's head has been cracked open on the windshield of a stranger's car. She can't even blame the driver because her husband hit *him* when a blood vessel in his brain ruptured. That's what the EMTs think happened at least. There is no good way to say this to her seven and ten year olds, but she assumes gently is best. "Daddy got a bump on the head," is what the mother finally tells her children.

Death is not quite a concept to the little girl. The possibility that her dad could die never crosses her mind. Her brother, less lucky, is just old enough to feel the word lingering in the air.

The father doesn't die though. The girl avoids the sharp crack of innocence breaking for a little while longer. Her psyche only suffers a bad bruise.

The girl learns the meaning of "ICU" that night. She hears "I See You" and asks if it's called that because they watch her dad all the time. The mother half smiles, whispering "something like that."

The family focuses on eleven days. Days tinged with the acrid taste of “intensive care” and the rancid smell of “medically induced coma.” The girl is not allowed to see her dad during that first week and a half. These are the first days of getting through.

After that, there are weeks, months, where the girl is allowed see her father during visiting hours. These days are almost worse. The girl makes her dad wear a hat to cover the scar that wraps around his ear. She wants to curl up in his lap--but doesn’t, because she is afraid. Afraid of how much she loves this person who is now changing, who cries often and forgets her name. Afraid of the day he yells “Fuck you” when they insist on getting him a wheelchair. Afraid of the getting through.

Getting through can be done in many ways. There are the classics: Screaming, crying, talking. The family does these. There are the necessities: Going to school, work, the hospital. They do these too. There are the fake smiles and the condolence cards that look sterile beside the cursing and tight hugs of the friends and relatives who fly out to the family’s temporary San Diego home. These things make the days go by a little faster. When those wear out though, the family has to find new ways of dealing with the getting through.

So the three of them drive to the mall each day, the same mall where they were supposed to have been the night of the accident. The family eats large, overpriced cups of Rainbow Ice “Dippin’ Dots,” sitting together on a wooden bench. The girl’s legs swing back, forth, back, as she watches the rainbow ice cream melt. She swirls it into a uniform grey.

Only after it is melted and gloomy will she eat it. She likes the reminder that, grey or not, it still tastes the way it had yesterday, and will tomorrow.