

Neva

NEVA PRESSED HER CHOCOLATE HANDS against the brown-and-white marble in the double shower when a familiar heaviness halted her breath. *Breathe*, she told herself as she instinctively put her hand on her chest as if she could keep her heart from leaping out. *Breathe*.

She inhaled, slow and deep, shaking her head as she tried to focus on her breathing.

“Mommy!”

The sharp sound of her son’s scream surprised her. Neva jumped a little and pressed her hand even harder into her chest, bending over in the shower, now unable to stand. There was plenty of room for her slightly taller-than-average frame to fit doubled-over.

“Mommy!”

The water peppered her back as Ellington continued to yell from his bedroom down the hall.

I hope he doesn’t wake his father, she thought as her heart continued to beat faster and harder while her son kept screaming louder and longer. *Stand up. Breathe*.

“Mom-my! Come here! Now! It’s a me-mergency!” he shouted. “Mommy! Where are you?” Neva knew that Ellington was persistent and would not stop until she appeared. *Stand up*.

Neva struggled to straighten and placed her hands against the slippery walls to steady herself as she turned off the water. She gingerly stepped out of the shower, removed the shower cap from her dark, shoulder-length hair, and wrapped a towel around her cocoa-colored torso, not bothering to dry off. Fearing the consequences if Ellington screamed once more, she

walked as fast as she could toward her five-year-old's room, trying not to slip down the hall. She knew that the pain in her chest would only worsen if she didn't quiet him down before his father woke up. *Thank goodness he's a heavy sleeper.*

Ellington had wet his bed again. Instead of getting up and taking off his own soiled pajamas, he just lay there screaming for her.

"Mom-my! I was waiting for you!"

"Shh! Be quiet, baby. I'm here now," Neva whispered. "C'mon, you can take off your own pj's."

"But they're all wet. Can't you do it?"

"Please try. That way Mommy can get dressed and we can be on time for school."

"I need your help, p-lease!" Ellington whined.

Neva sighed as she dutifully helped him peel off the heavy flannel bottoms and stripped the damp sheets off the bed, while struggling to keep hold of the towel that protected her from his increasingly curious five-year-old eyes.

"There, I helped you. Now take off your shirt, so I can run you a warm bath, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy," he replied sweetly as Neva dashed into the Jack and Jill bathroom; the bedroom on the other side was the one unfurnished room in the house. Neva wanted to make it a second office, a space of her own, kind of like what Claire Huxtable had in that episode of *The Cosby Show* when Cliff turned one room in their house into her own private space where no children were allowed. Neva chuckled as she remembered how everyone was trying to get in that room during that episode, but Claire was unflappable. It was funny.

It would not be funny if we were late, she thought. I hate to start my week that way. Once I start out behind, it feels like I can never catch up. On the way back to check on Ellington, she noticed that tiny puddles of water spotted the hallway. The thought of Dante's potential response made her forget about being late. Neva carefully got down on her knees, took the edge of the towel, and gently patted the tiny pools one by one—soaking in all the liquid to avoid any damage to the new hardwood floors he recently installed. The other ones were too dark, he said.

Neva's husband, Dante, dictated what colors went on which walls, approved every piece of tile that was purchased, selected every knickknack, and inspected each detail of, well, everything. The result was an entire

house that looked like him, all beige and brown. Neva's favorite color was pink.

She had silently hoped that Ellington would have been a girl, so she would have had her chance to sneak in a hint of femininity. The bedding was all picked out, but she never got to buy it. Instead, Ellington's safari-themed nursery seamlessly assimilated into the home's decidedly neutral décor, just as her husband wanted.

All the water gone, Neva let a small sigh of relief escape from her lips as she walked back into Ellington's room and found him jumping on the naked bed, wearing nothing but a smile. Neva tightened the towel around her chest, gathered him up, and put him in the tub. He splashed around loudly.

"Honey, hurry up," she said as she turned her back to him and leaned forward with her elbows against the vanity, which was directly opposite the tub. Almost instinctively, her head fell into her hands. As she mentally resigned herself to another day of covering her body in sweats and stuffing her uncombed hair under a baseball cap, she took some solace in the fact that at least she had taken a shower. *Some accomplishment.*

Neva sighed and shook her head as she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. The emptiness behind her eyes startled and saddened her. She wanted to look away, but found herself drawn into her own spacious stare. She kept looking, trying in vain to find the self she once knew, the person for whom a shower could no more pass as an achievement than earning a B. The deeper she searched, the louder Ellington splashed. And splashed. Water was getting everywhere, including on Neva.

"Ellington!" she yelled as she turned away from the mirror to scold him. As she turned back to try to find herself again, a single tear escaped down her cheek when it became clear she could not.

Heather

HEATHER'S STOMACH CHURNED AS SHE waited in one of the black leather Le Corbusier chairs that casually lined the reception area of the law firm offices of the chairman of the board of trustees for the Oakland Fine Arts Museum. The invitation was highly unusual, and she didn't know quite what to make of it. She got the call Monday morning to come in that same afternoon. *What a way to start my week*, she thought. *I'm glad I was able to push it back a day. I needed a minute.*

The older African American woman who manned the reception desk looked over at her every once in a while and smiled, which only made Heather more nervous. She was glad she had decided to wear her reliable red interview suit, even if it was out of style, but as she fidgeted in her chair, she wished she had worn something a little more comfortable.

The receptionist cleared her throat and awakened Heather out of her internal style dialogue in time for her to notice the chairman's secretary standing behind an open glass door. She was a short, robust white woman with gray hair, who always seemed annoyed whenever Heather called. She didn't look any happier to see Heather in person.

"You can come in now," the secretary curtly advised as Heather rose from her perch and feigned a confident stride past the reception desk and through the door the secretary was holding. Heather could have sworn she heard a faint "Good luck." Heather turned her head as she rounded the corner and noticed the receptionist still smiling at her.

"Ms. Neale, come in. Have a seat," Mr. Chamberlain's voice boomed from behind a desk way too large for the size of the room. *I wonder what he is overcompensating for?* she thought as she nervously complied.

“So glad you were able to come in today, and on such short notice.”

“Well, of course, I—”

Before she could finish, he interrupted, “Ms. Neale, I, along with all the board members, considered it quite a coup to steal you away from the DuSable Museum in Chicago. We were all quite impressed with your credentials and experience. I mean, you are a Stanford undergraduate and have a doctorate from the University of Michigan—all very impressive.”

“Yes, I—”

“But we are beginning to feel that, well, maybe we were a tad overconfident. You know, a lot of people have invested a great deal in this museum, and it means so much to this city and the people of Oakland.”

“I know, and that’s why—”

“And everyone knows that I’m all for community and doing things, you know, to help ‘our people,’ but we want to have a world-class institution here at the Oakland Fine Arts Museum. Only the very best, which is why we sought you. But perhaps we were mistaken. It seems that you have gotten a bit off vision with your latest endeavor. Now, maybe after we get established and some time has passed, this idea of yours, this community arts project, will have some, um—what’s the word?—context in which to be properly perceived, but right now, we feel that it’s just too soon. Am I making sense here?”

Now that he was finally asking her to speak, she had nothing to say, she was so shocked by what he had said.

“I will take your silence as agreement and trust that you will put forth no more of the museum’s precious, and might I add, rare resources toward this effort and get back to the business of doing the job we hired you for—to build this institution and make it a gem in this city’s crown. I’m so glad that we had this little heart-to-heart. We should do this more often.”

“I’m sorry,” Heather shook her head, stunned, as she stood from her seat, “I think there’s been a huge misunderstanding.”

“Why—what do you mean?”

“I was very clear about my vision of the way institutions should be integral to, and reflective of, the communities in which they exist. I told you when I interviewed months ago that I was committed to community art and arts education and working to elevate the environment as much as reflect it. I must have been mistaken in thinking that this was the precise vision you and the board wanted for this institution and that, in this

way, we would make a name for the Oakland Fine Arts Museum and do something that would really set it apart.”

He rose as he rebutted. “Well, priorities change, visions have to be malleable, and leaders must be flexible.” He stepped from behind his mammoth desk and stood directly in front of Heather, but she held her ground.

“I don’t think I can be flexible on this issue. It’s central to who I am as an artist.”

His voice elevated as he moved in closer, “Well, you need to do some yoga or something else to get more flexible, because let me speak plainly: we aren’t running a ‘ghetto museum’ filled with so-called ‘street art.’ You understand me? The name on the door says *Fine Arts.* Got it?”

“Yeah, I think I finally do ‘get it.’”

“Good. It’s essential that you do. Frankly, your job depends on it.”

“Oh, I’m crystal clear.”

“Good.”

“I quit.” Heather couldn’t have stopped the words from flying out of her mouth if she had wanted to. She could tolerate a lot of things, but disregard for her artistic vision was not one of them. She didn’t care if it had been her dream job—director and chief curator at an emerging institution. She thought there was room for innovation and change because they weren’t so bogged down in tradition. Even in the art world, she felt like a misfit of sorts; her ideas had always been risky and unproven, and therefore, in her previous positions, deemed unworthy of implementation. This, she thought, was finally a chance to create her vision, it, to finally be able to express herself, to be herself. How disappointing to discover that really, it wasn’t.

Annette

THE MORNING LIGHT FILTERED THROUGH the sheer curtains of the tenth-floor window of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel. Annette loved coming to DC. She led the government relations practice at Horne, Sterne & Woode, a large international law firm headquartered in Chicago. Once Barack Obama was elected president, the cachet of all things Chicago increased considerably in the nation's capital. The ever-ambitious Annette was intent on riding the current political wave as far as it would carry her.

She developed a crush on the law when she worked for HSW as a paralegal the year after her graduation from college. Her love grew deeper during her first year at Harvard, and she was head over heels by the time she returned to HSW for a summer associate position her first and second summers. She did well, so it was no surprise when they offered her a job in the early fall of her third year.

HSW was the only place Annette had ever worked. Even with the office politics and constant pressure to perform, it still felt like home. As the firm's only black equity partner and one of the few females in leadership, she far exceeded what her husband earned as the dean of students at one of Chicago's elite private schools. He always reminded her that he was not driven by money, as if that somehow made him better. How much he earned didn't matter to her, and as much as he championed his own altruistic career motivations, he never seemed to shy away from the benefits of her considerable salary, including: a four-bedroom row house in one of Chicago's priciest neighborhood, the S-Class Mercedes to celebrate his fortieth birthday, and a second home in Michigan. She always thought that her generous contribution to the household income would satiate his

desire for children, but it never did. He said all he really wanted was a family. *Don't the two of us make a family?* Annette often wondered.

She delicately opened the sheets, grabbed the thermometer from the nightstand, and discreetly slipped out of bed, careful not to make too much noise. On her way to the bathroom, she tiptoed over her skirt and jacket crumpled in a heap on the floor and almost tripped when her foot caught in the armhole of her custom-fit bra, which had been expertly removed the night before.

Safely arriving at the bathroom mirror, she stuck the digital thermometer in her mouth and swept her long auburn bangs from across her forehead. She hoped that by taking her temperature in the bathroom, she hadn't thrown it off too much, but surely she could not take it in the bed this morning. She rapped her carefully manicured fingers on the countertop while she waited for the thermometer to beep. Casting her light brown eyes down on the silver plastic stick, she wondered why she bothered. Charting her ovulation hadn't worked yet. Maybe she was doing something wrong. Math never was her forte, but still, people with a lot less on the ball got pregnant every day by mistake. She couldn't even do the damn thing on purpose. It didn't make sense to her. Here she was with all the resources to care for a child and she couldn't make it happen, while every teenager in America seemed to be able to get pregnant by just looking at a penis.

The thermometer beeped, and she dutifully recorded the numbers on the chart. Annette closed her eyes and shook her head in disbelief. Of course, she was ovulating when she was here and her husband was back home. *We can't seem to get this thing right no matter what we do*, she thought as she threw the chart and the thermometer on the vanity in frustration. She quickly recovered, took a deep breath, and splashed tepid water on her face while she forced a positive thought: *I will get pregnant.*

Catching her reflection in the mirror as she gently patted her face dry, she thought she needed a little something, so she lightly applied some bronzer to her honey-colored skin and a touch of nude lip gloss to look more “naturally” refreshed. As she examined her work in the mirror, something still seemed “off.” She squinted as she tried to decide if she was finally starting to show her age or if it was something else.

She washed her hands and tried to forget about it, as if that were possible. She had a lot of other things to focus on, but the whole baby situation made her feel inadequate for the first time that she could remember. And she could have sworn that her husband looked at her funny when she left for this trip. She kept staring at the mirror, trying to see what he saw, and

found no answers. *Humph*, she grunted. Drying her hands, she concluded that there was nothing wrong with her. And she was going to prove it.

Her red-toed feet stepped lightly but purposefully back into the expansive hotel room. She picked up her bra, placed it on a chair, and reached for her BlackBerry, where it was charging on the desk. She moved her thumbs adeptly as she sent her assistant an e-mail, asking her to call Tamara's office to get a referral to a fertility specialist and book the first available appointment, preferably by Friday. It didn't matter that it was 7:00 a.m. on Wednesday in Chicago; her assistant responded right away. Annette was used to getting what she wanted when she wanted it, and this baby would be no different.

Tamara

TAMARA CAREFULLY LIFTED THE BABY from the mother's womb and gently handed the tiny boy to the waiting nurse, who quickly cleaned and examined him before delivering him into the hands of the nervous new father, who was crying so much he was shaking. Tamara could barely look at him. He was so ... doting. Throughout the entire surgery, he hadn't stopped stroking the hair of his pregnant wife. And he looked at her so lovingly. It made Tamara sick. She was glad this case was over. They were just too perfect.

Like most couples, they wanted a natural childbirth, but with the mother's preeclampsia, Tamara had to perform an emergency C-section. She had given the speech a million times before, it seemed. "I know you prefer to deliver your baby naturally, but you should be prepared for a C-section, given the complications of _____ (fill in the blank with whatever the condition of that particular mother). It really is the best way to ensure your health and the health of your baby." This couple was particularly resistant to the idea that things weren't going to go as planned. It was clear from the beginning that they were the kind of folks for whom things typically happened according to plan, perfectly. *Well, not this time*, Tamara smirked.

Tamara hurried out of the operating room and peeled off her scrubs. A quick stop by the waiting area to inform the newly minted grandparents that all went well, and she could finally leave. Two sets of grandparents and maybe an aunt and uncle rose from their seats when Tamara approached them. They looked nervous, so Tamara forced a smile, which immediately seemed to make them relax.

“Everything went well. We have a healthy baby boy.”

They erupted in hugs and kisses. Tamara turned and quickly walked away before anyone grabbed her. She always felt a little out of place in the jubilation that followed the birth of a child. “Another happy customer,” she said to herself as she entered the doctors’ locker room. She silently and quickly changed into her winter running gear, not bothering to make small talk with the other doctors, who were changing as well. She laced her shoes, tuned on her iPod, and raced out the door.

Tamara turned onto the path alongside Lake Shore Drive and started to pick up speed. Running after a long night of deliveries always seemed to clear her head. Her creamy cheeks flushed pink as the freezing air whipped around her face. Tamara started running during her freshman year at Stanford. It was a useful way to manage the “freshman fifteen.” And running out there was a great way to enjoy the usually perfect weather. Running along the lakefront in Chicago in the dead of winter was another matter entirely.

A dark shroud of clouds hung over Lake Michigan, reluctant to give way to the sliver of pink light that was trying to claim its place in the sky. As she took the curve near Lake Point Tower and ran speedily by Millennium Park, then Grant Park and Buckingham Fountain, she turned up the classic Jill Scott song “Golden,” trying desperately to find some inspiration somewhere.

As the pink started to break through the gray, a feisty orange tried to barge its way into the sky. This colorful battle was not altogether lost on Tamara. The fact that the sun was trying to shine on a cold February morning was a gift that even she could not ignore. About this time every year, Tamara questioned her decision to ever leave sunny California to come back home. Chicago winters were the worst. Weeks could go by without the sun making any appearance. It would be day after day of dismal gray—and then it would snow. And snow. And snow. And then it would get even colder.

When Tamara reached Museum Campus, she turned around and turned her attention from the sky to the lake. Lake Michigan was one of Chicago’s most exquisite features, although the word “lake” always seemed too diminutive. When Tamara was a little girl, she thought it was the ocean because it was so vast. It looked like it could go on forever. She remembered fantasizing as a teenager about getting married at the South Shore Cultural Center in a room overlooking the lake. She imagined that the love she would declare to her husband would be as unending as the

water. That recollection almost made Tamara laugh out loud as she ran even faster, speeding up toward Northwestern Memorial Hospital, her long, black ponytail swinging as her strong legs raced her to her second home, where she could finally wash the smell of new life off her body. It wasn't like she had any reason to rush home.

Another Thursday with no weekend plans to look forward to. Dating was no longer worth her effort or energy. Tamara found that most black men who were worth anything were already taken, and the ones who weren't were either gay (or on the down low), uneducated, or underemployed; those who weren't any of those things had arrogantly internalized the oft-quoted statistics about the high number of unmarried black women over thirty, so they felt (and acted) like they were a precious commodity and let women do the pursuing.

Tamara was not about to become the aggressor in any relationship and could not be bothered with anyone who could not conjugate a verb, or who felt uncomfortable because she was a doctor and probably made more money than he did, or who thought that she should accept, even appreciate, the fact that he was with her tonight, and ask no questions about where he would be or who he would be with tomorrow. All she wanted was an attractive, intelligent, secure, kind, employed black man with no criminal record who didn't live with his momma or have a bunch of kids. *Why is that so difficult to find?*

Lauren

LAUREN REACHED OVER ON THE nightstand and grabbed the box of cookies she hadn't finished the night before. She was so hungry when she got home from China. She could barely eat a thing the entire trip. Chinese food in China is way different than the Chinese food she was used to. When she got home from the airport, everyone was already asleep and she was too tired to cook, so she just headed upstairs, where the cookies were waiting in her nightstand, ever faithful. It was nice, but having some company would have made it even nicer.

A few crumbs in the bed never hurt anyone, she thought as she stuffed three of the thin cookies into her mouth at once, while skimming her hand over the neatly made side of the bed her husband used to sleep on. *How long has it been since we shared a bed? Probably not since little Kyle was born, which was almost three years now.*

As if on cue, there was a soft rapping at her bedroom door. *Why isn't Kyle with Zoe, the au pair?* Lauren wondered as she sighed and glanced at the clock. It was seven thirty on Saturday, Zoe's only day to sleep in, but she knew Lauren had just gotten back in town. Maybe she was busy getting the twins ready for piano or dance. Lauren stayed in bed but didn't move. *If I don't answer, maybe he'll find Zoe.* Kyle knocked on the door again. *He's persistent*, she thought; *maybe he really needs something.*

"Who is it?" she called.

"It's me!" Kyle answered loudly.

"Me who?" Lauren teased.

"Me, Kyle," he responded.

Lauren laughed in spite of her exhaustion.

“You may come in ‘me, Kyle,” Lauren said reluctantly as she opened the locked bedroom door.

“Mommy!” Kyle jumped into his mother’s ample arms without being invited there and held on tightly.

“Oh my goodness,” Lauren said with a startled voice, “good morning to you too!”

“I missed you, Mommy!” he said as he planted a big kiss on Lauren’s cheek.

“Mommy missed you too, baby. Did you have a good week?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, what did you do?”

“I dunno.”

Lauren laughed, although she didn’t find it a bit funny.

“Did you go to school?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you learn something?”

“Uh-huh.”

“What did you learn? Tell me one thing.”

“Ummm ...”

“C’mon, you can tell me one thing you learned this week, can’t you?”

“Well ...”

“Oh, Kyle, really?”

“I’m sorry, Mommy. I can’t remember one thing.”

“That’s okay, baby. What are you and Zoe going to do today?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, you can do whatever you want, anything, just name it.”

“Really? Anything?”

“Yes, anything. Just tell Zoe, and she will do it. The zoo, the park ...”

“Swimming! I want to go swimming!”

“Well, you can do anything besides that. It’s too cold, and we haven’t opened the pool yet. It’s the middle of winter, you know.”

“Oh,” Kyle scrunched up his little forehead to think about his other options.

As he was in deep contemplation, there was a rapid knock at the door.

“Come in,” Lauren called.

“Lauren, I’m so sorry. I was getting the twins breakfast and I thought he was right there, then I turned around and he was gone. I have been looking for him all over the house,” Zoe apologized.

“It’s okay; we had a nice visit.”

“I’ll be heading off to karate now. Kyle, c’mon with me,” Zoe said as she reached over to take Kyle out of his mother’s arms and into her own.

“I wanna stay with Mommy!” Kyle clung tightly to his mother’s neck.

“Ah, yes, karate. I couldn’t remember what they had this morning. These kids have so much going on. Kyle, go with Zoe. We will do something fun tomorrow, on Zoe’s day off,” Lauren said, while unhinging Kyle’s arms from her neck and his legs from her waist. Kyle took Zoe’s hand with mild reluctance as Lauren got back in the bed.

“Shut the door, please,” Lauren shouted after them as they headed downstairs. *Just a little more sleep will get me back on track.* It seemed that her work travel schedule had increased instead of lightened as she had more children. She didn’t know whether it was the kids or her age or what, but one thing was certain, she couldn’t manage the jet lag so easily anymore. As she closed her eyes for a second time, there was another rap on the door.

“Ugh! Who is it?” Lauren asked in a perturbed, elevated voice.

Her husband, Prescott, peeked his head in. “Did I wake you?”

Lauren sat up and ran her fingers through her wavy hair. “Oh, no, of course not. Come in, you don’t have to knock, you know, it is still your room.”

He walked into the room slowly, leaned over, and gave Lauren a spacious hug and a polite kiss on the cheek but remained standing beside the bed. “Well, I didn’t want to disturb you; I know you got in late. Welcome home, by the way. Sorry I didn’t get a chance to see you last night. How was your trip?”

“Good, busy but good. I’m exhausted. I can’t hang like I used to with these business trips.”

“Well, it’s good that they continue to give you so much responsibility, isn’t it? I mean, that’s why you worked so hard to get that promotion.”

“I’m not complaining. I’m just saying I’m tired, that’s all.”

“Well, I’m sure it’s a lot. Thank God for Zoe, huh? Speaking of Zoe, I’m going to take Kyle off her hands for a few hours today to give her a break.”

“Aren’t you going in to the office? And a break? I mean, why does Zoe need a break? That’s what we pay her for—to watch our children.”

“It’s cool. I only have to work for a little while. He can play on my secretary’s computer for a bit, and then we can get some ice cream or go to the park or something. I like spending time with him.”

“Of course you like spending time with him, you’re his father, but I mean, why am I wasting my money having an au pair if you are going to do her job for her? Besides, ice cream? It’s the middle of February.”

“I didn’t know you could only eat ice cream at certain times of the year. You’re obviously really tired. You should get some rest. You know we have the black-tie tonight.”

“How could I forget? I arranged my trip to come home so I could attend. I’ll get myself together by then, don’t worry.”

“You’re already together, honey,” he sweetly replied with a smile. “See you later.” He leaned over and gave her a light peck on the forehead and walked out the door.

Gone seven days, and all I get is a kiss on the cheek and a peck on the forehead? Lauren reached past the cookies and opened the nightstand drawer to grab her little purple friend. After checking to be sure it still had batteries, she leaned back in the bed, put her hand between her legs, closed her eyes, and let the whirring send her into ecstasy, artificial as it was.

Neva

NEVA MANAGED TO GET ELLINGTON bathed and dressed for school, cook breakfast, and put some clothes on herself in enough time so they wouldn't be too late for school. *This week is getting off to a good start*, she thought. *I even got a load of laundry started*. It seemed that Neva was incessantly washing clothes. Having everything neatly folded in nice little stacks was sometimes the only sense of accomplishment she enjoyed on a given day, but even that was fleeting because no matter how many neat piles of clean clothes she created, more dirty ones continued to fill the hamper. Still, she relished in the temporary feeling that she had actually done something right that day.

As Ellington sat at the breakfast bar happily eating his oatmeal and playfully kicking his feet against the counter, Neva looked at him in disbelief. He managed to stay so happy somehow. She was grateful for that—grateful that her mood didn't seem to impact him one bit.

There were moments, like this one, when it still surprised her a bit that he was her child, that she had a child at all. She had never felt sure that she wanted one or could manage to have one. Still, at her husband's insistence, here he was. She could never tell Dante how she really felt. He would have never married her. He wanted a family more than anything.

Too late for regret now. Ellington was most definitely here, she thought as she cupped her morning coffee and kept staring at him. She remembered how the nurses brought him over minutes after he was born and placed him on her breast. Feeling completely drained after a long delivery, she thought, *What do you expect me to do with this?* He, however, needed no

instructions. When his tiny mouth grappled onto her nipple, she wanted to scream, but she didn't have the strength.

Nursing soon became what Neva liked to call one of motherhood's greatest conspiracies. Before she had Ellington, Neva watched women nurse and thought of how beautiful and peaceful they looked. It seemed to be the most natural thing in the world. *After all, it's what breasts were created for, right?* She used to think with self-righteous indignation that women who didn't nurse were selfish, but now she knew why they didn't—it hurt!

As Ellington continued to suckle, a few tears seeped out that Neva hid with a smile. Dante and the nurses thought she was overcome with joy, and she didn't tell them any differently. She didn't ask for help or inquire whether she was doing it right. She pressed the pain way down and kept on giving Ellington what he needed, until she almost forgot she ever felt it. Little did she know that it would become a strategy that she would have the opportunity to perfect over the next five years.

Heather

THE LIQUOR FROM THE TEQUILA burned Heather's throat as her long tawny legs stuck to the hard wooden floor. The ebony slat of the bottom edge of the platform bed pressed through her worn Stanford T-shirt and into her lower back as her hands carefully encircled the glass bottle of Patrón. She lifted it slowly, being as careful as her wobbly hand would allow, and poured another. She successfully avoided spilling any on her journal, which was open on the floor beside her, but a drop of the clear liquid landed on her leg.

She leaned over, bent down, and licked her leg, whisking away the wasted spirit. Heather peered out the window as she rose from the floor to catch a glimpse of the sky in between the two buildings immediately outside her bedroom window. It was still so dark and quiet. She turned and had to squint to see the clock, which read five o'clock, but she wasn't sure if it was day or night. Heather sighed as she thought about the job she had lost and the future that was now permanently beyond her grasp.

"Here's to failure," she said out loud before opening her throat wide and swallowing the tequila effortlessly. She looked up on her nightstand and saw the picture of herself with her best friends from college: Tamara, Neva, Lauren, and Annette. The eager smiles from their shiny faces mocked Heather as she slammed down the shot glass and looked at them with their taunting, toothy grins. *They are all living their dreams, doing what they love, except me. Tamara is a big-time doctor, like she always wanted. Neva is a mother and a wife. Lauren has it all—a career and a family. Annette is a partner at a law firm. And I am ... unemployed. This is not supposed to happen.*

Heather gave them the finger as she reached up on the nightstand. Then she turned them on their youthful faces with a force that left a small crack in the glass of the frame. *I don't want them looking down on me*, she thought as she climbed back into bed, her head reverberating with the remembrance of all she once wanted to become. It didn't seem like twenty years ago that she was eighteen years old sitting in the hallway of Stern Hall with Tamara.

"You have to have some idea of what you want to major in," Tamara urged.

"No, not really. Not yet. I have time, though, don't I?" Heather quietly responded.

"Well, don't take too long. I mean, you don't want to waste your time taking a bunch of classes you don't need. If you mess around too long, you'll end up being here for five or even six years."

"Well, that wouldn't be so bad, would it?"

"Oh my God, yes! I am four years, in and out. My parents would kill me if I didn't finish on time."

"My mom is happy I'm here. I don't think she would care how long it took. Do you think financial aid runs out after four years?"

"I have no idea, but it should. Don't you think? I mean, if you can't get it done in four years, maybe you shouldn't be here at all."

"Damn, that's harsh."

"If you say so, but think about it. No one got here without being focused and smart. I don't see any good reason why someone at Stanford can't graduate in four years."

"Well, not everyone is like you."

She remembered that conversation. They always wanted her to be "more grounded" or "focused." *All I wanted was to be myself*, Heather thought as she fell asleep.

Sometime later, her growling stomach woke her. It was three o'clock in the afternoon on Monday. It had been almost one week since she quit her job. *The past week has flown by and crawled along at the same time. Maybe I should eat something.* Opening her mouth and actually chewing seemed like too much work at the moment. Rubbing her hand over the hollowed cave of her abdomen, she supposed that was how her mother felt at the end. She remembered the hospice nurse saying that you can't make anyone sleep or eat. Heather had never been able to make her mother do anything.

Tamara had been nagging Heather to be sure her mother got regular mammograms, but she couldn't be bothered. Instead, her mother was

always organizing some protest, participating in some rally, or distributing flyers for some worthy cause. She was so preoccupied that she always seemed to “forget” to do her monthly self-exams, so by the time the doctor discovered the lump in her right breast, the cancer was already at Stage 3. She remained ever the Berkeley activist, always fighting “the power.” Heather’s mother was a revolutionary to her core. When her parents threatened to disown her because she got pregnant by a black man, she didn’t care. She proceeded with the pregnancy, had Heather, and married Heather’s father, regardless of what she stood to lose, which was much more than her parents’ approval.

Heather never knew her grandparents. Once her mom made her decision, they never spoke to her again. Funny, it never seemed to bother Heather’s mom. She was an expert at being exactly who she was and defiantly refused to let anyone change her into someone else. Heather wasn’t like her mother, bold and confident.

The doctors recommended an aggressive treatment protocol, which included a double mastectomy, radiation, and chemotherapy, but the words alone seemed to break her mother’s spirit. They eventually compromised. Heather’s mother had the surgery but opted for an alternative approach, which included a strict vegan dietary regimen, acupuncture, yoga, and meditation. Tamara tried to change their minds and urged Heather to insist on the more conventional treatment, but Heather’s mother was never one for convention.

Initially, she felt better, so Heather foolishly hoped that maybe her mother’s condition would completely reverse. But they were too late. The cancer metastasized to her brain, and she died of an inoperable brain tumor six months later.

That time went by so fast. Heather wanted a little of it back. Her mother would know how to make her feel better. She always knew exactly what to do. Her mother believed that Heather could do anything, and she gave Heather the space to try everything. She was the one who first nurtured Heather’s interest in art, after noticing Heather’s talent and eye for color. She even converted one of the closets in their tiny Berkeley home into a makeshift studio and had one of her artist friends give Heather lessons every Tuesday. Heather would rush home after school, put on the oversize shirt she imagined had once been her father’s, and paint or sketch before the lesson even started. Her teacher joked that he should have been taking lessons from her. She never felt more at home than in those hours after school in her studio. If only she had learned to keep that feeling.

Her mother had a little art show in their house once and invited all of her friends. Heather sold every painting, but she knew it wasn't real. She knew that her mother made her friends promise to buy stuff, but it still felt good to be seen.

As she ran her tongue across the two-day-old film on her teeth, she took a whiff under her armpit, and the smell almost made her own stomach turn. *Maybe I should get up after all.* Her legs were a little wobbly as she placed her feet on the hard dark floor and stood up. She stumbled, almost missing the two steps leading into the bathroom, but managed to catch herself before she fell. She stood in front of the mirror contemplating whether to shower or brush her teeth and decided the former was most pressing. She turned on the hot water, took off her faded T-shirt, opened the clear glass door, and stepped in. Her long curly hair was tangled, nearly approaching the matted state, so she stuck her head under the water too. She searched for shampoo and found none, which, she decided, was just as well. She stood there with her head under the water for a long, long time. *I don't think I can do this anymore,* she sighed to herself as her fingers started to pucker.

She reached for a towel and realized there wasn't one. She got out dripping wet, placed her elbows on the gray soapstone vanity in front of her, and leaned forward to rest her head in her hands. It felt as if her brain were expanding to the edge of her skull and her bones were pressing together to keep it contained. She kept one hand on the sink while she used the other to open the medicine cabinet. She found some Vicodin. *That should help.* Then she noticed an old bottle of Zoloft. "Hmmm," Heather said in a hushed whisper, as if someone could hear, "these always made me feel better."

As she continued searching, her fingers touched a bottle of Prozac that she never finished, and then she came across some Xanax samples that she had gotten from her old doctor. *Maybe some of these too. I am so tired of hurting.*

Neva

AS NEVA PRESSED HER FOOT on the accelerator and backed out of the circular driveway on her way to run some errands before picking up Ellington from school, her mind ran down her Tuesday to-do list: *Cleaners, call repairman for the washer, drugstore, pick up Ellington, soccer practice—soccer practice!* She slammed her hand to her forehead and her foot to the brakes as she realized he forgot his cleats. *At least I didn't get too far,* she told herself as she proceeded back up the driveway. *I still have time,* she thought as she drove back into the garage, closed the garage door, and ran into the house, leaving the service door open. As she grabbed the cleats from the mudroom, the phone rang.

Neva paused to look at the phone, but since she didn't recognize the number on the caller ID, she let it ring. She tried to turn toward the service door, but her feet felt like they had been cast in cement and her usually nimble legs seemed frozen. There wasn't a minute to spare before she would be late for the pickup line, but there was an urgency in the ring that made it hard to ignore. As Neva stood in the mudroom listening to the phone ring, she could taste bile building in her mouth and felt her stomach strangely churning. She didn't know how she knew, but way deep down, she was certain that this call was nothing good. *I can't deal with whatever it is right now. I gotta go,* she thought as she willed herself to walk back to the garage. Finally, the phone silenced.

Neva exhaled a sigh of relief as she settled into the tan interior of her white Range Rover, a Valentine's Day present from Dante. She thought it was too much—too big, too expensive; it was clearly something that suited him and was not at all like her. But that's the way it always went:

he would blow up at her, then give her a great present, treat her to an expensive dinner, or some such thing to help her forget what had just happened. She sighed as she remembered their fight the year before at Christmas. She didn't set the table right or she forgot a side dish he wanted or something—she couldn't even remember what now—but what she could never forget was the way he got in her face, pointed his finger at her nose, and cursed at her—in front of Ellington, her parents, and everyone. Every time she put the key in the ignition, she heard his harsh voice and biting words. Every time the engine turned, she felt the same fear that consumed her on that Christmas day and never really left. *If he would curse me out in front of my own family ...* she shuddered as she considered what he would do, what he could do next—but what he did was buy her this fancy car for Valentine's Day.

As she backed out of the garage and around the circular driveway for the second time, her cell phone rang, shaking her from the unpleasant memory. *Where is my phone?* She dug around in her purse to find it at the very bottom of the large hobo bag. It kept ringing as she rummaged around the console for her earpiece with one hand while trying to navigate the curvy streets of her Oakland Hills neighborhood with the other.

"Hello?" she answered frantically once she placed the recovered Bluetooth in her ear.

"Neva! Neva!" Carmen's heavily accented voice sounded more frenetic than her own. "Neva! You must come!"

"Carmen ...?" Carmen had been her housekeeper for years. It was the one indulgence Dante allowed. He always argued that she should be able to maintain the house by herself, especially since she didn't work, but Carmen did such a good job when Neva was pregnant, he agreed she should stay. He liked a clean house. When Heather moved back to the Bay area, Neva referred Carmen to Heather.

"Yes, it's me! You have to come—right now!" she responded anxiously.

"Where are you? Are you all right? What's wrong?" Neva fired off the questions before Carmen could answer them.

"It's Heather, she ..." Carmen broke into sobs, unable to finish.

"Carmen, calm down so that I can understand what you're saying." Neva tried to temper her voice, as if by example. "Just breathe, and tell me what's going on."

Carmen inhaled and exhaled loudly into the phone before starting again, speaking slowly and methodically. "I come to clean at Heather's,

like I do every Tuesday. I pass the bedroom to get to the bathroom, and I notice that she is lying on the bed. I say 'Good morning!' as I pass by. She does not answer; she does not move. I go in, and that's when I know that she's not sleeping; she just lay there. Not moving. Breathing, I don't know. I call 9-1-1, and then I call you. I don't know what to do," Carmen exhaled as she finished.

Neva heard the cars honking, but the squawks could not make the neurotransmitters in her eyes tell her brain that the light had turned green, so her brain was unable to communicate to her foot to press the gas pedal. The deafening cacophony grew louder, and it was only after the light turned yellow and then red again that Neva stepped on the gas, running the red light, nearly striking an oncoming car. She pulled over for a moment to collect herself and to process what Carmen had just said. It seemed she was destined to be a few minutes late today.

"Carmen, you wait for the ambulance to come." Neva poured her best calm mother voice into the phone. "I can't get there in time. You will have to ride with Heather and let me know where they take her. I'll meet you at the hospital."

Neva sat completely still in her car on the side of Thorndale Road for a while. Her mind was quiet for only a moment before the thoughts started racing, *What if Heather dies before I get there? What if she's already dead? I really should be the one riding in the ambulance with Heather, not some random cleaning person.* Her frustration, mixed with the fear she was trying to ignore, bubbled to the surface in loud, choking sobs as she raced to join the Hillside Academy pickup line.

She turned her head and noticed the cleats on the floor of the passenger seat, and her mind flashed to Ellington. *How can I get to the hospital and take him to soccer practice at the same time? Maybe I can call one of his friends' moms to grab him for me? Maybe he can miss practice. Or what if I can reach the sitter to meet me back at the house? I can pick him up and then drop him back home and then go to the hospital.* She hated the incessant coordination of logistics required for any deviation from her well-orchestrated schedule.

"Aargh!" she released her frustration as she slammed her hands on the steering wheel. Thankfully, she pulled right behind the nanny of one of Ellington's friends and teammates, who agreed to take Ellington to practice and then home with her afterward, so Neva could rush right over to the hospital.