I'm Glad My Mom Died

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Simon & Schuster
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

Simon & Schuster
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

The names and identifying characteristics of some individuals have been changed.

First Simon & Schuster hardcover edition August 2022

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Interior design by Carly Loman

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022939926

ISBN 978-1-9821-8582-4
ISBN 978-1-9821-8584-8 (ebook)

For Marcus, Dustin,
and Scottie

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Prologue

It's strange how we always give big news to loved ones in a coma, as if a coma is just a thing that happens from a lack of something to be excited about in your life.

Mom is in the ICU at the hospital. The doctor told us she has forty-eight hours to live. Grandma, Grandpa, and Dad are out in the waiting room calling relatives and eating vending machine snacks. Grandma says Nutter Butters soothe her anxiety.

I'm standing around Mom's tiny, comatose body with my three older brothers—Marcus (the together one), Dustin (the smart one), and Scott (the sensitive one). I wipe the corners of her crusted-shut eyes with a rag and then it begins.

"Mom," Together leans over and whispers into Mom's ear, "I'm gonna move back to California soon."

We all perk up, excited to see if Mom might suddenly jolt awake. Nothing. Then Smart steps forward.

"Mama. Uh, Mama, Kate and I are getting married."

Again, we all perk up. Still nothing.

Sensitive steps forward.

"Mommy . . ."

I'm not listening to what Sensitive says to try and get Mom to wake up because I'm too busy working on my own wake-up material.

And now it's my turn. I wait until everyone else goes down to grab some food so that I can be alone with her. I pull the squeaky chair close to her bed and sit down. I smile. I'm about to bring the big guns. Forget weddings, forget moving home. I've got something more important to offer. Something I'm sure Mom cares about more than anything.

"Mommy. I am . . . so skinny right now. I'm finally down to eighty-nine pounds."

I'm in the ICU with my dying mother and the thing that I'm sure will get her to wake up is the fact that in the days since Mom's been hospitalized, my fear and sadness have morphed into the perfect anorexia-motivation cocktail and, finally, I have achieved Mom's current goal weight for me. Eighty-nine pounds. I'm so sure this fact will work that I lean all the way back in my chair and pompously cross my legs. I wait for her to come to. And wait. And wait.

But she never does. She never comes to. I can't make sense of it. If my weight isn't enough to get Mom to wake up, then nothing will be. And if nothing can wake her up, then that means she's really going to die. And if she's really going to die, what am I supposed to do with myself? My life purpose has always been to make Mom happy, to be who she wants me to be. So without Mom, who am I supposed to be now?

before

1.

The present in front of me is wrapped in Christmas paper even though it's the end of June. We have so much paper left over from the holidays because Grandpa got the dozen-roll set from Sam's Club even though Mom told him a million times that it wasn't even that good of a deal.

I peel—don't rip—off the paper, because I know Mom likes to save a wrapping paper scrap from every present, and if I rip instead of peel, the paper won't be as intact as she'd like it to be. Dustin says Mom's a hoarder, but Mom says she just likes to preserve the memories of things. So I peel.

I look up at everyone watching. Grandma's there, with her poofy perm and her button nose and her intensity, the same intensity that always comes out when she's watching someone open a present. She's so invested in where gifts come from, the price of them, whether they were on sale or not. She *must* know these things.

Grandpa's watching too, and snapping pictures while he does. I hate having my picture taken, but Grandpa loves taking them. And there's no stopping a grandpa who loves something. Like how Mom tells him to stop eating his heaping bowl of Tillamook Vanilla Bean Ice Cream every night before bed because it won't do any good for his already failing heart, but he won't. He won't stop eating his Tillamook and he won't stop snapping his pictures. I'd almost be mad if I didn't love him so much.

Dad's there, half-asleep like always. Mom keeps nudging him and whispering to him that she's really not convinced his thyroid is normal, then Dad says "my thyroid's fine" in an irritated way and goes back to being half-asleep five seconds later. This is their usual dynamic. Either this or an all-out scream-fight. I prefer this.

Marcus, Dustin, and Scottie are there too. I love all of them for different reasons. Marcus is so responsible, so reliable. I guess this makes sense since he's basically an adult—he's fifteen—but even so, he seems to have a sturdiness to him that I haven't seen in many other adults around me.

I love Dustin even though he seems a bit annoyed by me most of the time. I love that he's good at drawing and history and geography, three things I'm terrible at. I try to compliment him a lot on the things he's good at, but he calls me a brownnoser. I'm not sure what that is exactly, but I can tell it's an insult by the way he says it. Even so, I'm pretty sure he secretly appreciates the compliments.

I love Scottie because he's nostalgic. I learned that word in the Vocabulary Cartoons book Mom reads to us every day, because she homeschools us, and now I try to use it at least once a day so I don't forget it. It really does apply to Scottie. "A sentimentality for the past." That's definitely what he has, even though he's only nine so doesn't have much of a past. Scottie cries at the end of Christmas and the end of birthdays and the end of Halloween and sometimes at the end of a regular day. He cries because he's sad that it's over, and even though it barely *is* over, he's already yearning for it. "Yearning" is another word I learned in Vocabulary Cartoons.

Mom's watching too. Oh, Mom. She's so beautiful. She doesn't think she is, which is probably why she spends an hour doing her hair and makeup every day, even if she's just going to the grocery store. It doesn't make sense to me. I swear she looks better without that stuff. More natural. You can see her skin. Her eyes. Her. Instead she covers it all up. She spreads liquid tan stuff on her face and scrapes pencils along her tear ducts and smears lots of creams on her cheeks and dusts lots of powders on top. She does her hair up all big. She wears shoes with heels so she can be five foot two, because she says four foot eleven—her actual height—just doesn't cut it. It's so much that she doesn't need, that I wish she wouldn't use, but I can see her underneath it. And it's who she is underneath it that is beautiful.

Mom's watching me and I'm watching her and that's how it always is. We're always connected. Intertwined. One. She smiles at me in a pick-up-the-pace kind of way, so I do. I pick up the pace and finish peeling the paper off my gift.

I'm immediately disappointed, if not horrified, when I see what I've received as my present for my sixth birthday. Sure, I like Rugrats, but this two-piece outfit—a T-shirt and shorts—features Angelica (my least favorite character) surrounded by daisies (I hate flowers on clothes). And there are ruffles around the sleeves and leg holes. If there is one thing I could pinpoint as being directly in opposition to my soul, it's ruffles.

"I love it!" I shout excitedly. "It's my favorite gift ever!"

I throw on my best fake smile. Mom doesn't notice the smile is fake. She thinks I genuinely love the gift. She tells me to put the outfit on for my party while she already starts taking off my pajamas. As she's removing my clothes, it feels more like a rip than a peel.

It's two hours later. I'm standing in my Angelica uniform at Eastgate Park surrounded by my friends, or rather the only other people in my life who are my age. They're all from my primary class at church. Carly Reitzel's there, with her zigzag headband. Madison Thomer's there, with her speech impediment that I wish I had because it's so freaking cool. And Trent Paige is there, talking about pink, which he does excessively and exclusively, much to the dismay of the adults around him. (At first I didn't realize why the adults cared so much about Trent's pink obsession, but then I put two and two together. They think he's gay. And we're Mormon. And for some reason, you can't be gay and be Mormon at the same time.)

The cake and ice cream are rolled out and I'm thrilled. I've been waiting for this moment for two whole weeks, since I first decided what I was going to wish for. The birthday wish is the most power I have in my life right now. It's my best chance at control. I don't take this opportunity for granted. I want to make it count.

Everyone sings "Happy Birthday" off-key, and Madison and Trent and Carly throw in cha-cha-chas after every line—it's so annoying to me.

I can tell they all think it's so cool, how they're cha-cha-cha'ing, but I think it takes away from the purity of the birthday song. Why can't they just let a good thing be?

I lock eyes with Mom so she'll know I care about her, that she's my priority. She's not cha-cha-cha'ing. I respect that about her. She gives me one of her big nose-wrinkling smiles that makes me feel like everything's gonna be okay. I smile back at her, trying to take in this moment as fully as I possibly can. I feel my eyes starting to water.

Mom was first diagnosed with stage four breast cancer when I was two years old. I hardly remember it, but there are a few flashes.

There's the flash of Mom knitting me a big green-and-white yarn blanket, saying it was something I could keep with me while she was in the hospital. I hated it, or I hated the way she was giving it to me, or I hated the feeling I got when she was giving it to me—I don't remember what exactly I hated, but there was something in that moment that I absolutely did.

There's the flash of walking across what must have been a hospital lawn, my hand in Grandpa's. We were supposed to be picking dandelions to give to Mom, but instead I picked these brown, pokey, sticklike weeds because I liked them better. Mom kept them in a plastic Crayola cup on our entertainment unit for years. To preserve the memory. (Maybe this is where Scott gets his nostalgic instincts from?)

There's the flash of sitting on the bumpy blue carpet in a corner room in our church building watching as two young and handsome missionaries put their hands on Mom's bald head to give her a priesthood blessing while everyone else in the family sat in cold foldout chairs around the perimeter of the room. One missionary consecrated the olive oil so that it would be all holy or whatever, then poured the oil onto Mom's head, making it even shinier. The other missionary then said the blessing, asking for Mom's life to be extended if it was God's will. Grandma jumped up from her seat and said, "Even if it's not God's will, goddamnit!" which disrupted the Holy Spirit so the missionary had to start the prayer over.

Even though I hardly remember that time in my life, it's not like I have to. The events are talked about so often in the McCurdy household that you didn't even have to be there at all for the experience to be etched into your memory.

Mom loves recounting her cancer story—the chemotherapy, the radiation, the bone marrow transplant, the mastectomy, the breast implant, the stage fourness of it, how she was only thirty-five when she got it—to any churchgoer, neighbor, or fellow Albertsons customer who lends her a listening ear. Even though the facts of it are so sad, I can tell that the story itself gives Mom a deep sense of pride. Of purpose. Like she, Debra McCurdy, was put on this earth to be a cancer survivor and live to tell the tale to any and everyone . . . at least five to ten times.

Mom reminisces about cancer the way most people reminisce about vacations. She even goes so far as to MC a weekly rewatch of a home video she made shortly after learning of her diagnosis. Every Sunday after church, she has one of the boys pop in the VHS tape since she doesn't know how to work the VCR.

"All right, everyone, shhhhh. Let's be quiet. Let's watch and be grateful for where Mommy is now," Mom says.

Even though Mom says we're watching this video so we can be grateful that she's okay now, there's something about watching this video that just doesn't sit right with me. I can tell how uncomfortable it makes the boys, and it definitely makes me uncomfortable too. I don't think any of us wants to be revisiting memories of our bald, sad, then-dying mom, but none of us express this.

The video starts playing. Mom sings lullabies to all four of us kids while we sit around her on the couch. And much like the video remains the same every time it's played, so too do Mom's comments. Every single time we rewatch this video, Mom comments on how the heaviness was just "too much for Marcus to handle," so he had to keep going off into the hallway to collect himself and come back in again. She says this in a way that lets us know it's the highest compliment. Marcus being distraught about Mom's terminal illness is a testament to what an incred-

ible person he is. Then she comments on what a "stinker" I was, but she says the word "stinker" with such a venomous bite that it might as well be a cuss word. She goes on to say how she can't believe I wouldn't stop singing "Jingle Bells" at the top of my lungs when the mood was clearly so sad. She can't believe how I didn't get that. How could I possibly be so upbeat when my surroundings were so obviously heavy? I was two.

Age is no excuse. I feel tremendous guilt every time we rewatch the home video. How could I not have known better? What a stupid idiot. How could I have not sensed what Mom needed? That she needed all of us to be serious, to be taking the situation as hard as we possibly could, to be devastated. She needed us to be nothing without her.

Even though I know the technicalities of Mom's cancer story—the chemo, the bone marrow transplant, the radiation—are all words that will evoke a big, shocked reaction from whoever hears them, like they can't believe Mom had it so hard, to me they're just technicalities. They mean nothing.

But what *does* mean something to me is the general air in the McCurdy household. The best way I can describe it is that, for as far back as I can remember, the air in the house has felt like a held breath. Like we're all in a holding pattern, waiting for Mom's cancer to come back. Between the constant reenactments of Mom's first bout of cancer and the frequent follow-up visits with doctors, the unspoken mood in the house is heavy. The fragility of Mom's life is the center of mine.

And I think I can do something about that fragility with my birthday wish.

Finally, the "Happy Birthday" song's over. The time has come. My big moment. I shut my eyes and take a deep breath in while I make my wish in my head.

I wish that Mom will stay alive another year.

2.

"One more row of clips and we'll be done," Mom says, speaking of the butterfly clips that she's carefully pinning into my head. I hate this hairstyle, the rows of tightly wound hair fastened into place with painful, scalp-gripping little clips. I'd rather be wearing a baseball cap, but Mom loves this style and says it makes me look pretty, so butterfly clips it is.

"Okay, Mommy," I say, swinging my legs back and forth while I sit on the closed toilet seat lid. The leg swing is a nice touch. Selling it.

The house phone starts ringing.

"Shoot." Mom opens the bathroom door and leans out of it, as far as she can go to grab the phone that hangs from the kitchen wall. She does all of this without letting go of the strand of my hair she's currently working on, so my whole body is leaned all the way over in the same direction that Mom is.

"Hello," she says into the phone as she answers it. "Uh-huh. Uh-huh. WHAT?! Nine p.m.? That's the earliest?! Whatever, guess the kids will have to get through ANOTHER NIGHT without their DAD. That's on you, Mark. That's on you."

Mom slams the phone down.

"That was your father."

"I figured."

"That man, Net, I tell ya. Sometimes I just . . ." She takes a deep, anxious breath.

"Sometimes you just what?"

"Well I could've married a doctor, a lawyer, or an—"

"Indian chief," I finish for her since I know this catchphrase of hers so well. I asked her once which Indian chief she dated, and she said she didn't mean it literally, that it's just a figure of speech, a way of saying

she could have had anyone she wanted back in the day before she had children, which has made her less appealing. I told her I was sorry, and she said it was okay, that she'd much rather have me than a man. Then she told me I was her best friend and kissed me on the forehead and, as an afterthought, said that she actually did go on a few dates with a doctor, though: "Tall and ginger, very financially stable."

Mom keeps clipping my hair.

"Producers too. Movie producers, music producers. Quincy Jones once did a double take when he passed me on a street corner. Honestly, Net, not only could I have married any of those men, but I *should* have. I was destined for a good life. For fame and fortune. You know how much I wanted to be an actress."

"But Grandma and Grandpa wouldn't let you," I say.

"But Grandma and Grandpa wouldn't let me, that's right."

I wonder why Grandma and Grandpa wouldn't let her, but I don't ask. I know better than to ask certain types of questions, the ones that go too deep into specifics. Instead, I just let Mom offer up the information she wants to offer up, while I listen closely and try to take it in exactly the way she wants me to.

"Ow!"

"Sorry, did I clip your ear?"

"Yeah, it's okay."

"It's hard to see from this angle."

Mom starts rubbing my ear. I'm immediately soothed.

"I know."

"I want to give you the life I never had, Net. I want to give you the life I deserved. The life my parents wouldn't let me have."

"Okay." I'm nervous about what's coming next.

"I think you should act. I think you would be a great little actress. Blonde. Blue-eyed. You're what they love in that town."

"In what town?"

"Hollywood."

"Isn't Hollywood far away?"

"An hour and a half. Granted, freeways are involved. I'd have to learn how to drive freeways. But it's a sacrifice I'm willing to make for you, Net. 'Cuz I'm not like my parents. I want what's best for you. Always. You know that, right?"

"Yeah."

Mom pauses the way she does before she's about to say something she thinks is a part of a big moment. She bends around to look me in the eye—still holding my unfinished hair strand.

"So what do you say? You want to act? You want to be Mommy's little actress?"

There's only one right answer.

3.

I don't feel ready. I know I'm not ready. The kid in front of me hops down off the stage steps in a way that confuses me. He doesn't seem nervous at all. This is just another day for him. He takes a seat next to the dozen or so other children who are already sitting because they've already performed their monologues.

I look around at the boring, white-walled, undecorated room and the rows of kids in metal stackable chairs. I thumb the paper in my hands nervously. I'm next. I got in line last so I would have more time to practice, a decision I now regret because my nerves have had more time to build. I've never felt this way before. Sick to my stomach from nerves.

"Go ahead, Jennette," the man with the black ponytail and goatee deciding my fate tells me.

I nod to him, then step up onstage. I set the piece of paper down so I have more freedom to use my hands for the big gestures Mom instructed me to use, and then I begin my monologue on Jell-O Jigglers.

My voice is shaky as I start out. I can hear it so loud in my head. I try to tune it out, but it just keeps sounding louder. I smile big and hope that Goatee doesn't notice. Finally, I get to the closing line.

". . . Because Jell-O Jigglers make me giggle!"

I giggle after the line, just like Mom told me—"high-pitched and cutesy, with a little nose wrinkle at the tail end." I hope the giggle doesn't come across nearly as uncomfortable as I feel with it coming out of me.

Goatee clears his throat—never a good sign. He tells me to try the monologue one more time, but "loosen up a bit, just do it simply like you're talking to your friend . . . oh, and don't do any of those hand gestures."

I'm conflicted. The hand gestures are exactly what Mom told me to do. If I get to the waiting room and tell her I didn't do the hand gestures, she'll be disappointed. But if I get to the waiting room and tell her I don't have an agent, she'll be even more disappointed.

I do the monologue again, losing the hand gestures, and it feels slightly better, but I can tell Goatee didn't get exactly what he wanted. I disappointed him. I feel awful.

After I finish, Goatee calls out nine names, including mine, and tells the other five kids they can go. I can tell only one of the kids understands that she's just been rejected. The other four waltz out of the room like they're going to get ice cream. I feel bad for her but good for myself. I am a Chosen One.

Goatee tells all of us that Academy Kids would like to represent us for background work, which means we'll stand in the background of scenes for shows and movies. I immediately know that Goatee is trying to make bad news sound good by the way that his face is overly animated.

Once he lets us go to tell our moms in the waiting room, Goatee calls out three kids' names and asks them to stay. I linger, trying to be the last one out of the room so I can hear what's going on with these three special children—these three Even More Chosen Ones. Goatee tells them that they have been selected to be represented as "principal actors," meaning speaking actors. They did so well on their monologues that they are not being represented as human props but rather as genuine, certified, worthy-of-speaking ACTORS.

I feel something uncomfortable brewing inside me. Jealousy mixed with rejection and self-pity. Why am I not good enough to speak?

I get out to the waiting room and run over to Mom, who's balancing her checkbook for the fourth time this week. I tell her that I've been chosen as a background actor, and she seems genuinely happy. I know this is only because she doesn't know that there is a higher tier that I might have been chosen for. I worry about her finding out.

Mom starts filling out the representation paperwork. She points her

pen at the dotted line I'm supposed to sign my name on. It's next to a dotted line she's already signed—she has to sign too since she's my guardian.

"What are we signing for?"

"The contract just says that the agent gets twenty percent and we get eighty percent. Fifteen percent of that eighty percent will go into an account called a Coogan account, which you can access once you're eighteen. That's all the money that most parents let their kids have. But you're lucky. Mommy's not gonna take any of your money except for my salary, plus essentials."

"What are essentials?"

"Why are you giving me the third degree all of the sudden? Don't you trust me?"

I quickly sign.

Goatee comes out to give each of the parents feedback. He comes to Mom first and tells her that I have potential to do principal work.

"Potential?" Mom asks, critically.

"Yes, especially since she's only six, so she's getting an early start."

"But why potential? Why can't she do principal work now?"

"Well, I could tell in her monologue that she was very nervous. She seems quite shy."

"She is shy, but she's getting over it. She'll get over it."

Goatee scratches his arm where there's a tattoo of a tree. He takes a deep breath like he's getting ready to say something he's nervous about saying.

"It's important that Jennette *wants* to act, in order for her to do well," he says.

"Oh, she wants this more than anything," Mom says as she signs on the next page's dotted line.

Mom wants this more than anything, not me. This day was stressful and not fun, and if given the choice, I would choose to never do anything like it again. On the other hand, I *do* want what Mom wants, so she's kind of right.

Goatee smiles at me in a way that I wish I understood. I don't like when grown-ups make faces or sounds that I don't understand. It's frustrating. It makes me feel like I'm missing something.

"Good luck," he says to me with a certain heaviness, and then he walks away.

4.

It's three a.m. the Friday after signing with Academy Kids when Mom wakes me up for my first day of background work on a show called *The X Files*. My call time isn't until five a.m., but since Mom's scared of driving freeways for the first time, she wants to get a head start and leave plenty early.

"Look at me, getting over my fear for you," Mom says as we pile into our 1999 Ford Windstar minivan.

We arrive at 20th Century Fox studios an hour early, so we walk around for a bit in the dark. When we pass the giant Luke Skywalker vs. Darth Vader mural on the side of one of the soundstages, Mom squeals with delight, whips out her disposable camera, and snaps a picture of me standing in front of it. I feel embarrassed, like we don't belong here.

By 4:45 a.m., Mom figures it's close enough to my call time to show up, so we check in just outside the soundstage with a short, bald production assistant. He tells us we're early, but we can stop by background crafty before it's time to head to set.

Background crafty is a cool place. It's a tent at the edge of the soundstage with food everywhere. Cereal and candy and jugs of coffee and orange juice and silver trays of breakfast foods—pancakes and waffles and scrambled eggs and bacon.

"And it's free," Mom says excitedly as she wraps various muffins and croissants in napkins and tucks them into her oversized Payless purse to give to my brothers later. There are a bunch of whole eggs sitting in a tray. Mom says they're hard-boiled. I pluck one out to try it. Mom teaches me how to roll the egg on a hard surface to crack the shell, then

peel the shell off the egg white. I sprinkle it with salt and pepper and take a big bite. I love it. I grab a bag of Ritz Bits mini cheese sandwiches, too. I could get used to this.

By the time I get to the last bite of the egg, all of the other background kids—there are thirty of us—have shown up, and we're all called to set at once.

We trail behind the bald PA as he guides us to the soundstage where we'll be shooting. As soon as we cross onto the soundstage, I'm in awe. The ceiling is so high, and it's covered with hundreds of lights and poles. There's the smell of fresh wood and the sound of hammers and drills. Many people in cargo pants pass us, some of them with tools hanging off their belts, some of them with clipboards in their hands, some of them whispering urgently into walkie-talkies. There's something magical about this. It feels like so much is happening.

We get to set and the director—a small man with light brown hair long enough to tuck behind his ears—ushers us in, talking quickly and frantically. He looks at me and the other twenty-nine children and tells us excitedly that we will all be playing children who are stuck in a gas chamber and suffocating to death. I nod along, trying to remember each and every word so that I can relay them to Mom on the drive home when she asks. Suffocating to death, got it.

The director tells us all where to stand, and I'm near the back of the blob of children until he asks for the smaller kids to come up front, so I do. He then points to each of us rapidly, one right after the other, and says to give him our best "scared-to-death" face. I'm the ninth or tenth kid he points to, and after I give my face, he tells the cameraman standing next to him to get a close-up of me. I have no idea what this means, but I assume it's good because the director winks at me after he says it.

"One more, even more scared!" the director shouts at me. I widen my eyes a bit, hoping that will work. It does I think, since he says, "Got it, moving on!" and pats me on the back.

The rest of the day consists of segments of set-work and schoolwork, which we are required to do on set, so we go back and forth between the two. Since Mom homeschools me, she pulled my schoolwork for the day and paper-clipped all the worksheets together into a little packet. The twelve-year-old girl seated next to me in the schoolroom keeps elbowing me and telling me we don't have to do any schoolwork if we don't want to because we're background actors, and the studio teachers assigned to background actors don't care how much work gets done because they just want to teach the principal actors. I try my best to ignore her and fill out my page on the state capitals. After our half-hour-or-so schoolwork segments, we're pulled from the classroom by the PA to go do the scene again. The same scene. The whole day, the same scene.

I have no idea why we have to keep doing this one scene so many times, and I figure it's best not to ask questions, but I notice that each time I come back to the set, the camera is in a new position, so I have a feeling it has something to do with that. Oh well, at least every time I'm brought to set, I get to see Mom.

Each time the PA walks us kids back to set, we pass the "background parents holding room," where all the parents are stuffed into a small bungalow. I wave to Mom, who notices me every single time. No matter how engrossed in her *Woman's World* magazine she is, she dog-ears the page, looks up at me, smiles big, and gives me a thumbs-up. We are so connected.

By the end of the day, I'm exhausted. It's been eight and a half hours of being on set and doing schoolwork and walking from the stage to the schoolroom and taking directions and hearing drills and smelling smoke (there was a fog machine on the gas chamber set to enhance the ambiance). It's been a long day and I haven't particularly enjoyed it, but I did like the hard-boiled egg.

"Suffocating to death," Mom says eagerly on our way home, as she recounts everything I told her about the day. "And in a CLOSE-UP.

That's gonna really show off how good you are. I bet once this airs, Academy Kids is gonna beg you to be a principal actor. BEG."

Mom shakes her head in disbelief as she taps the steering wheel with excitement. She seems so carefree in this moment. I try to soak in her expression as deeply as I can. I wish she was like this more often.

"You're gonna be a star, Nettie. I just know it. You're gonna be a *star*."

5.

"We have to leave for church in fifteen minutes!" Mom shouts from the other room before I hear the distinct smack of a makeup brush being thrown against the mirror. She must've gotten her eyeliner crooked again.

The church my family goes to is the Garden Grove Sixth Ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Grandma was baptized a Mormon when she was eight, and then Mom was baptized a Mormon when she was eight—just like I'm gonna be baptized a Mormon when I'm eight, because that's when Joseph Smith said you become accountable for your sins. (Before then, you can sin scot-free.) Even though both Grandma and Mom were baptized, they didn't go to church. I think they wanted the perk of going to heaven without doing the legwork.

But then right after Mom was diagnosed with cancer, we started attending church service.

"I just knew the Lord would help me get better if I was a good and faithful servant," Mom explained to me.

"Oh. So we started going to church when we wanted something from God?" I asked.

"No." Even though Mom was laughing when she said it, she sounded kind of nervous, maybe even a little annoyed. And then she switched the subject to how handsome Tom Cruise looked in the new *Mission: Impossible 2* trailer.

I've never again asked when or why we started going to church. I don't need to know the specifics of why we go to church to know that I love it.

I love the smell of the chapel—pine-scented tile cleaner and a whiff of burlap. I love my primary classes and all the songs about faith and

Jesus, like "I Hope They Call Me on a Mission" and "Book of Mormon Stories," and my personal favorite, "Popcorn Popping," which, come to think of it, I'm not sure has anything to do with faith or Jesus. (It's about popcorn popping on an apricot tree.)

But more than anything, I love the escape. Church is a beautiful, peaceful, three-hour weekly reprieve from the place I hate most: home.

Home, like church, is in Garden Grove, California, a town not-so-affectionately referred to by its inhabitants as "Garbage Grove" because, as Dustin puts it before Mom always shuts him up, "There's a lot of white trash here."

We get a good deal on renting the house, since Dad's parents own it, but apparently not good enough since Mom's always complaining about it.

"We shouldn't have to pay anything at all. That's what family's for," she'll vent to me while doing dishes or filing her nails. "If they don't leave the house to your father in their will, I swear . . ."

We're late on our rent just about every month—Mom's always crying about it. And the payments are often short—Mom's always crying about that too. Sometimes it's just not quite enough even though Mom, Dad, Grandpa, and Grandma all chip in. Grandpa and Grandma moved in with us "temporarily" while Mom was battling cancer but just wound up staying even after she went into remission because it worked out better for everyone.

Mom calls it the "curse of minimum wage." Grandpa works as a ticket-taker at Disneyland, Grandma works as a receptionist at a retirement home, Dad makes cardboard cutouts for Hollywood Video and works in the kitchen design department at Home Depot, and Mom went to beauty school but says having babies sidetracked her career—"plus the hair bleaching fumes are toxic"—so she picks up shifts at Target around the holidays but says her main job is ensuring I make it in Hollywood.

Even though the rent payments are often short and almost always late, we've never been kicked out. And I feel like if anybody but Dad's

parents owned the house, we probably would have been kicked out by now. Part of me fantasizes about that.

If we got kicked out, that means we'd have to move somewhere else. And if we'd have to move somewhere else, that means we'd have to pack up the stuff we want to take with us into moving boxes. And if we'd have to pack stuff into moving boxes, that means we'd have to sort through all the stuff in this house and get rid of some of it. And that sounds wonderful.

Our home hasn't always been like this. I've seen pictures from before I was born where it actually looked pretty normal—a humble house with a little clutter, nothing out of the ordinary.

My brothers say it began when Mom got sick; that's when she started not being able to let go of things. That would mean it started when I was two. Since then the problem has only gotten worse.

Our garage is filled floor to ceiling with stuff. Stacks of plastic bins are filled with old papers and receipts and baby clothes and toys and tangled jewelry and journals and Christmas decorations and old candy bar wrappers and expired makeup and empty shampoo bottles and broken mug pieces in Ziploc bags.

The garage has two entrances—the back door and the main garage door. It's nearly impossible to get through the garage if you enter by the back door because there's hardly enough space for a walking path, but even on the off chance that you are able to elbow your way through the path, you won't want to. We have a rat and possum problem, so the only thing you'll see on your sliver of path is dead rats and possums stuck in the traps Dad places every few weeks. The dead rats and possums stink.

Since you can't really walk through the garage, our second fridge is placed strategically at the very front of the garage so that we can open the main garage door and access it easily.

Easily is an overstatement.

Our garage door is the only manual one on the block, and so heavy that it broke its own hinges. The door used to make a loud clicking sound once Dad or Marcus—the only two in the household strong enough to