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To Live Without

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Author Bio

Aimee Griffin is an English and Philosophy major with a Theatre minor, which means she looks forward to her future of living in a cardboard box in a major city somewhere. When she's not writing, she can at times be found acting or directing with the Theatre department, or copyediting for The Gettysburgian and taking a stand against the overuse and abuse of the word "however" by aspiring journalists. In her free time she drinks a lot of tea so she can be more like the English people with whom she studied abroad and hopes to one day live among, and is an advocate for the right of gingers to be loved.

TO LIVE WITHOUT

AIMEE GRIFFIN

Every workday lately felt like a lifetime, but coming home wasn't a relief anymore either. I walked into the house, through the tight foyer, and into the kitchen, where I deposited my suit jacket, briefcase, and keys in a heap on some chair. Mary Sue, the babysitter, was sitting at the kitchen table humming and reading a glossy magazine. When I came in, she didn't move right away, following me with her perpetually sleepy eyes and slow smile. She took her time gathering her things to leave, rattling off the day's summary.

"Same ol' same ol' today, Mister Fields. Katie's outside somewhere. She's been ignoring me since this morning. Got her inside when I said I made baloney sandwiches for lunch but she took one bite and I haven't seen her since. There's still plenty of food in the fridge, especially in the freezer. See you in the morning." Purse in hand and heels clicking on the linoleum, she made her exit, her fluffy white dog pattering after her.

I grasped the wooden handle of the refrigerator and eased it open to survey the contents. Casseroles, soups, stroganoffs, pasta salads, egg salads, none of which Katie would even look at. I couldn't even see what the freezer held, it was so packed with ceramic dishes made with sympathy by the grandmas and housewives of the neighborhood. The decision was overwhelming me and I began to get frustrated, until I realized that I had no appetite and let the freezer door slam. With heavy fingers I loosened the knot of my tie; it was already coming undone. I'd been wearing a tie every day for the entire length of my career; it was funny to think that I still couldn't tie it well. I'd been tying it by myself for a month, and I still couldn't get it right. She used to do it so well, and I loved that moment in the morning with her so much, I saw no point in having her teach me how. In the dark haze of our bedroom, she'd finish buttoning the top buttons of my shirt and run her hand down my chest to smooth the fabric. I could feel the light pressure of her forearms on my shoulders as she flipped up the shirt collar and slid the tie around my neck.

The silk slipped out of my fingers and onto the kitchen floor as I walked back out the front door and stood on the porch. The hot late afternoon sun illuminated the street and all the houses close by, and the tired sounds of the end of childhood games and the calls of mothers echoed out into the space.

"Katie!" I called out. "Katie Marie!"

"We ain't seen her all day, Mister Fields," a boy riding home on his bicycle called out. I lingered for a moment, then trudged back through the house to the back porch. The grass was obscenely long, a foot high maybe.

Not far from the porch, sticking out over the green summer grass, I spotted a white blond ponytail. Katie crouched low in the grass, her skinny limbs motionless, poised to pounce. She didn't hear the screen door slam; she was concentrating too hard on her mission. Something like a smile pulled at the edges of my mouth, and I quietly slid off my shoes and socks and placed them on the porch. I crept down the steps and silently came up behind the little hunter. I made my way through the grass, avoiding overturned plastic furniture, a soccer ball, a baseball bat, and swooped in to grab Katie up in my arms. Her shriek was deafening. I held her over my shoulder and walked back to the house. She flailed wildly, her scrawny arms and legs beating ineffectually against my chest and back.

"Put. Me. Down," she commanded through clenched teeth. "You ruined everything! I'm never going to find Billy." Billy was the name of Katie's pet frog. She had rescued him from the middle of the street one day, and she had made it her mission in life to protect this poor frog that didn't have enough sense to stay out of traffic. I had tried to convince her that the frog perhaps wanted his freedom, and that maybe he had just made a mistake once that he had certainly learned from.

"Billy," said the stubborn little child, "Needs my help. He won't make it alone." That was that. I placed the little girl on the cement step outside the back screen door and stood looking down on her.

"What happened to Billy?" I asked, rolling up the sleeves of my dress shirt, preparing for whatever search I would be required to perform as a sympathetic father.

"I don't know! He's gone!" Katie spread her tiny hands, palms up, in a gesture of helplessness and defeat. "After you left, I finished my breakfast and went back into my room, and he wasn't in his habitat!" Thus far, the escape seemed to be a mystery.

"Was the habitat knocked over, baby? Was the little door on top open?" Mary Sue's little dog, Sheba, had been known to occasionally wreak havoc here and there when she was particularly unsupervised. Perhaps she had knocked over Billy's plastic "habitat."

"No, that's what's weird! He just wasn't there! He disappeared!" The little girl sat, elbows on her knees, chin in her hands, surveying the back lawn. "He could be anywhere. He could be halfway to California by now!" Her green eyes were big and her mouth was set in an angry little line that trembled now and then. Her bare feet were streaked with dark grime, her grey cotton shirt was expertly rumpled, and her cutoff jean shorts were smeared with grass stains, but still her ponytail remained intact. I did her hair the only way I knew how. Every morning I stood behind her, brushed out all the knots from sleeping, gathered every lock up at the top of her head, and secured it with an elastic scrunchie. It was all I could learn, and she wore it like a badge of honor. I remembered how she had to begin sporting it the last few weeks of school, before I took her out. It was the beginning of her

in-school conflicts.

"Amanda Lake called me Cindy Lou Who all day today. Because of my hair. I didn't like it," she told me, I guess it was a little less than a month ago now.

"So, what did you do?" I already knew the answer, I had heard it from the principal.

"I told her to keep her fat, bratty mouth shut at recess. And then she wouldn't, so I shoved her a little." She had in fact shoved Miss Lake into a thorn bush. She still swears she didn't know that the bush was prickly.

After a week of getting calls from the principal about how Katie wasn't interacting with the other students well, that Katie wouldn't come back inside when recess was over, and that Katie wouldn't pay attention in class, I ended her school year early about two weeks ago and kept her home. I wanted to punish her, but I knew I wouldn't.

I sat down on the step next to her and copied her posture.

"Why didn't you eat your lunch today?" I asked as Katie picked at the cement. "Mary Sue is only trying—"

"It was wrong. She made it all wrong, just like you do. And she cut it across." I inhaled deeply. Only one person was capable of making baloney sandwiches that Katie would eat, and there already wasn't much that you could get her to eat as it was.

We sat on the porch until the peepers came out and the sun went down. Eventually I turned to look at the child next to me, and unable to return to the topic of Billy, I suggested dinner instead. In the kitchen, Katie sat on her knees on her chair at the kitchen table, stabbing forcefully at the macaroni and cheese in her bowl.

"Is that any way to eat?" I sat across from her at the small table, eating nothing, just watching her.

"I eat like I mean it," she said through a mouth full of macaroni.

"It's not very feminine."

"What's that mean?"

"It means the boys won't like it."

"Mary Sue was talking on the phone about how some boy was looking at her butt—"

"Don't listen to Mary Sue."

A whole box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and three glasses of milk later, my girl sat slumped in her chair, belly full and face smeared with the poor remnants of the macaroni. She lifted the back of her hand to wipe off the offensive stickiness and I caught her little wrist in my hand.

"Eh! Bath. Go." She heaved a little girl sigh and lumbered up the stairs to the bathroom. I slumped in the nearest kitchen chair and I heard the fan in the bathroom click on. I leaned my head back and rubbed my eyes and water could be heard running from the faucet. It made me think of the clink of dishes being washed. I saw the suds filling up the sink and her deft

hands brandishing the sponge at me, threatening me for never actually helping with the dishes, all with her half-smile on her face. She set to work scrubbing at the plates, her hair falling over her face as she worked. Washing dishes always brought out something nostalgic in her, and she tossed me a smile over her shoulder.

"Remember when we used to wash Katie in this sink?" she asked, staring dreamily at the wall. "She was so quiet while we washed her baby belly, and her little hands, and her little feet."

"Ah, the days before she could talk and tell me about everything I do wrong." I leaned the chair on its back legs and smiled at her.

"She's just grumpy and stubborn like you sometimes."

"Grumpy and stubborn, huh? Apparently not stubborn enough if I can't win an argument against a two and a half foot tall opponent."

"You can hardly call what happens between you two 'arguments.' She's got your heart in her little fist."

"She's not the only one."

The water stopped and Katie called out to me from the bathroom.

"Daddy! Come wash my hair!" I hoisted myself from the chair and slowly made my way up the staircase. When I walked into the bathroom, she sat in the tub, covered in suds from the neck down. I remembered how the suds used to make her giggle at bath time, how she loved to blow on them so they floated away, how the new and interesting shampoo hairstyles I came up with were always a delight. Now, bath time was very businesslike, just like every other part of our days. She sat still and quiet as I soaked her hair, massaged the shampoo into her scalp, and then rinsed it out. When clean, she stood, pink faced and wrapped in a fluffy blue towel, in front of the bathroom mirror, and I gently combed the knots out of her wet hair. Her green eyes stared straight ahead. She refrained from making funny faces or sticking her tongue out at me; she just stared.

We split up to go to our respective rooms and change into pajamas. I dropped my dress shirt in the hamper, hung my pants up to be worn another day, and left my belt coiled on a chair. I had to search for my slippers, they used to always be positioned at the end of the bed, next to hers. I had left them in my closet that morning, in a rush to get out of the house. Bending down to retrieve them, I caught sight of the side of the closet that wasn't mine, the side I had yet to clean out. I stood up and reached out to touch the skirt of a soft light blue frock, the one with the zipper in the back that was such a pain. When my fingertips grazed the fabric, I jerked back and wrenched the closet door closed with a bang. Feeling ashamed, I glanced at the doorway to see if I had startled Katie, but the hallway was empty. She never came near this room anymore. In my boxers and an undershirt, I walked to Katie's room and found her standing by the window, which I had thrown open that morning in the heat. She had her arms on the sill, her head resting on them like a pillow, staring out into the back yard. She had on a

t-shirt that reached below her knees and swallowed her in fabric. Her wet hair left a damp, dark spot on the back in between her shoulder blades. When she heard me enter she swiveled to look at me, her face smooth and sad.

"Billy's not coming back, is he?"

I turned down her covers and patted the sheet while I sat on the edge of her bed. She crawled into the spot I'd indicated and pulled the top sheet up over her lap.

"No, baby, I don't think we'll see Billy again." As she listened to me, I waited for tears, but she didn't seem shocked by my answer.

"Was I doing something wrong? I tried to give him plenty of flies to eat, I always made sure his habitat was fresh." She looked down at her lap, playing with her hands.

"No, honey, you were wonderful! It's not anything you did, I promise. It was just Billy's time to be somewhere else."

"He didn't like it here?"

"Katie, I know Billy loved it here. But you can't always stay in the same place forever. Sometimes you have to leave. It makes us really sad that Billy's gone and I'm sure he misses you a lot, but we have to think how it's probably better for Billy to be outside anyway."

Katie pulled the sheet up to her chin and thumped her head down on her pillow.

"I hope he's okay."

"I'm sure he is, baby. Now, get some sleep. I love you."

"Love you, too, Daddy."

I went back down into the kitchen and stood for a while, wondering what to do next. I pushed open the back screen door and it crashed back against the house when I stepped outside. I sat back down on the cement step, in the middle this time because I was alone, and looked out across the dark lawn, tracing the division between the black landscape and purple blue sky. The peeping crickets sang loudly in the night, a deafening chorus. I realized, as I sat there, that I was straining through the cricket refrains, listening desperately for the croak of a frog.