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Sick on the Inside

Maelina A. Frattaroli

Gettysburg College, fratma01@cnav.gettysburg.edu

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Author Bio

Maelina Frattaroli is a senior and a double major in English and Spanish. After graduation, she aspires to "find herself," whatever that might entail, and then proceed at some point to graduate school for either an MA. in Spanish or an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, or both. She hopes to travel the world someday: either when she's young and broke or old, retired, and rich. She also plans on consuming ridiculous amounts of garlic for the rest of her life because that's her obsession. She would like to thank Dusty, Kim, and Fred for believing in her and motivating her as a writer.

Sick on the Inside

1: The Thing on the Bathroom Floor

Mommy didn't wake me up that morning to say bye. She didn't even go to work that morning. I think she forgot. Later, Daddy wasn't waiting for me in the driveway when Sharon, Kelly's mommy, brought me home from nursery school in their big, blue-gray car that made you go backwards and get real dizzy if you sat in the back. Riding backwards made throw-up climb up my insides. It stung, but it never came out. The car smelled like a muddy, wet dog because their dog went for rides sometimes. Daddy called it a "soccer mom" car.

Miss Sharon wanted to come inside with me, but I told her I wasn't afraid to go alone. She hugged me really close and said she wouldn't let me. When she stopped hugging me, I could still smell the hairspray on her brown hair. She said it was dangerous for a three-and-a-half year-old like me to go anywhere alone. She took my hand; hers was warm. She brought me inside with Kelly. Daddy wasn't in the kitchen, but we heard him talking to Mommy upstairs. I heard them talking two times – once in real life, and once in an echo. I think they were having what Daddy calls a deep conversation. Daddy's face gets all red like the skin of a tomato when he has a deep conversation. When Sharon saw Tommy, my fifteen-year-old brother, on the couch in front of the TV, she finally let me be alone.

Tommy waved to me, but didn't say anything. He smiled, just a little, but not enough to show his teeth. He had dark, metal braces. Mommy said that he was embarrassed because he thought no girl would want to kiss someone with mini cages glued onto his teeth. He had his headphones on and moved his head in fast nods. I could hear the loud music with too many drums through them. He was watching football. I hated football, but I also hated Barbies. They're all the same. No one ever looks like that. Tommy looked kind of depressed, but I think he was just going through a phase, like Mommy and Daddy always said. He didn't talk to them much; he was always talking to other people on the computer with the door shut behind him. Whenever Mommy or Daddy came into the computer room, he would make the screen go black and tell them it was none of their business who he was talking to. I thought he was mad because of his braces or his face that was red and bumpy like Mars. I ignored him; he just wanted attention.

I didn't smell the yellow soup with stars that Mommy sometimes made for me. She made me the one in the red Campbell's cans for my snack before dinner. I ate all of it except for the chicken. The pieces were too pink with a lot of slimy fat stuck to them. Mommy wasn't in the kitchen, and I was starving. I heard a little noise from upstairs; it sounded like Daddy was saying swearwords again; sometimes, he does when his paperwork drives

him crazy. Something was banging so loudly that I felt it through my shoes. I thought it was Daddy hammering a nail into the wall.

"Daddy!" I yelled up at him. He didn't answer me.

I ran upstairs and almost fell because my bag was still on my back. I'm happy I didn't fall because I did one time and my head hurt forever. It felt like my brain stopped thinking and was ready to fall out of my head. Daddy's office light was on, but he wasn't in there. The top of his hair wasn't popping up from his chair. Mommy and Daddy were yelling in the bathroom. The door was open, but just a little bit. I never heard anyone yelling in the bathroom before except when they were constipated because they didn't eat enough fiber. I didn't call Daddy's name anymore. I kept quiet, just like Daddy used to tell me when he didn't want to hear me open my mouth. I still keep quiet sometimes.

I didn't want to see them in the bathtub looking like that. She didn't look like Mommy, and he didn't look like Daddy. Mommy's chestnut hair was wet in her face like a messy, chocolate spider web. She kept hitting her head. Daddy's shirt had red paint all over, but they weren't painting. They moved a little bit. Mommy was screaming louder than I did the time I tripped on my shoelace and fell downstairs. Mommy said that I got the wind knocked out of me. Her skin was white like clay and it looked moist, but the shower wasn't on. Mommy screamed some more.

"No! No you don't!" She told him to go away.

She was sobbing, and her face was almost redder than the paint on Daddy's shirt. Her long hair was dancing all over her head that kept moving up and down real fast. When Daddy tried to give her a hug, she tucked her arms in and turned away. She shook like she was taking a cold shower.

Mommy was trying to hide something in her hand. Daddy told her to give it to him now, and that he wanted to take it from her because she was hurting herself. I couldn't see very well, but her hand looked tight. When my hand's closed tight, my knuckles get white because the blood moves away from the bones.

"I wanna help you, Claire," he told Mommy. He tried his best not to yell at her. Daddy always said that Mommy was a very sensitive lady. She didn't like being yelled at. I think Daddy was too scared to yell. I wanted to yell, but I think I had a frog inside my voice that made yelling impossible. I stayed in the corner.

Then, Mommy said something that I'll never forget. "You're a liar, Rob! A fucking fake! Admit it! You and me – a fucking waste, all so you could fuck --," she shouted loudly, but slowly, choking after every word.

She was breathing funny, like Tommy did when he used his electric breathing toy for his asthma. Her words were hard to understand. She didn't sound like Mommy because those were ugly words. I saw her spitting

on little kids like a big bully when she said them. They were words that you hear in those bloody, grown-up movies with lots of guns, bad guys, and policemen. I wasn't allowed to watch rated-R movies, but sometimes Tommy turned on the TV to HBO while I sat on the other couch painting with my water colors.

"Look, give me that thing in 3...2...", Daddy counted slowly. His voice got more tired, almost like he was whining, after each number.

Mommy was wriggling so fast, he couldn't keep up with her. She was squirming like the earthworm that moved like mad after I cut it in half with a shovel. That was the same one I tried to eat when I was three. I thought it might have tasted like brown, slimy spaghetti from Chinese restaurants. She held her hand with that thing in it up real high like Lady Liberty holding the torch. Before Daddy could count to one, something made the thing fall onto the bathroom floor. It fell fast, but slow because it was doing flips like the acrobat I saw at the circus after the elephants came on. The light on it changed like a dying flashlight as it flipped.

When it fell onto the tile floor, it sounded like someone dropping a coin. The thing was bigger than a quarter. It was a silver square; one side looked clean like strong aluminum foil, and the other side looked scary and almost red. It was skinny like the end of the knife Daddy uses to cut his rib-eye steak he always grilled. There were little red drops that bounced off of it onto the shiny, white tiles. Maybe it was the same red paint that Daddy was wearing. I looked at it for a long time. I was still looking at it, and Mommy was still choking. I never saw Daddy cry before then.

2: The Black Taxi Cab

It was thirty minutes past my bedtime, and I was still awake in bed. Mommy was late tucking me in. She came, finally. She always opened the door so it wouldn't squeak; Daddy always made it squeak. I saw the triangle of light grow bigger on my carpet in the dark when it opened. My eyes were wide awake and felt extremely big. She walked in slowly. She smiled at me, but didn't show her teeth; she never did. Daddy always said that that smile was her "secret charm" that made her look like that mysterious lady in Leonardo DaVinci's painting. Mommy took tiny steps like a ballerina as she walked, and they didn't make any noise.

She came over to me and sat next to me on my bed. Her chestnut hair, like Belle's from "Beauty and the Beast," smelled like her favorite lilac shampoo. It smelled so sweet, I wanted to eat a bouquet of lilacs. She kissed my forehead with her soft lips. She always said her secret was Vaseline before bedtime. After she bent down to kiss me, my face was covered in a brown-haired blanket of lilacs. She sat up again.

"Chrissy," she whispered. "I won't be driving you to school tomorrow. Daddy will instead."

"What about Friday?" I asked her. I was a little bit confused. Mommy always drove me every morning and Sharon always brought me home in the van.

"No, not Friday either. Not for a while, sweetheart. There's some place I have to go to," she answered. I could tell she was sad, but she tried not to cry. Her eyes were pink like a carnation.

Mommy said nothing for a while. With both her hands, she reached out to my face. I thought she was going to hold my head in her cushiony palms like she did all the time when she said she had the best little girl in the world. Instead, she slowly brushed my hair back with her long fingernails that moved in wavy patterns against my scalp. Her hands running through my hair felt like a comb with huge teeth. She tucked my hair behind my pointy ears; they were so pointy that Tommy would call me an "elf child." She smiled that smile again. But she looked down at my comforter instead of my eyes. Her hands dropped to her lap, making a soft slapping sound.

Mommy wasn't going to the doctor's for a check-up. She wasn't going on vacation with the people from work either.

I kept quiet.

She told me that I might not understand, but to try my best to listen anyway.

"I'll be gone for a while. Mommy's a little bit sick, sweetheart, but I'm sick on the inside. When a person is sick on the inside, they need to go see a doctor for a longer time than for any other sickness."

I kept thinking and thinking and trying to understand, but I couldn't. I asked her if she would be gone forever, like Grandma who went to that old, brick nursing home when she started to speak nonsense.

"No, not forever," she said. "It might be a long time, but not forever. Only until I stop being sick. But please promise me two things," she said, and then put her hand on top of mine. It felt like Play-Dough, cold, like how my palms felt on a cloudy day. "Promise me that you won't be afraid without me and that you'll listen to Daddy and be a brave, strong girl for him."

I was good at keeping promises, but I didn't know what to say to her. I think I started to cry a little. I hated when I cried because the hot tears would make my cheeks and neck itch for a long time.

"Can you do that?" she asked me.

She lifted me up and held me in her comfy sweater-arms. She let me cry my tears into them, but the wet sweater started to itch at my face, and I moved away. I never thought soft clouds could itch so much.

"I promise, Mommy," I whispered. I cried and cried anyway, and she rocked me to sleep.

9:15. I was four years old for fifteen minutes when a beeping sound a little louder than Daddy's cement truck woke me up. My window was open, and then Mother Nature blew in through the screen like Tinkerbelle and froze the tip of my nose. I sat up in my bed and looked outside. There was a black taxi waiting at the end of my driveway. It was all shiny in the October sun, and there were strange shapes of light on different parts of it. Mommy always said the sun played tricks on shiny things. I couldn't see the person in it through the tree branches and yellow and gold fall leaves. They fell with the blowing wind like gigantic snowflakes. The driver beeped two times in a row, then another two times in a row.

The old kitchen door slammed shut. Mommy's high heels stomped on the stone sidewalk as she walked to the car. Whenever her shoes sounded like that, I knew she was leaving the house to go somewhere. But they were clunking faster this time. I ran downstairs so I could see her again. Daddy and Tommy were sitting quietly at the kitchen table; they both had their heads down. Tommy's hood blanketed his head, and his earphones were on again. I walked around them. I wanted to see her by myself as she walked towards the shimmery, black car.

I opened the front door and pushed the glass to open it some more. The glass was cold like the top of a frozen pond. My sweaty hands made cloudy fingerprints on it like white paint on dark paper. Mommy didn't see me open the door though, and I didn't call her name. She was already at the black car. A man with a big belly and bald head opened the trunk for her and helped her put her two big suitcases inside. He was so big, he seemed hungry. He looked like he wanted to eat the suitcases. They were only Mommy's suitcases, but it was like she was taking her whole life with her to the place she had to go.

The man with the big belly shut the trunk with his fat, strong arm. His arm was short like a plump sausage. The trunk made a noise that felt funny in my heart. I shut the glass door and kept looking from inside. Daddy and Tommy still weren't looking. I looked for a long time at the shiny, middle part of the tires. They were so shiny, they were white. I only saw the back of Mommy as she opened the front door and sat down for the ride to the place where she would stop being sick on the inside. The car disappeared.

3: Jack-O-Lantern Lady

"Daddy tells me you can paint a really pretty picture," she said to me.

She tried to get me to paint something for her every Wednesday after she picked me up from the bus stop. She was ugly. Her eyes had lots of red veins, and her eyebrows looked like caterpillars. Her nose was bumpy like a witch's. She had red hair like fire that was always messy; she never used a hairbrush in her life. One of her teeth was gray. There were three on the bottom that had yellow stains from too much mustard maybe, but I never saw her eat mustard. She probably ate mustard in private. We stopped buying mustard. Mommy loved mustard, the kind that was almost brown,

not yellow like paint, and had little dots in it. She put too much of it on her hotdogs. How revolting! I didn't like it because it was spicy and burned my mouth.

"I don't like to paint," I told her.

"Sure you do. All big girls like you love to paint. You're five now." She smiled.

Her name was Ingrid – a boring name, like Barbie. Her smile was crooked like a jack-o-lantern's and her breath smelled like a teacher's. Teachers have bad breath, especially teachers with faces like jack-o-lanterns. Someone told me that was because they have black coffee for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Her breath smelled like the bathroom after Daddy gets out. Daddy told me never to tell her that though because she was a friend of mine who wanted to help me, and you don't say things that hurt friends' feelings. I'm good at keeping secrets, so I didn't tell her. I kept quiet.

"I'm four and a half," I said. She stopped smiling.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you're so pretty that you should paint a picture of yourself?" she asked.

"I think so. But I don't want to anymore," I answered.

"Your Daddy always says how he loves your curls; you look just like Goldie Locks." She smiled again.

I got mad and didn't say anything for a little while. I thought *Goldie Locks and the Three Bears* was stupid anyway. Goldie Locks shouldn't have played those tricks on the bears.

"Daddy never says that he loves my curls," I told her. "He never says anything like that to me."

"Chrissy," she said. She sounded mad now, but she didn't yell. I hated it when someone said my name when they were impatient with me. "I asked you nicely if you could paint a pretty picture. Why don't you make this one especially for Daddy? I hear it's his birthday tomorrow."

"No," I said with my voice raised, like Mommy's when she used to scold me. "Daddy hates my paintings. He doesn't understand them. He said he didn't want a birthday party anyway; he doesn't have time."

It was true. My paintings frightened Daddy and even Tommy, who said he understood Daddy less than I did, and that's why he started making me paint for Ingrid. But my paintings were true stories, not fairytales.

"You know that's not true," she said, and smiled again.

I looked away for a while because I got grossed out staring at her slimy teeth. I don't think she knew what toothpaste was.

"I have a project for you," she said. "Now, this could be kind of fun. And, I promise, you don't have to show it to Daddy if it makes you feel uncomfortable, okay?"

"What project?" I asked.

"Next week, before I come back, I want you to have a painting ready for me. But this painting is different than all the other ones I've wanted you to make. I want you to think real hard about something you don't understand very well and are afraid to talk to me about. Maybe you don't understand why you think Tommy's sad, or why Daddy doesn't cook anything you think tastes good. I want you to paint that thing you don't understand, but under one condition: it has to be something important that's happened to you."

"Do I have to?" I asked.

"Chrissy, if you choose not to paint this, then you know we're going to talk about it. Sometimes, it's better to let the painting talk for you," she said.

The old kitchen door opened and she got up when she heard it. It squeaked like a rubber ducky, only louder. Mommy always said it needed some oil, and that she wanted Daddy to spray it for her. She never asked him. Daddy was home from work. He always came home at five, and then he would make dinner for me and Tommy. He always made me something disgusting because he didn't know how to cook like Mommy. Mommy knew how to make things home made and always let me help her.

"Little by little, Rob," I heard her say to Daddy from inside the kitchen. They were trying to whisper, but I heard their echoes. "You need to take care of yourself at some point; don't forget that. Blaming yourself won't do."

She left, and then Daddy started to make another dinner that smelled like it was burning. The burning stuffed up my nose. I wasn't hungry; there were too many butterflies flying in my stomach.

4: Water Colors

Daddy was already 35 for four days now, but I decided to paint for him anyway. I thought maybe, after the painting, Daddy would start talking to me more. I would be expressing my feelings like he always told me to. Sometimes, my feelings came out, but I never knew I had them. I didn't want to show it to him until later.

Daddy was in the kitchen trying to fix that door, finally, and he was saying lots of swear words. His face was sweaty and little droplets of sweat bounced onto the linoleum floor like dew on grass. I covered my ears; I didn't like the sound of the swear words. They made my eardrums hurt like I had an ear infection. I turned the TV on kind of loud to the "Disney Afternoon" cartoons.

I put my big painting pad that Mommy got me when I was three on my lap, opened the water colors, and reached for the plastic cup in front of me.

I went into the bathroom to fill it halfway with water, then came back and sat down. I picked up the brush and heard Daddy curse some more. That stupid door!

"Turn that down, honey! Daddy can't hear his music!" he shouted, and then coughed. He coughed a lot because he would never stop smoking tobacco.

A fast song by Daddy's Rolling Stones blasted, "I can't get no satisfaction." Daddy listened to them all the time, probably because he liked the words, and this one was his favorite song. To me, it was boring to listen to. But, I danced to it sometimes with Mommy. She liked them too.

I grabbed the cup of water next to me, and turned to a new page of Mommy's painting book. Mommy said I painted well, like a fifth-grader. She always said that someday, I'd be a famous artist. I soaked the hairy tip of the brush so it looked like wet dog hair. I started with the color black. I wanted my painting to be at night, when I was scared the most after Mommy stopped tucking me in.

I painted a square with a black outline in the middle of the paper. There were a few puddles and a few gray parts, but it was still black. I poked a puddle with my pointer finger. It was cold like olive juice from a can. I rubbed it onto my blue jeans. I left the middle empty with the white paper so it could look like Mommy and Daddy's mattress. I switched to a skinnier brush for a minute so I could paint little pillows on top of it like the fluffy white ones on their bed. Then, with the fatter brush, I began to paint the black night inside the room. I only painted part of the picture black, like I'd paint a sky during the day. I didn't want to hide the entire painting. There weren't supposed to be any lights on, though.

I took the skinny brush and painted the shape of the shadow on the floor. It was the light coming through when I opened the door because I was scared and wanted Daddy. Mommy was on another business trip. I carefully painted a short girl with curly blonde hair, opening the door. The door was red, but I painted it black. Mommy thought the red was "out of character." That girl was me, except the yellow paint got mixed in with the black and turned a muddy-brown color, a little bit darker than sand. I wrote, "CHRISSY" next to myself.

And then came the horrible part; I had to draw the thing I didn't understand, but I knew was important. I couldn't let down my friend Ingrid. I touched the water with the skinny brush, held it there for a really long time, and watched as angry storm clouds sank into the water in circles, like the smoke from Daddy's minty cigarettes swirling around up into the atmosphere.

I dipped the skinny brush into the skin-color part of the water color box. As the brush moved toward the bed, it dripped a little skin-color juice onto the rest of the painting. The drops were like the watery cheese from Easy Mac that spilled on Daddy's Formica counters if Tommy mixed it too hard. I ignored the drops and began to paint again. I painted a circle, lying

down on the pillow, for the head of one of the people, and another circle on top of that for the second person. Then, slowly, I painted the person that was on the bed. It was a girl. I gave her bright blonde hair because I remembered how it glowed next to the moonlight shining through the open window. It was also very frizzy like the 80's Barbie's hair. The 80's Barbie was the ugliest and had clothes like a clown.

I drew her skinny legs all open and bent like an upside-down daddy long leg. I remember she sounded like she was dying, but I couldn't paint that sound. I just gave her a really ugly face instead, with green eyes and green lips. I didn't see her face in real life, though. It was too dark. I didn't put clothes on her because she wasn't wearing any. The brush started to get a little bit dry because I stopped painting for a while. I wanted time to concentrate. I made the man's body that was on top of the woman's; it was Daddy. I wrote "DADDY" above his head. This was my only painting I didn't understand.

I brought the painting up to my room and put it under my bed so it could dry in private. There were still black, olive juice puddles all over the nighttime part of it. I wasn't ready to give it to Daddy yet. After all, Daddy disliked all my paintings. I thought he might hate this one the most, though.

5: The Man with the Moustache

I actually never showed Ingrid or Daddy the painting. I painted a picture of our family holding hands instead. Daddy actually smiled, which made my stomach feel kind of funny, a *good* funny. I kept the painting I *really* didn't understand under my bed. I forgot, though, that Daddy vacuumed under there sometimes.

Miss Sharon didn't say much to me that day when she dropped me off. Looking at her face in the car mirror, her skin seemed paler than usual. Kelly sat in the front seat quietly, holding her coloring book, and made scratching noises with colored pencils. Miss Sharon's cell phone rang.

"Tommy? Tommy? Wait. I know; I know you..." she tried to say quietly. "She's with me. Please calm down. Shh. We're pulling up soon; come out."

When we pulled in, there was a giant, black car parked under the rusty basketball hoop that Tommy used when he wasn't listening to his metal. It had a green license plate with mountains on it. It was bigger than the one that took Mommy away. Tommy was waiting at the bottom of the driveway instead of Daddy; Tommy almost never waited for me. His headphones weren't on that day.

"Where's Daddy?" I asked Tommy.

"Inside," he said. He pretended Miss Sharon wasn't there when he spoke.

Then, I noticed that his face had red stripes down it, almost as red as the stripes on a candy cane, from tears. Miss Sharon held me close, as close as she held me the day I found Mommy and Daddy in the bathroom. She held me like this every day since the black taxi cab took Mommy away. Kelly hugged one of her legs and stared at Tommy's baggy pants and long wallet chain looping out of his pocket. She pulled a Kleenex out of her jacket pocket and handed it over to Tommy. "It's time, Tommy. Let's go inside," she whispered quietly.

"Why are you crying, Tommy?" I asked.

He said nothing.

Tommy never stood as close to me as he did then. His breath made white ribbons in the cold air, almost whiter than the smoke from Daddy's cigarettes. "Tommy? Whose car is that?" I asked.

"Shhh," he quieted me and took my hand tightly. Sharon still held onto me

"Miss Sharon, whose car is that?"

"You're going to meet the man who drives it soon. Just come with me, sweetheart. Keep holding my hand," she said.

The four of us, Tommy behind, walked down the long, flagstone sidewalk toward the front door. We followed the smell of fresh vanilla coffee in the kitchen. Tommy ran upstairs as soon as we came inside the house. Sitting at the table was Daddy with his head resting on his tangled arm-pillow. Ingrid was next to him rubbing his back with one hand and pouring coffee into small, green mugs with the other. At the far end of the table was a large man writing speedily on a clipboard. He was ordinary looking, neither skinny nor fat. He wore glasses that were too large for his face. They were so big, I thought his nose might have broken. His lips never turned upside down to smile; their top part was covered almost completely by his hairy moustache that stuck out too much.

"Kelly," Miss Sharon bent down to her. "Please go in the living room and watch some T.V. until Mommy's ready to bring you home. I have to talk to Chrissy about something, okay?"

I started to follow Kelly because I was already missing some of "Goof Troop." But then Miss Sharon grabbed my shoulders and turned me around to face the table.

"How do you do, Mr. Morrison?" Miss Sharon asked, facing the moustache man.

"Fine, thanks. And yourself?" he answered. He spoke slowly and quietly. His voice was all the same; there was no music to it. I couldn't even look at his eyes, only his moustache. It moved up when he said "fine," and out like a fish's mouth when he said "thanks." When it moved out, all the stripes of grey hairs stuck out straight from the skin like a porcupine turning old.

"As well as I can be. I'm Sharon, the one who called. I've been meaning to do so, but I always thought everything was under control until Tommy called me up late last night."

"Now it's time we tell her," the man said without any feeling in his voice.

"Chrissy, this is James. James Morrison. He came here to explain something to you. Don't be afraid, okay?"

Before I could answer, Daddy began to cry louder than he cried that time Mommy was going crazy in the bathroom. He made choking sounds like Mommy did that afternoon. Ingrid ran behind him and grabbed hold of his hands that were shaking like an earthquake.

Miss Sharon let go of me to help Daddy clean up the coffee he spilled with his shaking hands. I ran upstairs to find Tommy. He was in my bedroom, taking things out of my closet and stuffing them into suitcases.

"Tommy, what are you doing? What's the secret?"

"Just...Just sit, please."

Before I climbed on top of the bed so I could sit down, I lifted up the bed skirt to find my painting that was lying under there like a player in hide-and-seek. I hadn't checked in a week. It was gone. Daddy's vacuum had sucked it up.

"Tommy, it's gone!" I shouted.

"What's gone?" he asked.

"This picture I painted!"

"I....I....I know," Tommy said as he dropped one of my shirts onto the carpet floor. "Daddy, um...Daddy...Shh, nevermind."

I knew it.

We didn't say anything after that; we only cried.

Then, I started to lose control of myself like that poor earthworm I chopped in half on the flagstone sidewalk. I lie down on the bed and pounded it until my fists started to hurt, like when I tried to knead dough when Mommy used to make bread. But, it was more painful.

Someone knocked on the door loudly. We didn't move. I heard clumsy footsteps running up the stairs after the person who was knocking.

"Please!?!?" Daddy's congested voice yelled. "I know I, I know I -"

"With all due respect..." It was Mr. Morrison's voice; it was he who was knocking. "You have proven unfit under the circumstances. She knows, Robert, but what she doesn't know that your son does is your attempted..."

I plugged my eardrums with the soft tips of my pointer fingers.

When the man with the moustache lifted me into the big, black car with the green license plate, I had to sit next to Tommy in the back. Now Mommy and Daddy were both sick on the inside. I didn't even know if Mommy was still sick, but she must have been very ill if she couldn't come home to help Daddy. Does everyone who's sick on the inside get taken away? I think I was getting sick on the inside, but not like Mommy or Daddy. I think I was sick because my painting kept talking to me. It still does. When it talks to me, I don't talk. It talks all the time.

George and Jeannie make me that yellow Campbell's soup with stars and laugh at me when I pick out the slimy, pink chicken pieces. They let Tommy listen to metal without earphones. Ingrid still comes to visit me from time to time; I don't talk.

I'm five and a half.