

Things Unspoken

Everything that moves makes a sound, my mother told me once.

It was her response to a firestorm of test cases, me running around our house pointing and saying, How about that? How about that?

Everything, she said.

5 Of course there are the obvious examples: feet stomping, drawers shutting, vibrations I can feel. But with other things – the ceiling fan, the flicking of switches and igniting of bulbs – I’m not so sure. Now, sitting bored on the floor behind the reception desk at her studio, I wonder if it’s even true. I scan the room for traces of noise, but the students haven’t shown up yet and everything is still.

Through the front window the neon sign flickers: YMEDACA ECNAD YDAL RIAF YM.

10 Maybe light really does make a sound. Or maybe she just said it to shut me up.

Noisy or not, the girly name isn’t doing me any favours. It’s bad enough I have to spend my afterschools at a dance studio, but I can’t even pretend they’re doing something cool back there – hip-hop, or that Spanish dancing where the partners look like they’re going to punch each other – not with a name like that. The guys at school make fun of me: Chris-sy the sissy, Chris-sy the sissy.

15 Even my father used to say, Melinda, a dance studio is no place for a boy to be spending his time.

But he took off and my mom says his opinion doesn’t count any more. No, she says, you are only twelve; I don’t want you home alone that much.

20 From the outside this place is a dumpy storefront, occupying the better part of the strip mall across the road from our house. Inside it is clean and bright and people bring their kids even from East Somerton, two towns over, because my mom was a famous dancer in New York City until she got hurt and wasn’t any more. [...]

I glance up at the old lady who mans the front desk. I didn’t even notice her come in but now she’s staring at me, blowing hot air in the shape of my name as if she hasn’t known me since I was two, as if she has no idea I can’t hear. I watch her blotchy cheeks expand and contract as she puffs out breath that smells like rotten fruit. She has chin hair.

25 Chris, move, I need to file these and you’re in the way. [...]

When I finish my homework I slip through the side door of the big classroom and clean the bathrooms, reducing the time lag between when classes are finished and when we can go home. The girls are in ballet now, and I watch as they glissade diagonally across the room, two-by-two, [...]: *sissonne* – *pas de chat* – *plié* – *pirouette*¹. Over the years I’ve learned all the ballet terms there are to know. They are, after all, my mother’s words.

30 At the end of the night my mother is sweaty, blonde hair plastered to her head like the skin of an onion. The fabric of her shirt is almost see-through in the part stretched across her pregnant belly.

Chris, carry that for me? She points to a box full of pink baby clothes.

35 What is it?

Hand-me-downs², she says.

We don’t know if the baby is a boy or a girl, and the box of frilly outfits makes me nervous. I stare. She points again, though we both know I’ve understood.

40 My mother doesn’t know sign language. She read in her parenting magazines that kids who signed would never learn to speak. Then, after I’d learned both and proved her wrong, she declared signing unnecessary.

You talk. You read lips. [...]

When we get home Greg is on the couch, relaxing, he calls it, except that he is still wearing his tie all

¹ *sissonne* – *pas de chat* – *plié* – *pirouette*: ballet techniques

² a piece of used clothing handed down from one person to another

the way up, tight around his neck. Greg is a schmuck. I know because I had a tie – the real kind, not a clip
45 on – when my parents went to family court. Ties are not for relaxing.
Hiya, Sport, he says, which is another thing about him.
Hi, Schmuck, my hands say. My mouth just says, Hi, Greg.
Every night he turns off the captions on the TV and every night when I ask him to turn them back on he
looks surprised, as if he forgot I lived here too, or expected me to come home from the studio cured and
50 whistling a show tune. [...]

I wake in the middle of the night, knowing before I know.
Lights on in other rooms, their glow meeting in the hallway outside my open door. Still I've learned not
to get out of bed in the hours that belong to grown-ups, hours when fathers come home drunk and
bruises ripen. I seal my eyelids down in fake sleep. Then I feel my mother's clammy hand on my shoulder
55 telling me it's OK to be awake.
It's time to go, she says.
I stumble around on unsteady morning feet looking for my sneakers. The sky is navy blue and the
roads are empty. My mother breathes like she's been underwater for too long and I think please please
please be a girl. A daughter with rubber-band muscles and an ear for music. A girl who my mother
60 can teach to dance, and make her smile her real smile again, the one with teeth she only shows by
accident when she's laughing.

I'm in a waiting room where they keep the expecting grandparents. They're wheeling my mom away
and she is yelling at the receptionist, He's deaf, he's deaf, just so you know. [...]
I fall asleep sideways in one of those extra-wide chairs made for fat people. Greg wakes me up.
65 Come see her.
I wonder if Her means my mother, or if the baby is out and it's a girl. At first I'm afraid to walk into the
room but when I do my mother is sitting up in bed holding a big ball of blanket and it is pink!
Thank you! I actually say aloud and Greg and my mother look at me funny so I say, How is everything,
how do you feel, what are you going to name her?
70 We'll call her Skylar, for her big blue eyes.
Skylar is a word I've never said before. I test it out, rolling the syllables around on my tongue. My
science book says babies' eyes can change colour as they get older, but the name feels sweet in my
mouth so I say nothing.
I figure out Skylar is deaf long before everyone else. She and my mom come home from the hospital,
75 and I spend lots of time in Skylar's pink nursery, just looking at her. Once her eyes start to open wider she
looks back at me. I hold her in the crook of my arm, sign a word or two with my other hand, and her eyes
narrow and focus like the lens of a camera. I put her back in her cradle and clap behind her head, watch
her not react. I think I should tell my mother; but when I get downstairs I find her in the kitchen among
gifts – flowered onesies and pastel stuffed animals. She is smiling. I go back to Skylar's room.
80 Just me and you, Sky, I say, my hands useful in this house for the first time. Don't worry. I've got you.

They find out at Skylar's six-month check-up. I sit in the waiting room, and when my mother comes out
and tells me I clamp my back teeth together and think don't move a muscle, now is not the time to be
talkative.
Impossible impossible, she says in the car.
85 When Greg comes home my mother hugs him and cries until her snot drips down the back of his shirt.
I sit with Skylar and show her nursery rhymes. I tell her the one where the dish and the spoon take off
together and she giggles like we are sharing a secret.
Don't worry, Greg says. We can fix this. [...]
I have to talk to you, my mother says one night, and I think shit they've mailed home my report card. I
90 follow her into her bedroom and she makes me sit down. I am waiting for her to say no video games for a

week, but instead she says: I'm telling you this so you can understand, she says. We're going to get Skylar a cochlear implant.

This whole time I have been silent but now I feel myself yelling, You can't, you can't, they'll drill a hole in her skull!

95 We have an appointment at the clinic next week, she says. Everything will be OK.

Skylar is not like you, I want to say. Skylar is perfect. But the words shrivel in my mouth and I think I might throw up so I run down the hall into the bathroom and stand with my face over the toilet. Nothing happens, and my mother doesn't come after me.

100 I want to get out of the house and I look around and why the hell do I always lose my goddamn sneakers? When I find them I pull them on and slink³ from room to room, trying to pin down the location of my mother and Greg. I've memorised every place I've gotten caught before and I avoid all the loose floorboards. I peek back in my mother's room, where she is sitting on her bed matching socks, the phone squeezed between her shoulder and chin. [...]

105 I feel jittery again and mean to run right down the stairs and out the front door but instead find myself walking toward Skylar's room. She's asleep in her crib and I pick her up and throw her extra blanket over my shoulder.

Outside the air is cool and I feel better. We can go anywhere we want, Sky, I tell her, but it's dark and she's asleep, and even I know I'm lying. I wait for a gap in the headlights and run across the highway, Skylar's little head bobbing against my shoulder.

110 At the strip mall I decide I am never going in that stupid dance school ever again, which I prove by walking past a few times, up and down the sidewalk and around the parking lot. Then I get a little closer for a quick look. I pull on the door handle, jiggling it hard; I kick the bottom metal part and hurt my toe. I turn around to go home. But then I feel the place behind me, the big ugly MY FAIR LADY flashing out a rhythm that looks like a laugh, and I can't let it get away with that. I hoist Skylar up higher, feel her breath quicken against my neck. Then I take a rock from the parking lot, a chunk of asphalt rough in my palm, and throw it hard, a SMASH through the front window. I reach through the broken glass and release the lock on the other side, let us in.

115 I know there is a burglar alarm and we don't have a lot of time, so I go straight into the studio and swing my free hand through the giant stack of CDs in the corner, smash them too, jumbo-sized *Jenga*⁴. I pick one off the top of the pile and slide it into the stereo. It's a fancy system, a lot of levers and dials, and I just turn them all up to where they stop twisting and lay down in front of the speaker. The sound ripples on my windbreaker and up my spine; Skylar, pressed against me, doesn't wake up. Music banging hard inside my ribcage, music like a heart attack. Red siren light streaks along the spidered glass and the vibration swells through my chest and up into hers. The room swirls and flashes and smells like feet, and I
125 breathe the bass line, and wait for someone to find me.

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³ move smoothly

⁴ game with wooden blocks