

Moving On

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Abby came in as I packed fruit between the marked assignments in my brief-case on the kitchen bench. Her hair curtained her face; one leg of her *Little Miss* pyjamas was hitched higher up her thigh. She tried to pass into the kitchen but I edged across the opening a little and she drew back. She flicked her hair behind her. Her dark eyes stared, but I was stunned by how lovely they were. I looked for signs of remorse but couldn't see any.

'Good morning,' I said.

She shifted her weight onto one leg.

'Where's Dad?'

'He left early.'

I spread my arms on either side of me, forming a triangle with the bench top. My fingers curled under the laminated surface. Abby rolled her eyes.

'Can I get some breakfast?'

'In a minute.' I leant forward onto my hands. 'Do you realise how late you were?'

'Oh, c'mon!'

'I said *eleven*, and you deliberately disobeyed me.'

'I didn't...do it...on *purpose*,' she replied loudly, as if I was slow to understand. 'I thought Letiesha was watching the time.'

'It was your responsibility to be home on time.'

'I bet Dad doesn't care. Why do *you* have to go mental over it?'

I winced. Why wasn't Martin here to help me? I gripped the bench top harder. The flaking chipboard underneath the laminate caught in my fingernails. Abby's curls swung about her face as she paced the floor.

'That's *it* Abby. This is your last term before your exams. I'm not going to let you stuff it up.'

'*What* the?'

You won't be going out with friends again until the exams are over.'

'Oh, get *real*!'

'In a few months you can go to all the parties you want.'

'That's not fair! It's *one* mistake!'

'One too many. You'll take our faith in you more seriously next time.'

'*Your* faith?' Abby spat. '*You* didn't want me to go anyway. I heard you and Dad fighting about it.'

'Well, I was right then.'

Abby pushed the heel of her hands into her eyes and lifted her shoulders. I sensed the effort she was making to try and contain herself, and suddenly I felt uncertain, as if I was the one pushing the limits. It felt familiar. My mother and *I* in that position, circling each other and never meeting in the centre.

'Abby...' I began more softly, but she cut me off.

'Just stop *controlling* me!'

'I'm trying to help you...to get through this year...you know?'

She drew herself up to full height, still just short of mine. I flinched. She glared at me.

'Then just leave me alone,' she said. 'Cos your help *sucks*.'

Her words hit me in the chest. I quivered inwardly. I knew better than to let Abby think that words said in anger were irreparable. And

there was nothing that I was prepared to return against her. But she must have seen the pity flicker in my eyes. She sucked in her breath and spun around. It looked like a cat-o-nine-tails, the way her hair whipped around the doorway and out of sight. A door slammed, shattering me in its wake.

I travel away from the city in the mornings, so there are always plenty of seats. Around me people slouched against blue velvet upholstery. Some yawned; some tried to extend the time they had to themselves with books or ear buds that connected to their pockets or bags. Discordant rhythms drummed softly. I felt heavy and reclusive, as if Abby's anger clung to me and I didn't know what to do with it.

At the next station a woman I couldn't remember seeing before got on the train. She was tall and very pregnant. She carried a small handbag, a book and a travel mug. The sight of the mug irritated me. *Doesn't she know that eating and drinking aren't allowed on the train?* She sat on the seat opposite me, tucked the mug between her knees and opened her book to a marker half way through. *Life After Birth*, read the yellow title above a black and white photo of a woman and child playing and laughing.

I stared at the woman, noting each detail, pausing sentimentally on her belly. I remembered how my own body had felt; purposefully pushing outwards in curves I was proud of. Now my remnant paunch was a nuisance.

I judged the woman to be a little older than me, yet her clothes were like a girl's. She wore red knee-length pants with bows at the hems, and a pale orange top with puffy sleeves. But her face had the seasoned markings of middle age. Her skin, free of make-up and freckled, fell in tiny terraces underneath her eyes. Her red hair was grey at the temples, and drawn back from her forehead with plastic combs. When she moved the curls bounced perkily. Above strappy silver sandals her calves were firm and also freckled. I crossed my legs, blotched purple at the back by childbearing.

She sat very straight, holding her book high above her belly, sipping occasionally from her mug. There was an air of unburdened optimism about her that I, churning with disappointment over the fight with Abby, almost resented. Then it occurred to me that this might be her first pregnancy. The unflattering term that I'd heard doctors use for older first-time mothers came to me. *Elderly prima gravida*. There was something satisfying about the way the phrase distinguished me from this woman. I recounted, almost smugly, that when I'd cradled my babies' heads, the skin on the back of my hands had been taut like new sheets; that the breasts I'd fed them with had been high and firm. I sighed. Back then, I hadn't understood what childbearing and aging would do to me. Even though I did, in time, lose most of my pregnancy weight, my body has never been the same. Now, my skin is stretched, my muscles lax.

We travelled past choking queues of city-bound traffic. I wondered about the woman. *What kind of life did she lead? Was she married?* Then she looked up from her book directly at me, interrupting my thoughts. I turned away to look down the carriage.

The train slowed near a station and she stood up, fumbling to stop the mug falling to the floor. At the door people gave her a wide berth. She nodded slightly, confidently claiming the space offered her. As a young expectant mother, I'd been shy of that sort of attention, yet now I envied the way her body accorded her special status. She stepped onto the platform without a backward glance. I watched her curls bobbing over the top of the other commuters' heads. As the train pulled away my eyes followed her along the ramp, hoping to see which direction she took, but my view of the station disappeared quickly.

My stop was next. Only a few people got off at this time of the morning; twenty minutes later the platform would be swarming with teenagers. I flipped open my phone while I jostled through the small crowd, pressed Martin's name into the phone and reached his message service. It was seven forty-five. *Where is he?* I spoke quickly after the prompt.

'It's me. Can you ring me during recess? And...thanks for sticking around to see Abby this morning!'

I shoved the phone back into my bag and looked around to see if I'd been overheard. The platform was empty, but I still blushed. I flattened my hair back over my head and held the ends against my neck. I imagined Martin hearing the message and how annoyed he would be at my sarcasm and at being put off guard at work. I wondered if I would hear from him.

The cold in the underpass swamped me. I walked through the tunnel, its blue tiles sprayed in black and silver graffiti. Out in the street the crossing guard was still placing his flags, so I had to wait for the traffic. I stepped on to the road during a short break and skipped across both lanes quicker than I normally would. The thrill of playing with Martin's temper fired my step. Why should he be spared the brunt of it, the awfulness of Abby's rage?

I slowed down on the hill towards the high school. Spats with Abby, like the one that morning, were increasingly frequent. Some days I felt I'd barely recovered from one before another hit. *Does she feel the same?*

The departmental office was empty when I got there. Stacks of photocopied worksheets lay in criss-crossed piles on my desk, nudging a framed photo of the kids. A pink Post-it note curled away from the top sheet. Caroline's handwriting read, *Let's talk at recess. C.* I tapped the note nervously, toying with ways to get out of the meeting. My phone beeped. I assumed it was Martin, but the message read, *basketbl 2day hom 5.* I felt my face drop and realized I'd been frowning. Abby was good at letting me know where she was; reminding me of her schedules. *Was I being too hard about last night?*

After school I went down to the back of the garden to bring in the washing. Strong winds had blown all day, so the clothes and linen were unusually soft. I struggled to swing a sheet back over the clothes line so that I could find its pegs, but the breeze continued to play with

it and it parachuted above me in a blue cloud. Martin hadn't rung me back, and my convictions from this morning were waning. I pulled too hard on the sheet and tangled myself in it. When I heard someone call for me the sound was muffled, as if very far away. I was tempted to stay hidden. I pulled the sheet from my head and looked back at the house.

Paul leant against the back door, his long hair a red splash against the white doorframe. His jeans bowed outwards as he slouched. He held a pick between his fingers. So he'd been home long enough to get his guitar out. I called to him but my voice was lost in the flapping sheet. I pushed the folds away from my face and saw a shadow pass behind Paul. He turned, said something into the room, and went inside. I knew it was Abby he was talking to. The sky went blue again and I grabbed onto the sheets and drew the corners into my mouth. The air I sucked through them tasted of lemons.

Inside I folded the sheets and carried them into the hallway. Both bedroom doors were shut, but I could hear Paul's playing. All semester he'd worked on a composition and it was nearly finished. He strummed, plucked and slapped the guitar in the new style he was practising. I tapped on his door and pushed it open. The music stopped.

'That sounds great,' I said. 'I like it where you pick up the tempo and then drop back again.'

'Cool!' he said.

It amazed me that young people could abbreviate such a small word. But I knew that Paul didn't really need my opinion. He was just tolerating the praise for my sake.

He started playing the section I'd referred to, strumming with extra flourish as he made his way towards the door. He smiled and lifted one silver-studded eyebrow into mock arrogance. When I looked up into his face I couldn't see anything of the little boy that my life had once revolved around, cuddling and nursing him constantly. After Abby was born, he'd never let me wander from his sight for long before he came looking for me. Somewhere along the way, his nervous

apprehension had given way to the confidence he now strutted before me. When he reached the door he bent down and kissed the top of my head. Smiling, I pushed him away with my elbows. I nodded to the loose manuscript and clothing that littered the floor.

‘Clean up that mess when you’re finished,’ I said. He scowled and drew his pick down onto the strings in a loud, hard chord.

It was silent behind Abby’s door. I edged closer to it and leant against the surface.

‘Hello, Abby.’

She grunted back a short reply. As I rested there, my daughter felt far away, and the barrier between us seemed greater than the thickness of the door. My cheek peeled off the door when I moved.

‘Dinner’ll be ready soon.’

At the cupboard in the hallway where we keep the linen, I squeezed the sheets into the only empty spaces I could find. As I stepped back to shut the door, a pink plastic arm fell with a rustling sound out of a brown paper bag on the top shelf. Crammed up there were things we didn’t use anymore. The arm belonged to Abby’s first baby doll. I couldn’t remember packing it away. Its fingers curled as if beckoning.

I stood on tip-toe to push the arm back into the bag, which moved a little, revealing a patch of light coloured wicker. I gasped, as though I’d stumbled upon a fragile living thing. I lifted down the small basket carefully. Inside, a blue and white cloth covered an old coffee set that I’d bought when Paul was very young. Its small cups and saucers, cream coloured with gold rims, made a much better tea set than the plastic ones from toy shops. It was nearly complete; only the lid of the coffee pot had broken in all the years we’d used it. I fingered the china gently. The tiny handle on the cup only just fit between the pads of my fingertips.

I looked up at the shelf again and remembered other cupboards and drawers around the house that I hadn’t opened for years: dark, silent spaces filled with objects that were important to us once. Those places had helped to order a world that spilled randomly about me

when the kids were young. I'd delved in and out of those cupboards every day.

It occurred to me that many items had at some point been used for the last time without me being aware of it. How had I stored these cups? Had I shoved them into the basket carelessly, assuming they'd be brought out again, while my eyes followed a trail of Lego that also needed clearing? Would I have handled them differently if I'd known I was putting them away for good? I thought of the woman on the train collecting the bits and pieces that come with babies and early childhood. The time between the beginning and the end of infancy seemed hazy to me. I suddenly wished it was very clear. Standing in the hallway in front of the accumulated contents of my family's life, fingering a small china cup, I felt as though I'd missed something important, almost sacred.

I was reading in bed when Martin came home. I watched him undress, slowly and deliberately, like he always does. He pulled his shirt off and hung it over the back of the chair.

'I spoke to Abby,' he said finally.

'When?'

'Just now. She's still awake.' Leaving his boxers on, he lifted the quilt and fell heavily into the bed.

'I wish you'd been here this morning,' I said. 'We had an awful fight, and this evening she didn't say a word all though dinner.'

He closed his eyes. Soft pockets of skin settled on his cheekbones.

'I told you I had a meeting.'

'Last week, maybe?'

I waited, but the urge to prompt him became too strong.

'Well? What did you *say*...to Abby?'

He lifted onto one elbow, bracing himself.

'That parties aren't a good idea until her exams are over.'

My relief that Martin had backed me up was bittersweet. He'd made me wait for it, but had proved, once again, that we really did work

together. Our show of unity made me suddenly sorry for Abby. I put my book on the side table and slid under the sheets. Martin's fingers stroked my thigh. I focussed on the ceiling where the cornice above the bed was freckled with mildew. Abby hated *me*, and somehow I felt that it was linked to Martin.

'Why am *I* the bad guy?'

'Because...you're here.'

I turned, twisting my nightie under my waist.

'And where are *you*, Martin?'

His head jerked back slightly and he rolled back on to the pillow, letting his hand slide off me. I hadn't meant to push him away. I leant over him. My breasts fell against the bodice of my nightie and through the opening they looked elongated, almost foreign. Their emptiness made me feel vulnerable and for a second I mourned the loss of their old fullness. I lay on his chest and looked into his face. I buried my hand in the thick, grey-flecked curls behind his ear.

'Do you remember the tea set?' I asked. 'The one I bought for Paul, for his second birthday, I think.'

Martin ran his fingers lightly over my back.

'The one Paul used for tea parties?'

'I found it today. There's so much lying around this house we've forgotten about.'

'Are you hinting it's time for a clean out?'

'No...maybe.'

I reached across, turned off the lamp and moved back to my side of the bed. But in the dark I felt unsettled again. After several minutes I spoke.

'I...don't want her to go, you know. Abby, I mean. I'm...I'm not sure what I'll *be*, when the kids aren't here anymore.'

Martin groaned as if I'd woken him.

'You'll be a *grandmother*,' he joked, digging me in the ribs.

'Don't be stupid.' I turned away from him. Tears pricked my eyes and I was ashamed of them. Martin didn't respond straight away. Then he nudged closer and I felt his lips against my ear.

'You should go for that head of department position,' he whispered.

'I'd never get it,' I said, annoyed that he was missing the point.

'You might,' said Martin. 'Didn't Caroline ask you to apply?'

'She tried to catch me today, but I made excuses.'

'Jenny, you'd be great at it.'

'It's the time. I'd have to go in earlier, stay late.'

'So? You don't have to be here every afternoon anymore.'

'I know!' I snapped. 'Still, I *miss* them you know. It's silly, but...I loved it.'

Martin pulled me towards him.

'The early days? You were always exhausted. You never had a minute to yourself.'

Is that what it was like? There were days, I remembered, long and difficult, that felt as though they'd never end.

'There was more to it than that,' I said softly. 'I think it mattered to Paul and Abby that I was there. I think it sort of *made* me too, somehow; staying focussed on *one* thing. Well...that's how I thought of it then.'

'There's more to come,' he said. He yawned and buried his face deeper in my neck. 'We're not free of them yet.'

I cupped his hand in mine. He still hadn't got it. It wasn't just about the children. But thinking about it now, and Abby growing up, and the doll in the cupboard, I was reminded, warmly, of a time and place that I'd left behind a long time ago.

His arm was heavy and I knew it would keep me awake. I lay still and waited until the slowing of his breath told me that he was asleep.

My bare feet stuck to the boards as I walked quietly across the room. In the hallway I stood on a chair and pulled the bags down carefully from the top of the linen cupboard. In other rooms I fished out boxes from the backs of cabinets. I carried them all into the lounge room and sat on the floor in a small circle of lamplight. Wide awake, I sorted through the odds and ends of a life I hadn't thought about for a long time.

I'd kept our favourite picture books, as many as fitted into a cardboard box. There was the one about a little girl who loved to build cubby houses, and *Chubby Engine* which I knew by heart. I needed to read it, then and there, trying it silently at first, but that didn't work. I had to whisper to get the intonation that felt right.

'I am a chubby engine. I work the chubby line. I have a chubby coal car, it keeps me running fine.' Some of the pictures were familiar, as if I'd seen them just days before; some were new all over again.

I brought a bowl of soapy water to the floor and sponged Abby's doll, scrubbing a stain off the hair-like grooves in the plastic scalp. In a storage box I found Paul's Duplo. He'd spent hours building skyscrapers and trains and ships. Martin and I thought he'd be an engineer. But only a few years ago he surprised us by wanting to be a musician.

In the bottom of a kitchen cupboard I fished out the wooden tray that I'd used with the tea set. With flowers, a plate of sandwiches, and a pot of "honey tea", it had been a favourite in the garden for picnics. The intricately carved ridge that formed handles at the ends was dusty. I wiped it clean

I stayed up for hours. There were some things I couldn't find. Abby had a pink corduroy dress that Mum had bought her. I'd loved it and was sure I hadn't given it away. But I couldn't find it. I wondered what I'd been thinking when I'd passed it on. When I thought about the dress, and other items I no longer had, I wished I could touch them just once more. So I took great care now to notice each thing. There were some that I just couldn't let go of. There was no predictable pattern to my choosing, but a sense that a particular cup or book or string of beads contained some of the sweetest memories. For all those, I found a place in the cupboards again. Then I cast aside the items that held no memories or promises anymore, into boxes for the Salvation Army or for friends with young children. And I dwelled for a moment, on every decision that I made.

In the hallway I balanced the tray on one arm and knocked lightly on the door. I opened it without waiting for a reply. Abby was under the quilt. I'd bought the cover, printed with large frangipani flowers, when we redecorated the room for her tenth birthday. It matched the white furniture and purple walls, now covered with posters of pop stars and a pouting Keira Knightly, Abby's favourite actress. The flowers on the quilt had lost their intense colour. I wondered why I hadn't noticed its shabbiness before.

Abby's hair spread behind her on the pillow. She looked warily from under the sheet.

'I thought you might like breakfast in bed,' I said.

'O-kay,' she murmured with exaggerated suspicion. She sat up against the wall. Her feet neared the end of the bed. I placed the tray on her lap. Buttered toast, and a Milo. A hibiscus flower alongside the cup was already closing.

'The picnic tray!' Against the wall Abby's curls gave her an odd halo. 'I haven't seen it in ages.'

At the foot of the bed I stooped to pick up a blouse from the floor. It was white and as slippery as water. It slid over my fingers onto the end of the bed. I wasn't expecting anything and didn't see Abby's face when she spoke again.

'Thanks, Ma...for the toast.'

I hadn't gone back to bed until the early hours of the morning and now tiredness nagged at me, but I wasn't bothered by it. Abby's toes made small peaks under the quilt. I quickly pinched them. They didn't retract.

'You need a new bed. I could take you next week, if you want to go looking.' I glanced around the room. 'And maybe on the holidays we could freshen the walls up a bit.'

'Who'll pick the colour?' she asked.

'You, of course.'

Her eyes widened. I was pleased to see that in spite of her attempts at times to make me feel irrelevant, I could still surprise my daughter.

The pregnant woman boarded the train again. She walked towards me and I tried to catch her eye, thinking she might recognise me. She sat next to me and glanced, smiling politely. I nodded back. Her body spread outwards unapologetically. In several places her thigh, hip and elbow nudged me. I felt overshadowed. Her blue dress gathered at the neckline so that it ballooned over her body. There was a sense of resignation in her clothes that I pitied but understood. When Paul and Abby were babies clothes had meant little to me. I'd rarely felt that the world beyond me and the kids ever noticed me anyway. I'd felt most at home, secure even, in track suits and sandals. But I spend more money on clothes now, and I take more interest in how I look. I picked at miniscule beads of fabric on my beige pants.

The woman didn't have her mug today, but the book with the mother and child on the cover poked out from a side pocket of the bag at her feet. I sensed something was different about her, something subdued: a new discomfort perhaps? Maybe it was just tiredness. I knew that her cumbersome belly would both delight and torment her. My thoughts about her the day before seemed churlish to me now. Where she was heading was, after all, a place I'd once been. Outside the window, trees blurred past in flashes of light and dark. I wondered if I could enter that passage of early motherhood at this age, as she was about to. I doubted it. Motherhood is a one-way journey. A new baby now wouldn't be a welcome prospect. Beside me the woman was staring straight ahead. I smiled to myself. We were on different journeys, or at different stages on the same road, and mine no longer involved the exquisite illuminations and the embracing seclusion of babyhood.

I recalled that I'd seen all of my family that morning. Martin had brought me a cup of tea before he left for work. It was unexpected but very welcome after the late night I'd had. And Paul was up early for a change. Over breakfast he told me that his composition was finished, his face shining with a sense of his own brilliance. Abby had smiled gratefully when I took in her breakfast. Each a simple, but welcome gesture.

The woman stood up for her stop and wove her way through the crowd to the door. She seemed more self-conscious than she had the day before, excusing herself and apologising when she bumped against someone else. And then I looked away, staring lazily through the window, and almost missed it. As the woman squeezed through the huddle of passengers waiting to board, I saw something shadowy, like a dove, flap to the ground at her feet. The platform cleared and there was her book, its marker on the paving beside it. Its brightly lettered cover blew open and shut in the breeze. She kept walking. I moved to the edge of my seat. While the train paused there was time for me to spring up and call to her through the doors, but I didn't. I felt suspended, as though she and I didn't share the same universe. It seemed that if I'd called to her she wouldn't have heard me. Although we were close in age, it seemed that years separated this stranger from me. Transfixed, I waited for someone else to see the book and run after her as she walked slowly up the ramp to the overpass, cradling her belly in her hands. No one did.

The train began to move. Slouching back against the seat, I decided that it was just tough luck about the book. The woman would find out for herself that she'd lost it. Maybe she'd turn back for it. Maybe it wasn't important to her after all. As I travelled forward, my view of the woman on the overpass slipped away. The train hurtled through the suburb, and my thoughts turned again to the place I'd just left, as home after home flashed past the window.