

Princess squeezed her eyes shut and pushed her face into the pillow, hoping to feel Mama's warm hand on her back. Lying as still as she could she listened for Mama but found only quiet. No nearby whispers or cries or muffled, rumbling voices, no dishes dropped in the sink, no footsteps in the hall on the creaky floor outside the bathroom. But *it's morning, and it's quiet in the morning*, she thought. It's afternoons and nights that can be loud with yelling—especially nights.

The Snow White sheet tacked up over the window glowed as Princess rubbed her eyes, sat up, and kicked the faded yellow blanket from around her legs. She wore what might have once been purple baby doll pajamas. *Was this the second morning Mama didn't rub the sleep out of her? Or the third?*

She kissed Bunny on the cheek then stood up and looked at the other mattress in the room. Its brown sheets and blankets were lumpy and still. She didn't see Mama, but to be sure, she walked across the mattress, scuffing and then kicking at the puffs of sheets and blanket. She jumped up and down several times until the bottom sheet came untucked and grabbed the top sheet and blanket.

Princess enjoyed the bounce and rise she got jumping on the mattress, the moment of flying, both feet off the ground, and the cushiony welcome back when she landed. There had been a big lady who came to the house once. She had pulled Princess to her stomach and chest in a hug. Princess remembered a similar sensation of making contact and then going deeper into softness. The woman had smelled of flowers, beautiful, sweet flowers.

Mama hugged her, too, but Mama's arms were bony and hard, and her hipbones kind of stuck out. She had a soft belly though. Princess liked to sit next to Mama and run her hand

along Mama's belly, hip bone to belly to hip bone and back, hard to soft to hard. Sometimes Mama pushed her hand away. Then Princess sat still against Mama's ribs, feeling her breathing, and breathed with her. Mama didn't smell like anything, not flowers, not soap, just herself. Just Mama.

Princess walked down the hall to the bathroom, went in, peed, and crossed to the sink to wash her hands. As she stood on the blue step to turn on the water and grab the soap with two hands, concentrating on holding onto it, she realized she hadn't needed to move the step into place. Her stomach knotted up, and a tiny burst of fear took root in her belly.

Princess looked at herself in the mirror over the sink. Her hair was messy; loose pieces stuck out all kinds of ways. She looked messy, but it was her face, her eyes, her nose, her mouth. It was her. She flushed the toilet using both hands to pull the white handle down and jumped back a bit as the water and pee whooshed and went away.

"I peed and flushed all on my own," she said out loud. A hint of pride sat next to the fear.

She stepped back into the hall and walked through the living room, past the sofa, blank TV, her box and the lamp, two of three lightbulbs lit, though overwhelmed by sunlight.

The ceiling lights were on in the kitchen as well. Dishes sat on the table, the counter, and in the sink. The refrigerator buzzed loudly. Princess heard a car door slam in driveway outside. She looked back through the living room, down the hall, and into the bedroom at her mattress on the floor in a square of sunlight.

Mama wasn't here. And she wasn't here yesterday either. That's why the blue step was in front of the sink, right where she'd put it. Usually, Nestor, Mama's boyfriend, kicked it to the side, complaining it was 'in the way' and a 'damn pain in the ass.' One time he kicked it into the

bathtub, ripping the shower curtain and knocking over the shampoo bottle. 'Good thing it was a plastic bottle,' Mama had yelled at him.

Princess felt kind of tingly and the hint of pride from moments ago slipped away, leaving space for fear to slide into. She could count to ten and knew the numbers eleven to twenty, but was kind of confused about how they all fit together. So, she was pretty sure this was morning number three without Mama.

"*Where is Mama?*" she wondered. She thought hard for a minute, morning, then night, morning, then night. She went to sleep by herself, she got up by herself. How many times?

Princess sat on the floor by the table, next to an open box of Kix and a stack of books: five books, one, two, three, four, five. She'd piled them up by size. At the top were two tiny books she could balance on one hand if she held them very flat and very still. The bottom book was big, too big to hold open by herself on her lap. When she was alone, she laid it on the floor to read. The two in between were softer, made of paper and cardboard. Her favorite was about princesses who lived in a castle and snuck out every night to dance. They wore pointy hats and long dresses and seemed very light.

She grabbed a handful of cereal and began eating it. 'Little balls of breakfast,' Mama said most mornings. Princess carefully moved all the cereal pieces into her left hand, but three fell on the floor, quietly tsk, tsk-ing as they bounced. She picked a single piece up between her thumb and finger. She looked at the small marble, smelled it, licked it, and then popped it into her mouth. *Mmmm ... yummy!*

She lifted another piece in the same way. This time she turned to face the window over the sink and raised her hand and the cereal into the light. Slowly she began squeezing her fingers together until the ball popped and disintegrated into crumbs and dust in the morning

sun. Princess rocked back, surprised at the collapse and a little afraid. Her stomach skipped around, side to side and up and down, and her face crumpled. A small cry formed in her throat.

She looked down at the Kix in her hand, grabbed several, pushed them into her mouth, and began chewing. She watched and wiggled her toes as she ate the remaining Kix, spinning on her bottom on the linoleum floor.

She stood up, took another fistful of Kix and wandered into the living room. The cardboard box, her cardboard house, sat off to the side of the couch. She'd forgotten to check for it earlier. She checked every morning since Nestor had said he'd throw it out if she weren't quiet.

She had to crouch a little to get through the door Mama had cut with a knife. Two Kix fell from her hand. Inside, she had to stand with her shoulders hunched forward and head bent down. She spun once, then sat on the pillow she'd put there.

Mama told her the pillow said Princess; that's what the letters spelled; the first letter was P. She ate the rest of the cereal and leaned back against the box. She felt it give but trusted it to hold. She tapped her feet on the other side of the box.

Once done eating, she crawled to the door and called out, "Mama? Maaamaa! Nestor?" No one called back. She tried to pull the door flap closed. She struggled, catching her fingers and then her cheek on the rough edge. Eventually, though, the door stayed closed. And she'd done it all by herself.

She sat back in her house, on her Princess pillow with her toes against the cardboard and hummed to herself. The neighbor's TV came on, but it was muffled and soft from inside the box instead of being loud. She felt safe in her cardboard house.

Then Princess lay down and kicked and kicked and kicked against the box. She laughed out loud at the noise and the feeling of her feet hitting the cardboard and moving her whole body,

thrashing about, a bit out of control but contained by the box. As she moved, she kicked at the door she'd pulled closed, and it burst open.

Princess lay still for a second, breathing. She looked out into the living room. The small, low table had glasses on it. *I'm thirsty*, she realized. So she rolled onto her stomach, pushed up to her hands and knees, crawled out of the box, and ran to the kitchen.

The bottom edge of the refrigerator door was warped, so she pulled there with both hands until the door opened. Her pink sippy cup was in the door. Pink, *P, the same letter as Princess*. The sippy cup was nearly empty and didn't have a sippy top anymore. She'd have to fill it in the bathroom. She could do that. Next to her cup were baby Carmen's bottles, lots and lots of them. *I should bring her a bottle*, thought Princess, *maybe then she'll wake up*. Princess picked up a bottle and closed the refrigerator door, forgetting her pink sippy cup.

She ran down the hall holding the bottle with two hands; the floor screech-screached as she passed the bathroom. In the bedroom by Mama's mattress was a white box, white on the outside, brown, like Princess's box, on the inside. But this was a much smaller box because Carmen was much smaller than Princess. *She's just a baby*, thought Princess.

Princess walked across the mattress and the mess of sheets she'd made earlier. She sat on the far edge of the mattress looking into the box at the baby, being careful to be quiet and not hit the box. Once she jumped up and landed sitting, her feet hit the box, and baby Carmen cried loudly for a long time. Mama had looked at Princess with pointy eyes and mouth until the baby was quiet.

Princess didn't do that again. Princess was more careful now. She looked in at baby Carmen. Carmen lay on her back, her eyes open, making no noise. Princess held the bottle up in front of her face.

"See? Breakfast! You hungry?" Princess asked.

Usually, when you held something close to baby Carmen's face, she jerked her legs back and forth. But she lay still now. Princess put the bottle down in the box next to two other bottles. She was surprised Carmen wasn't drinking them. Usually, Carmen sucked and gulped and waved at bottles.

"You are smelly, Carmen!" Princess said out loud. But baby Carmen smelled a lot. Mama said it was just poop, everyone pooped, and Carmen just needed a clean diaper.

Princess tried to change Carmen's diaper, but it didn't work exactly. She'd struggled to get the clean diaper in place and taped it up. She sprinkled more baby powder over Carmen's legs and diaper before picking up the bottle again and waving it above the baby's face, sing-songing, "It's breakfast, Carmen. It's time for your bottle, breakfast, Carmen, time for your bottle."

When Carmen again didn't react, Princess turned and ran back toward the kitchen, singing to herself, "Put it back in the 'frigerator for later, put it back in the 'frigerator for later."