

I Promise

by
Lea Rachel

When I was a child I was unaware of most things around me. I never fully registered the late-night fighting of my bitter, disillusioned parents. My older sister's hyper-activity and jealous grabs at attention I took to be style. The whispers of strangers hidden behind cupped fingers as I limped along on the street blew by me like puffs of air. In our run-down, paint-peeling, weeds-overgrown house in the heart of downtown Detroit I imagined I lived in a castle. It was a large, three-story structure in the historical district of Detroit, allegedly built by Thomas Edison at the turn on the century, and it came with a carriage entrance, a dumb waiter, and push-button light switches. The dusty attic, reached atop a spindly spiral staircase, held shafts of light that warmed my soul, no matter what the season. My best friend, Anastasia, and I would sit in that attic and look out the tear-drop shaped window and pretend we ruled the world. We had no idea Detroit in the 70s was a world nobody wanted to rule. Barely a decade after the race riots, with scars still visible in the streets and on building facades, Detroit, like me, remained locked in shadow.

On the morning of my eighth birthday I woke up surprised, frankly, to find myself still alive. Squeezing my toes and curling deep into the warmth of my cat-printed bed sheets, I wondered what it meant. I knew that the doctors had told my parents that I would die by my eighth birthday and this was THE DAY. I had gone to bed the night before very carefully - saying my prayers, kissing each and every one of my thirty-six stuffed animals directly on the nose, giving both of my parents long deep hugs before crawling into bed - and yet, here I was. I listened to the cars pass in the street below and stared at the slats of sun as they shifted in patterns on my bedroom wall. I turned over on my side, and the oak of my second-hand bed-frame creaked.

"Breakfast's almost ready!" my father called from the bottom of the stairs. I waited another minute and then dragged myself out of bed.

Leaning forward in the bathroom mirror, staring at the dark gray streaks that lined the edges of my teeth, I wondered if it were possible to smile naturally without opening my mouth. I wanted to avoid another school picture like the last one, where I'd stupidly grinned from ear to ear, my lips spread wide and my dark teeth dominating the landscape, like disintegrating tombstones in an ancient cemetery that nobody ever visited. I tried various poses but nothing seemed to work, and in disgust I covered everything up with toothpaste.

By the time I made it downstairs for breakfast my sister was already bent over the kitchen table rapidly eating a bowl of cereal. My father, in a crumpled blue suit, stood at the kitchen sink washing his hands and nodding his head to an AM radio news report. A long, thin strand of cigarette smoke wafted up toward the ceiling from a disregarded ashtray on the counter to his right. Nearly the entire cigarette had turned to ash without my father remembering to smoke it; the ash rested, in a perfectly delicate spiral, just waiting to crumble to pieces the minute anyone touched it.

“I hate this cereal, why do we buy it?” my sister Rebecca paused to ask no one in particular. Her long brown hair, pulled tight into a crooked French braid, fell past the back of her chair and I had to avoid stepping on it as I walked past her. She had never cut her hair since the time she was born and every morning long minutes were spent combing and braiding what were still her “baby hairs.” Earlier that year my mother had taken photos of my sister naked, the hair just long enough to cover her crotch and nubile breasts, my sister’s pose in front of the camera provocative with chin lifted high, pelvis turned out to the side, and hands splayed on her hips. The photos were kept in a frame on my sister’s bedroom nightstand, and she showed them to anyone who unwittingly came over for a visit.

“The one with sugar on top is better,” she continued, but my disinterested father remained listening to the radio, slowly drying his hands on a checkered and stained dishtowel. “This one is just flakes. Brown flakes. Boring.”

I reached for the chair next to my sister, but my damp hands slipped and the chair’s metal legs clattered loudly to the ground.

“Happy Birthday Pumpkin!” my father said, turning from the sink with arms opened wide. I smiled despite myself and, leaving the unruly chair where it had fallen on the ground, ran into his embrace. He squeezed me almost-too-tight and I inhaled his comforting Old Spice smell. When he let me go, I still couldn’t stop smiling. I looked at my sister, expecting a similar birthday wish from her, but she was busy reading the side of the cereal box. I looked back up at my father and his smiling face steadied me. It was my eighth birthday, the day had actually arrived, and despite what all the doctors had said, maybe, I thought while looking up at my father’s happy face, just maybe everything would still turn out alright.

“Where’s Mom?” I asked, sitting down more carefully this time.

“At school again.”

I kept forgetting that my mom had gone back to school at the university, and that she wasn’t going to be home in the mornings anymore.

“But she should be back to take you to your party after school.”

“You’ll be there too, right?” I asked hopefully, but my father’s eyes avoided mine.

“No Pumpkin, I’ve got to work. But I’ll give you your presents when you get home later.” I was disappointed, but tried not to show it.

“Its probably just some books,” my sister said damply.

“Shut up,” I shot in her direction.

“I’m not telling,” my father interrupted as he placed a glass of juice and a bowl of cereal in front of me. He kissed the top of my head and, ignoring my sister, I turned my attention to the food in front of me.

When school let out that afternoon my mother was there to pick me up. The backseat of our long green Thunderbird was piled high with paper hats, balloons, and party whistles and in the front sat my mother, smooth hair perfectly in

place, long nails neatly painted. Her smile was radiant and I longed to be close to her.

“How’s my Lea’cik?” she asked as I scrambled into the car. I noted that, unusually for her, my mother had added her favorite Turkish endearment to the end of my name, and she rarely spoke her native language anymore. I wanted to ask her what it meant, but I was afraid of annoying her. I only found out years later, in a class I took in college, that the contraction meant “little one,” or sometimes, “my little one.”

“Are you excited?” she asked. “Is Gimbu coming?” I nodded my head up and down. Gimbu, one of my friends from school, had somehow become my “boyfriend,” according to my mother, after I’d inadvertently told her that we’d held hands on the playground. I wasn’t entirely sure what a boyfriend was, but I could tell that it made my mother happy to think that I had one. I assured her that he was coming, and that my friends Kwesi, Anastasia, Stacey, Katherine, and Tiffany were coming too. Even Mrs. Stearn, my teacher, had said that she would be there.

We picked Rebecca up from her school a couple of blocks away and then drove together to the local McDonald’s. I was overjoyed when my mother had finally agreed to let me have my birthday party there - it was what all my friends were doing, and despite the fact that my father had readily agreed to the proposal, my mother had been harder to convince. She was worried that McDonald’s wasn’t very safe or clean and that having the party there, rather than at home, wouldn’t be worth the extra money. When my mother and I entered the restaurant and found that the staff had already covered the tables with colorful paper placemats and piles of fresh crayons, and that each booth was carefully laid with personal plastic party favors, even she seemed to have a gleam of satisfaction in her eye.

Anastasia was the first guest to show up. She was short, like me, but with bright red hair and glowing brown eyes. She handed me a square purple box wrapped with a thick silver bow and told me that I’d love what was inside. I hugged it to my chest and only reluctantly placed it on the table set aside for presents. Then Anastasia gave me the card she’d made - it was a stack of index cards really, paper-hole punched at the top and tied together with fuzzy orange string. I opened the construction paper cover and read in bright green crayon, “Lea-Rachel is my forever best friend ☺.” The index card after that was a stick-figure drawing of the two of us playing together outside my house.

“Wait. Don’t look at them all now,” Anastasia said, putting her hand on my arm. Reluctantly, I closed the packet of index cards and put them carefully on the table next to the present Anastasia had already given me.

A few minutes later Gimbu walked through the door, and when I saw him I ran and grabbed his hand and dragged him over to where my mother stood. Triumphant, I exclaimed, “This is my boyfriend Gimbu.”

My mother turned from the person she was talking to and looked at us with a smile. Thoughtfully, she tilted her head to the side and said, “But he’s black.”

Gimbu’s own mother, still standing near the door, clucked her tongue in response and shifted her body weight heavily to one side. She had no idea that

where my mother was from, in Turkey, there simply were no black people and that my mother was still in awe of the multiculturalism that was America.

“What do you mean?” I asked, in genuine childhood ignorance. Gimbu’s cool hand slipped from my own. My mother, suddenly uncomfortable, laughed openly at my question and bent over to kiss me on the cheek. Seeing the look in her eyes, I thought I had said something smart. Gimbu’s own mother, after a pause, let out her breath and let the moment pass. After she nodded her approval I grabbed Gimbu’s hand again and, together with Anastasia, we went to look at the Snoopy birthday cake.

Friends continued to arrive and it wasn’t long before the party was loud and hectic and happy. Everything was a success, but as the afternoon wore on, I continued to grow increasingly uneasy. My hands, which habitually sweat as a symptom of my disease anyway, grew so wet I couldn’t hold on to a cup of coke, and at one point a full glass slipped from my fingers in the middle of the room. Its mass of sticky dark sweetness spread across the floor in something of a hurry. When my mother asked me to bring her the tub of chocolate ice cream so that we could scoop it out into bowls, I dropped the heavy container on the table, my hands leaving humid palm prints on the sides like a scattered child trying to find a way in. Before I knew it my feet were sweating too, and when I walked I felt my toes squish and squirm in the wet of my damp cotton socks. I kept smiling and pretended that nothing was wrong.

When it came time to open presents the ringing in my ears, yet another sporadic symptom of my disease, had grown so loud I could hardly hear anything else. I wanted to squeeze my eyes shut and press my palms to the sides of my head, but I refused to give in. I had become adept over the years at hiding these more minor aspects of my disease, and I refused, especially on my birthday, to acknowledge them. I bent over and picked up the first birthday present from the table, steeling my spine and holding my breath, knowing that all eyes were on me. I must perform, I told myself, I must do this. I can do this. It was just like all those times at the hospital when the nurses didn’t ask, but told me to “Be a good girl. Be strong. Hold it in. It’s not so bad now, is it?” I was used to lying and nodding, allowing others to comfortably believe that the machinations they put me through weren’t somehow tortuous. I was a master at pretending that the pain was not so bad.

It wasn’t until I got to Anastasia’s present that I came close to actually losing my composure. The square box wrapped in beautiful shining silver caught the light and reflected my misplaced smile. I tried to open it without ruining the pretty bow, letting my moist fingers slide underneath the tape and letting things come loose slowly. When the box was finally open I found a Hello Kitty bath set inside, complete with toothbrush, cup, mirror, and tiny matching comb. I loved Hello Kitty, it was my absolute favorite, and while I stared down at the present still nestled in its neat purple box, the thought ran quickly through my head, Will I live long enough to have time to use this? My heart was beating so rapidly I wondered, Is this it? Am I going to fall over dead in the middle of opening my presents? I pretended the tears in my eyes were ones of happiness when I went over to give Anastasia her hug.

Later that night, after the party was over, after all the presents had been opened and put away, after the cake had been eaten and finished, once we were back at home in our clean, comfortable house, my mother asked me to come over and talk to her. I got up from where I was sitting on my father's lap, flipping through the colorful books that he had indeed gotten me for my birthday, and slowly walked over to where she stood. She sat me down on the living room couch and, a little fearful, I could tell that she was going to talk serious.

"Are you ok?" she asked. "Did you have fun at your birthday party?"

I avoided looking at her, knowing that if I did I would just start crying. I focused my eyes instead on the generous cleavage of her soft round chest.

"What's wrong?" she asked slowly.

"Nothing."

"You seem so sad. Like you are going to cry. Aren't you happy?" This time she lifted my face to hers as she spoke. "Are you sure you're alright?"

My chin quivered as I nodded my head unconvincingly.

"What is it?" she asked again, stroking my hair.

I looked up at her fully then, and just before the tears overtook me, I asked when I was finally going to die.

"What?" my mother nearly yelled. For a minute I thought I had done something wrong. "Who told you that?"

I paused. "The doctors. They said that I was going to die by the time I was eight years old. Why hasn't it happened yet?"

"Oh, you're not going to die baby. Oh my God. Where did you hear that? How did you hear that?" My mother leaned forward and gathered me up into her lap. I breathed in her comforting powdered scent.

"Who told you that?"

"The doctors."

"Well yes, the doctors said something like that a long time ago, but they also said that you would never walk and you're walking, right?"

I nodded in mute agreement.

"And they said that your teeth would crumble and fall out, but they haven't, right? And they said that you would be bedridden and never able to play outside in the park, right?"

My eyes grew wide and my nodding more pronounced as the truth of her words dawned on me.

"Oh baby, the doctors said lots of things when you were born, but they didn't know what they were talking about. Look at you. You've proved them all wrong. You're healthy and strong and able. You're not going to die. Not any time soon at least."

"I'm not?"

"No, you're not."

A heavy stone rolled off my chest and I hiccupped fresh gulps of air. My mother's eyes filled with tears as she watched the relief pass visibly over my face. Years later she told me how angry she was that night, how for awhile after our talk she had thought about suing all my childhood doctors for having made me live with such fear for so long. After calming down she had eventually blamed

herself, for not protecting me better, for not having realized that I'd been living under such a cloud of anxiety and perpetual dread. When things got bad with my father afterwards, she blamed him, assuming that I'd overheard all those horrible premonitions during one of his drunk bragging sessions to friends. We never exactly figured out where I'd heard this once long-ago premonition, that I'd die by the time I turned eight years old, but I had, and for a long time I'd been preparing myself for an early death.