

HUNGER, Megan Riley

The heat drives against the insulation of the house. Delta's 105° ambiance, breeze-free and so humid, the skin of bending knees gathers moisture like ditches. I escape with each hand's plunge into the dish water and a box fan herding cold air from the living room's window unit into the kitchen. Two white-paned windows above the sink look out onto the front yard, reflecting a high tide of heat waves above black pavement. They seem to saturate his clothes, his 4 foot tall, 75 pound, decade-old frame. His face is reddened by skateboard overexertion – he walks into the house, slams the screen door, and shoots me the look. Uncertainty. Doubt. And at the same time, a familiar look that comes from years of putting up with it all. The red spreads across his ears and neck.

Our mother has somehow been buoying the household with her unemployment and his child support checks. Seven jobs in three years spanning two states: She is running out of options along with faith and the fortitude to explain what is going on. The bare cabinet shelves do the talking. Freshmen year at college was my first successful escape route and had been my safe haven of government sustainment. Scholarships and loans opened up my pocketbook potential and although it must be accounted for later, the now of \$2000 made me a beginner's millionaire. But summertime brought me back to this pathetic suction cup of a town where again, I face a reality they haven't been able to surmount.

“Drink some water, honey. You're face is red as a beet,” I say.

Then another look forms, a glare that seems to say “Really? You're coping with your third hangover of the week and you're telling me to drink some water?” But since he doesn't really

know the reason I didn't come home until 3 am, why I smell like smoke and couldn't watch Transformers until we both fell asleep on the futon, the look can only signify "Oh please."

He puts his board down and goes towards the avocado cabinets for a glass. He picks up the small, blue plastic mug with foam letters spelling out "Noah" in a multi-color craze. I recall my matching "Megan" mug. Although nine years apart, we both prefer that vessel. The cup is too small to hold a substantial amount of anything, but the way the condensation gathers around the colored shapes, collecting until cold drops fall on the floor, toes, or jeans, the way the handle wraps around like a Fischer-Price embrace – it's comforting, and we cling to those blessings.

He laps up the tap water and I know I was right about the heat. 100° in the shade is a lot to handle, even for Skinny Bones Jones, a nickname our grandmother coined for him. He refills his cup twice. His string bean arms glisten under the muted kitchen light as he draws in every ounce.

"I've gotta trick you gotta see!" he says, after catching his breath from another gulp.

"Aww, yeah?" I reply, pretending to be aware of what he's talking about. The only wheels I'm interested in are the four out front, supporting the red four-door risk I take on the road every day. Gas leak one month, busted timing the next, none of the Cavalier's ailments are fixed but rather put off for another paycheck or some lottery ticket from some other state.

"Yeah, I was in Mrs. Wiles' driveway and I did two 180's!" he brags.

"So, would that make it a 360?" I ask with a laugh, trying to stump him with numbers as to keep the rep of omniscient Big Sister intact.

"Well no! I did a kick step then did another 180! 360's are in the air, a whole circle," he explains in that vacant tone, just as his rude friends sound. It doesn't come naturally to him, though.

“Oh, okay honey.”

I watch him open the cabinets, probably looking for some sugary sweet, gummy, glucose-infected package to satisfy his palate. As each door is opened then closed, I can sense his heart sinking, a heavy rock dropping towards the bayou bottom.

“Are you hungry?” I ask. I know the answer but ask anyway. He doesn’t respond and instead, stands with the fridge door open, a huge no-no among house rules. Apparently, invisible dollars fly out with each second of stagnant fridge staring, though we both find ourselves guilty of such subversion, especially during the hotter days.

“Noah, are you hungry?”

“Yeah,” he mumbles. He lets the fridge door creep shut, the seal inhaling deep the leaked cold air like some food safe, like there was food in there to keep safe.

“What do you want?” I ask, once again knowing the question is in vain, but not because I knew what his reply would be: The answer could not exist. His eyes begin blinking quickly and well up with tears. He sits by me at the plastic picnic table-turned-dining room table. As his body meets the bottom of the fold-out lawn chair, he crumples up, his head plopping on the hard plastic, sweat droplets falling from his forehead and collecting into salty pools. He stares at them. He isn’t depressed, suicidal, or suffering from some ridiculous diagnosis of dwarfed attention spans and tempers, but rather escaping. I watch the liftoff in his blue eyes.

“I dunno,” he pushes out, his bottom lip pouting as he exhales a gust of frustration.

“Well, what sounds good? How about a grilled cheese? There’s some shredded cheddar in there, I think.”

“I had one earlier.”

I get mad, but I don't show it. I understand that he doesn't understand. I can't say I have a firm grasp of it all either – the empty fridge, the empty plates, the empty wallets, the empty stares from behind black-gridded glass, nodding their empty heads like they know us, know the others sitting in the waiting room, know how it feels to lay in bed and pray for stamps that fill up fridges, that fill up stomachs. I'm sorry. You make too much money to qualify. When did fear become fair?

“Well...how...about...oh look!” I throw out a phony exclamation as I find a can of generic raviolis. “How about these?”

“Mmm... uh-uh, I don't really like 'em.”

I knew this. C'mon, Big Sister, think. How can I make him give in and eat these masses of dough smothered in a faux-meat sauce?

“Well, I can put some of that shredded cheese on 'em! And, oh, look, there's some butter! I can make some buttered bread? Sounds pretty good, huh?”

He raises his head from the table, the sandy brown buzz leaving his swollen eyes exposed. He looks like such a big boy with his bowl-cut gone, left at the foot of the barber chair at the beginning of summer. I want to cry, but I can't. It's his turn.

“Okay,” he answers. A moment's silence falls while I look for the can opener. Avocado drawers scrape and the box fan hums a familiar tune, filling our heads, comforting us in the invisible cradles we wish we could crawl into, where we can cover our heads in blue and pink blankets and know nothing else. I find a container big enough for the family-size can, grind the metal

open, and dump the dough ball bowl into the microwave. The beepbeep beepbeep echoes sharply in my ears and as hands find the butter tub, I hear the stretchpullrip of his sweaty skin being released from the tablecloth. He lifts his head up high enough to meet my eye.

“Do you want some?” he softly asks. I turn around with the empty can in my hand, damp palms wrinkling the purple label, and look at him, his filthy brow, those blue eyes.

“Sure, honey.” I turn my body sharply right to hide a quivering smile.

I grab two big serving spoons for the dramatic effect of abundance. And as we feast on our stale buttered bread and scrape at the burnt raviolis stuck to the side of the big floral bowl, I know we made it. Lunch – a small victory, yes, but a victory it was. After a few hours, digestion will set in and the demanding rumbles will overtake our bodies again, but for this moment, we can sit in plastic chairs at a plastic table eating plastic food and feel fleshy, full, and free.