

**Out of the Frying Pan**

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“Some people change their ways when they see the light; others when they feel the heat.” — *Caroline Schoeder*

If I had to describe myself in a personal ad that morning it would have said “Eight months pregnant and struggles to open pickle jars.” Not quite the words I imagined I would use to describe myself at age 22, but the irrational cravings born of my pregnancy went unquestioned in the third trimester. On bed rest for all but three hours of each day, the desire to find salty, sweet, tangy, and just plain scrumptious foods carved its way into my mind the same way that paint always manages to seep into the heels of my paint brushes, where the bristles meet the handle.

Barely dawn and here I stood in a standoff with a jar of shithead pickles. My hands burned from the effort of trying to twist the lid, probably glued to the glass of the jar by the already muggy July air. No matter how closely I molded my fingers to the grooves, the lid wouldn't budge, and the thud it let out as I finally dropped it against the counter sent an echo through the empty kitchen. My knuckles were as white as the walls in mine and Daniel's new house, which yesterday Daniel had suggested leaving as blank as a new canvas permanently.

“All of them?” I had asked.

“Why not, Leah? White's supposed to reflect heat, right?” he'd said. A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead and met its boring end in the white carpet.

I couldn't tell if my husband was joking, but one thing was clear — the soupy humidity of Minnesota didn't care if white reflected heat. If it was July, it was hot as balls. I'd been itching to change the walls since my first step in the house, running through palettes in my head that

wouldn't be too crazy for Daniel. The pickles, resembling a rough dab of hunter green on a blank canvas, intensified the itch to paint. They almost made me want to unpack. Almost.

I'd been awake since 6:00 a.m. when a kick from the baby had interrupted a dream where Daniel and I slept in a giant frying pan. A nice one, though. Definitely ordered from the Pampered Chef. It had a non-stick surface. At 6:30, Daniel ignored the scrambled eggs, hash browns, and bacon I made for him, grabbing a bare slice of toast on his way out the door, no time for butter even. His goodbye was muffled by a mouthful of crunching, my cheek scratched by the crispy crumbs on his lips as he kissed me goodbye.

I was left with moving boxes surrounding me in stacks three deep, a sad substitute for the real mountains we left behind in Oregon. Two hurried scribbles branded each box, one our last name and the other a short description of its contents.

I left the pickles on the counter and leaned closer to the stack of boxes next to the refrigerator that came close to falling over every time I opened the door. A box opener balanced on the dented-in corner of the top box, leaning toward the floor at an angle about one tap away from falling overboard. Definitely not baby-proof.

Like everything else in the house, the box opener was sticky as I slid it to the middle of the box and reached underneath to lift it gently from the bottom. The box wasn't heavy, but it was difficult to hold in front of the sweeping curve that my belly had become. Mere months ago the straight edge of the box would have fit flush against my flat stomach. The negative space between the cardboard and myself was too large now, unstable even. I was relieved to set it down on the counter.

The ripping of the tape sounded louder than it should be. I pulled back the flaps of the box gently, revealing a stuffed elephant on top, with the note “For Baby Emma” and a small smiley face pinned to its ear. This was the name my mother wanted for the baby. I closed the flaps again, replaced the tape as best as I could, and slid the box against the wall, underneath the still empty cupboards.

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Crosshatch, overlay, mold, carve, collage, sculpt, trace, shade, shape. The verbs of my trade slide off my tongue so easily, slippery and full to the brim with water.

Stipple is my favorite. My first art textbook describes the technique as “a method of drawing, engraving, or painting using dots or short strokes.” The real gift of stippling is the degrees of solidity it creates, flowing seamlessly between transparency and opacity. I feel similarly solid and hollow as I press my hand into the page and release it again. I feel solidarity.

I’ve been painting for a long time. Starting in first grade, I’d tell relatives that I was going to be a painter when I grew up, like Pablo Picasso. I suppose they thought it was no different than any other kid saying she wanted to be a ballerina or an astronaut. None of my family was into art, and I’m sure they would say they could do better if they saw one of Picasso’s pieces. Abstract didn’t mean much to them, other than undeveloped.

I declared myself an art major right before I came home for Christmas my freshman year, to the registrar if not to my mother. As soon as I got in the front door, my mother was waiting with tea at the kitchen table. I could see tears held back in her eyes as she pushed her chair back and came to hug me before I could even put my bag down. I wished I had called more often.

“So how did your classes turn out?” she asked me as we sat down at the table with its two chairs. It had been that way for so long. I wondered if she had put the other one away when I was gone.

“My art prof is amazing. I wanted to bring some stuff home, but it was too big for the plane,” I said. True, but I also knew that my mother would have only looked at them for less than a minute each.

“What about that bio class? How did you like that?” she asked. The radiologist in her had always hoped I would work in a hospital.

I was pretty sure I had a C in that class. “Oh, it was alright,” was all I said.

“I know the intro classes can be kind of boring, but once you’re past those it is some really cool stuff,” she said, taking a sip of tea while still smiling, a strange trick of my mother’s. She always looked proper.

“Yeah, I know,” I said. I took a sip of my own tea and a silence settled on the table. My mother was still smiling. I was twisting my own still-full cup on the table, watching the ripples on its surface.

“I bet you’re tired. Go on and get some rest if you’d like, we can talk in the morning,” she said. She was eyeing my cup like she was worried it would spill over onto the table. “It’s so nice to have you home.”

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The phone Daniel bought the day before rang and I scrambled to pick it up off the dock. Didn’t some people call it a “cradle”? The word made me feel nervous. My fingertips hovered over first one button, then another, but I had no idea how to answer the call on this goddamn

newfangled phone. It was as if all the angles in the house conspired to maximize the volume of the phone's bleating rings. After too long, I found the right one.

"Is that you, Leah?" It was my mother.

"Yes, mom, the one and only," I said.

"Your voice sounds different," my mother said.

I said nothing. I was still thinking of how loud the phone had been. This was a house built for quiet.

"Hello? I asked you how things are going?" my mother said.

"Oh, you know. Just opening box after box over here," I said.

A lie. I hadn't opened any boxes yet.

"Has it cooled down at all? I heard on the news that this is the hottest Midwest summer in 20 years. It's about 40 degrees cooler here..."

The phone was slippery in my palm and there was a faint clicking noise on the line between Oregon and here as she waited for me to respond to a joke about the weather. I hadn't really heard the punch line, but she was laughing, so I nodded my head. Then I remembered she couldn't see me.

"Was there anything you needed from me?" I said.

"I was just checking in, but while I have you I might as well take care of a few things," she said.

I could picture my mother perfectly. She would be sitting at the kitchen table in the chair closest to the refrigerator. A notepad with a butterfly border around the edge sat squarely in front of her, a pen in her right hand ready to check off each item on her list.

“Did you schedule a consultation with that specialist at Mayo?”

Her pen hovered over the little box next to *Mayo appt.*

“I’m going in next Tuesday. That’s the soonest he could see me,” I said.

My mother sighed. “You’re supposed to see someone within the week. What if something happened during the flight?”

“That’s the soonest one,” I said.

“I would call again, just to check,” she said. She would be circling *Mayo appt.* now, or drawing an exclamation point next to it. It would worry her for the rest of the day, if not longer.

“Okay, I’ll check,” I said.

She told me she’d call back later to check how the checking went. As we hung up, I imagined the spirals of her phone cord sliding across the floor, its curlicues kinking up. I used to lay on the floor untwisting those knots, pulling them apart and watching them spring back together. The tremors traveled up the cord, but never shook the phone enough for her to notice.

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All in one day Daniel had set up his home office and our bedroom. In that order. Without any other furniture set up, I lay on the bedroom floor, a saggy pillow propped between me and the wall.

“What do you think of putting the desk over by that south-facing window?” he asked, popping his head in the bedroom door.

“That’ll be lovely,” I said.

“There’s beautiful light on that side of the house, honey. You’re going to love your studio,” he said. Daniel didn’t really understand art. I met him at Brewed Awakenings coffee

shop in Wheeler. when he'd asked what I thought of the painting hanging on my left, a worn out copy of Bruegel's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. It was a piece that I remembered well from my art history courses because it was rumored that the popular version is actually another artist's interpretation of Bruegel. The original supposedly includes Daedalus, Icarus's father, flying safely through the air as his son crashes into the calm blue seas below.

"I can set up the baby's room tomorrow, if you'd like," Daniel said, his tone so reminiscent of his eagerness that first day, a year ago now.

"Whatever you want," I said, making shadow puppets on the wall with my hands.

"Is that a yes or a no?" Daniel asked.

I was still looking at the wall, trying to imagine what the room would look like soon.

"Later," I said.

Daniel only touched me once that day, to help me stand up so he could bring in the mattress.

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Sometimes all you can do is cry, which is what I did the day I dropped out. I'd called my mother a week before to tell her I was leaving, thinking about art school next year instead of university. The phone didn't distort her voice enough to hide the apparent sigh in every word she spoke.

When I moved back in, my room felt even smaller than it had over Christmas Break. My artwork from the past year had been stacked all around, oils, acrylics, and watercolors mingling amongst each other instead of hanging on their own on the walls. I barely had enough space to set up my easel.

Later, Daniel let me move some of my paintings to his place, where they stayed stacked in a corner. Daniel liked my art, but he preferred to leave the prints he had already purchased on the walls. One night, as I lay with my eyes open, staring out the window, and Daniel slept with his head over my heart, I wriggled out from under him and went to the living room, where I spread the canvases out. My money from *Brewed Awakenings* was all going straight to my bank account, and without rent to pay, it was starting to add up. Daniel didn't know that I'd been looking at an art school out east, that they'd asked for a portfolio of my work. I only needed to complete two more pieces to submit one.

I spent the night working on the visions in my head, unable to sleep. A week later, Daniel's head laid over my heart again as I stared out the window, wondering how to tell him he'd soon be hearing two heartbeats.

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I opened the fridge door in search of another salty food that was easier to get to, and a blast of cold washed over my front. I wanted to kill Daniel for not having an air conditioner installed before we moved in. All this extra weight made life a lot sweatier. Nothing else looked good to eat, but the relief was enough to keep me in front of the door, at least until the hair on my arms started to stick straight out as tingles ran up and down my skin.

I moved slowly down the hallway from the kitchen to the bedroom, the only room in the entire house with a fan. I walked past my studio and Daniel's home office on the left, looking in the doors, as if anything had changed. Baby's room was on the right, next to ours, with the door closed. I hadn't seen it yet. There was just the one box for the room, and that could be done later.

The large east-facing windows in our bedroom were already filling with light. I had no choice but to let the sun keep beating down though, since I had no idea which box contained the single set of curtains that Daniel had hung in his apartment back in Wheeler. They were a shade of green that was probably once described as beautiful, but by this point the sun had faded them so much that I wasn't even sure why Daniel brought them.

I sat slowly on the edge of the bed and eased myself back onto the pillows. When the doctor first told me I'd have to be on bed rest, I asked how I was supposed to sleep that much every day. Being pregnant made me tired, but it didn't put me into a coma. The doctor didn't understand my joke and carefully explained that many women found reading and knitting to be very productive activities while on bed rest. I told him I didn't know how to read. He didn't think that was too funny either.

Outside the clinic, in the car, Daniel told me not to be rude. I blamed it on my hormones.

A small pool of sweat was already forming at my lower back, soaking through my t-shirt. I imagined a small continent forming there. Perhaps it was shaped like South America, or maybe Europe. A pancake soaked in syrup must feel remarkably close to the way I felt at that moment. I pulled Daniel's pillow over and set it on top of my head to block out the sun. The smell, one-half Head and Shoulders shampoo and one-half sweat, made me gag. Flinging the pillow away, I turned away from the window onto my side. Though nothing in comparison with stairs, even rolling over took effort.

Another ringing, this time the doorbell, invaded my peace and quiet. A faint buzz of excitement began edging the dizziness out of my brain. The possibility of a visitor was like a

shot of coffee (god how I missed it) into my veins. Even if it was just a Girl Scout selling cookies. Or another housewarming gift from Daniel's mother, Martha, sent via UPS.

The same delivery boy had come to the house every other day for the past week. The third day in, he dropped a "FRAGILE" box on his way up the front walk and by the time I made it to the door, a waterfall of apologies was spewing forth. I frankly gave less than a shit, but he had insisted that I open it right there on the front porch. Just to make sure. The neighbors probably thought I was eager to open my Crate and Barrel napkin rings or whatever other knickknacks a housewife slobbers over. Delivery boy stood there, his sweat dripping all over my porch like it was raining, as I ripped it open to find a set of 1200 thread count Egyptian cotton sheets. Totally not broken. Obviously. Sheets do not have to be shipped as a fragile product, Martha. That guy thought I was an asshole.

I hauled myself to the edge of the bed, wiping my face with the back of my hand and fanning my side in a short attempt to dry the sweat. Sitting up made me feel dizzy. The sun wasn't even mid-sky yet. For a moment, I considered just lying back down. But if Martha had sent another gift, she'd be calling that night to make sure that it got there exactly on the day she wanted it to.

Anyway, it took me awhile just to make it to the top of the stairs and the doorbell rang a second time. Going down the stairs meant positioning myself like this was an expertly choreographed dance. I had to turn myself sideways just to see my feet, which was necessary to keep me and mine from tumbling down the stairs. It would be so easy to slip. It happened all the time. It was always so hard for me not to laugh when other people tripped. I must have some kind of trip karma built up by now.

By the time I made it to the bottom of the stairs again, I could feel the sweat picking up, spreading the stain slowly. Whatever continent it had looked like was ruined. It probably just looked like grease spilled from a frying pan, its edges haphazard. The doorbell rang for a third time and I hurried as much as I could to the door, looking through the peephole first, a habit leftover from Wheeler. In the first days there, I sometimes forgot that I was halfway across the country, just outside of the corn belt, where the biggest threat of crime was someone picking up your morning newspaper by accident.

Instead of Delivery boy, there was a woman standing on the stoop, a plate of cookies—were they chocolate chip?—in front of her as she looked between the door and window and back again. She looked just a tad younger than my mother, but her lipstick was a pink of the bubblegum variety.

The woman wasn't alone, I realized, as the door swung open. A little girl with wispy blond pigtails stood on her left, scraping her sneakers on the concrete stoop. The woman told the girl to shush and turned to me with a smile. Must be her mother. Some lipstick was stuck to her teeth, and I could see that she had missed a button on her blouse, right above her belly button. I felt a little better about my own pajama-clad body.

“Good morning,” I said.

“I'm Sue, your neighbor across the street, and this is my daughter Hannah,” she said.

“Say hi, Han-pants.”

Hannah looked up at me for a second, then buried her face in her mother's khaki-clad thigh. The hug jolted Sue, whose left hand tipped so much that the cookies almost fell onto the porch.

Sue righted the plate just in time with a nervous giggle.

I had no idea what to say. The Minnesota accent, it seemed, was not a myth. It was like a bad Ole and Lena joke come to life. I settled on my name. "I'm Leah. Nice to meet you."

"Well how far along are you?" Sue asked, her hand reaching out to pat my stomach.

I turned a bit, moving my belly just out of her reach. I considered telling her I wasn't pregnant at all, just fat. I'd used that joke back in Wheeler a few times, my mother glaring disapprovingly each time.

Sue's smile faltered for a second, her pink lips closing down over her teeth. The smile came back immediately as she said, "Must be pretty close."

I nodded my head. "Just one more month," I said.

"Did you hear that Han-pants? She's having a baby in one month," Sue said to her daughter, who still clung to her leg.

Sue smiled. "She's a little shy. She just turned five." She waited for me to respond.

Hannah released the arm hugging the front of her mother's thigh and held up four, then five, then four fingers again. She dropped her arm and buried her face back into Sue's hip.

"Well, it's kind of a mess in here, but if you want to come in--"

"Don't worry," Sue said, pulling Hannah in after her. "Do you need some help with these stairs? They must be a haul." She held her arm out for me to hook my own through.

"I'm fine," I said as I grabbed onto the railing.

I could see Sue head for the counter to deposit the cookies, while Hannah wandered around amongst the boxes. As I reached the top, Sue, too, was looking out over the boxes like she was surveying a new country.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding,” Sue said.

“I’d offer you some coffee, but—”

“I understand. Hannah’s my fourth and I’ve never really gotten used to going off the coffee for nine months at a time.” Sue smiled at me for the umpteenth time.

“Four?” I asked. I realized the pickles were still on the counter and shuffled around to grab them.

“Matthew, James, Rachel, and Hannah,” Sue rattled off, ticking a finger up for each child. Hannah peeked her head around a box at the mention of her name, but went back to her exploration when she realized she wasn’t in trouble.

“Christ,” I muttered before I could stop myself.

Sue just laughed. “Yeah, we’re kind of a religious bunch. This must be your first?” She reached out and patted my belly before I could stop her. As her hand moved back to her side she seemed to notice the pickles for the first time.

“Oh, I ate a ton of these with James!” Sue said.

“Yeah, it’s kind of an obsession,” I admitted. “But the lid’s stuck.”

Sue motioned for me to hand the jar over with her hand and I set it back on the counter for her to give it her best shot. She strained for two or three seconds, then set it back down and grabbed the hem of her shirt to use on it. A set of stretch marks peeked out, but Sue didn’t seem to care. She twisted and twisted, and finally, with a loud pop, the pickles were free.

“There you go.” She started to set the jar down, but her hand slowed halfway there as she scanned the living room on the other side of the counter. “Han-pants?”

There was no response.

Somehow, I knew where Hannah would be. Sue was looking at me, probably gauging how uncomfortable I would be if she started looking for Hannah without asking me for permission to roam the house first. But that wasn't necessary.

"I bet she's down here," I said, moving away down the hall.

The hallway was hot, the air completely still so far away from the windows and the fan. Ahead on the right, the door to baby's room was slightly ajar and humming floated out from inside. I stopped at the door, looking down at the handle, tempted to pull it shut and walk away. After a deep breath, I pushed the door open gently with the tips of my fingers, not knowing what to expect on the other side for the second time that day.

The room was perfectly square and as white as the rest of the house. Hannah stood in front of the only windows in the room, facing the street. Daniel had cracked a window a few inches and the slight breeze coming in through that space cooled the room to a bearable temperature. At the creak of the door, Hannah turned to face us and sent her pigtails into the breeze, causing her hair to ruffle downily behind her.

"How come there's no boxes in here?" she asked us.

Sue squeezed past me and went to grab Hannah's hand. "Hannah, what did I tell you not to do when we're at other people's houses?"

I winced, ready to hear Sue's pleasant tone morph into one of a strict disciplinarian, but she just pulled Hannah closer and combed through her hair with her fingers.

"It's okay," I said. "This is the baby's room and she's not here yet, so she doesn't have any stuff."

Hannah looked confused, and I found myself wondering what it would be like to not know where babies come from again.

Sue smiled at me and for the first time I felt like it was genuine. “A girl! You must be so excited.”

“You should make it pink!” Hannah said, suddenly jumping up and down.

“Hannah Jane!” Sue said, putting her hands on her daughter’s shoulders to settle her feet down, but she kept smiling. “You are just a card sometimes, aren’t you?”

Hannah smiled up at her mom, her feet still wriggling on the carpet.

“Well, Leah, I should get this one home so she can run free, but you should come to our house for dinner sometime.”

“I’d like that,” I said.

Sue took Hannah by the hand to lead the way out of the room. Just before she slipped out the door, Hannah reached her hand out and grazed the very bottom of my belly. The smallness and coolness of her palm shocked me, a touch I had never felt before.

I stayed in the room as Hannah and Sue left the house and walked across the street. I could see them below, Hannah skipping and her mother following suit. It was cool in here and comfortable, just a simple room. A mural for baby would look beautiful on these walls. A forest, a rainbow, something whimsical.

Or maybe I would do my own interpretation of *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. Baby and I would fly over the sea, the breeze light and perfect on our faces. I would paint the two of us flying close to the sun, not caring that the wax that held our wings might melt. We would be in a painting, after all. We could do whatever we wanted.