

Monster

by myke ripellino

My sister, Bonnie, is busy with the dishes as I enter the kitchen; I toss the mail I was sorting through onto the table and look around for Sophie, my four-year-old daughter.

"Bonnie, isn't she ready yet?" I ask.

"She's getting her shoes and socks. Any news from Jack?" I shuffle through the mail again. Maybe I missed it. Maybe it's buried somewhere in the stack of bills.

"No, not a word," I say. Bonnie turns away from the sink. I know what's coming next.

"Listen, Maddy," she says to me as she dries her hands.

"Bonnie, please, not now." But I know she'll continue.

"Maddy, you need to wrap your brain around the fact that it's over. Jack's gone. He's not coming back for you or Sophie." I pull a dishtowel from the drawer and begin to wipe the dishes. I can see the empty bus stop from the window above the sink.

"Sophie's his only child, Bonnie. Why couldn't he at least send her a birthday card last week? You saw her. She waited all morning for the mailman. It was like she didn't even care about the gifts from me."

"Honey, you're my sister and I love you so don't get mad at me when I say this. You need to move on. This rut you're in isn't good for you or that child."

"Where the *hell* is Sophie? We're gonna miss the bus." I check my watch.

"Maddy, are you listening to me? Why don't you go out some night? I can watch Sophie."

"Thanks, Bonnie, but there's no way I'm going out anytime soon. It's bad enough that she's growing up without a father. She needs me. The least I can do, with the mess that I've made, is be a good mother."

Sophie runs into the room, grinning and breathless. She points her toe towards me while balancing against the kitchen

chair. The sock is inside out and the heel is twisted around to the front.

"Mommy, look! I put my socks on all by myself!"

"What a big girl! Come here, let mommy put your shoes on or we'll be late for the bus."

Soon Sophie and I are standing at the bus stop and I raise my face to the spring sky. I take a deep breath, relax, sense my shoulders lowering as I exhale, but Sophie pulls at my hand, panicked.

"Mommy! Mommy! I forgot Baby! I forgot Baby!"

Tears form in her big blue eyes and her lip quivers as she realizes she forgot her favorite doll.

"For God's sake, Sophie, don't cry. You can see her when we get back."

"No, Mommy. I *can't* leave her home. *She needs to come with us.*"

"Well, go find her but hurry up, the bus might be here any minute. It's Saturday and if we miss it there won't be another one for an hour."

She runs off towards the house and conquers the porch steps as she tries to find Baby.

"Mommy. I can't find her! She's not on the porch."

"I don't see the bus yet. Keep looking."

The screen door slams as she runs into the house. How can Jack do this to her? How can he sleep at night? How did I fall in love with such a bastard? I look up the street again. What if she's not back by the time the bus arrives? My jaw tightens; I dig my nails into my palm. I wait. Again I look and finally see the bus approaching. Sophie should be running out of the house any second now. And if she doesn't? I realize that I have a choice: if she's not here by the time the bus pulls up I can wait for the next one, or I could, couldn't I, get on without her? Bonnie's inside and can take care of her for a few hours while I go into town. It's my only day off and I just want to window-shop, have lunch at the diner.

The bus arrives, its doors open right in front of me and I don't look back. I can't risk seeing her; I'll lose my nerve. The air behind me is quiet. *This is it. Just do it.* I put one foot on the step, then the next and walk into freedom. I pay my fare and find a seat away from the window so that Sophie won't see me, catch me. The doors close and the engine groans as the bus pulls away from the curb. But then there's a piercing scream, a child's scream, and the brakes screech, the bus jolts and passengers jostle in their seats.

The bus driver throws the doors open and jumps down to help the small girl standing on the sidewalk as she screams, "Stop! Stop! You're taking my Mommy!" He takes one of her little hands and guides her up the steps as she clings to Baby. Her sobs are loud and wet. She sees me and cries louder, runs down the aisle and throws herself at my legs. "Mommy, you lost me."

The doors close again and the bus departs. I fold her into my arms and swing her and Baby up onto my lap as I wipe away both of our tears. People are staring at me, not sure what to think.

"Mommy, why did you lose me?"

"I didn't lose you, honey. Mommy could never lose you."

The glares speak judgements. These strangers want to think that it was some sort of mistake. But don't all parents try to sneak away sometimes? Usually it occurs at home-this child was running for a moving bus! This was no mistake. No mother boards a bus and forgets her child. *What sort of mother is she?* What sort of mother am I? *She must be a monster.* I agree.

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As Sophie sits on my lap, the sobs soften and I can smell her hair, clean and young, as she nestles her head against my breast. She rocks gently, soothing herself with her own rhythm, cooing to Baby.

"It's all right. Mommy's here. It's gonna be all right, Baby. All right."

I want to believe her words.

The bus is back on its journey but the strangers are still muttering among themselves. Occasionally, one will look back as he or she speaks to their routine friends, people they know from taking the same bus, the same time, on the same days, to the same places. If I smile at them they'll think I'm insane. Am I insane? When did I start caring about what other people think of me? I want to scream but I can't scream because my child is sitting on my lap. She's calmer. Her crisis has passed because time has passed and I've learned that time is not tangible for a four-year-old child.

I hold Sophie, rest my chin on her head and look out of the window, avoiding their stares. Thank God she's stopped crying. I watch other people's houses pass; neat, tidy, with well-manicured lawns. I see gardens with bushes now bursting to bud their roses, bushes that someone must have lovingly trimmed back before last year's frost. Swing sets are waiting for children to rush home from school. From the laundry hanging on the line, I picture a family: the breeze blows their clothes, the shirts and pants dancing, and the mother will remark, as she folds them after dinner, how much she loves the way sunshine makes clothes smell so good.

The driver announces the next stop. I realize it's ours and prepare to see the faces again, as we make our way off the bus. I can't meet their stares so I keep my eyes down as we head for the front door, holding Sophie's hand. She says bye-bye to the passengers, condemning me even more.

We are, finally, standing on the sidewalk. The bus departs, taking with it the jury of my peers. I feel the sun on my face again. I breathe, still holding Sophie's hand.

"Mommy, is it time for lunch?"

"Almost, honey."

We stand at the curb; the light is red. I look down at Sophie and see those big, blue eyes looking back at me. Her nose is still red from crying and her lashes are stuck together from her tears. The clouds move in, cover the sun and chill the air with their greyness. Sophie leans into me, seeking warmth. She has Baby

cradled in her free arm. The light changes. We step off the curb,
hand in hand, and cross the street.

