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MOTHER'S DAY

A. J. J. Bourque

Based on true events



IF YOU LISTEN REALLY CLOSELY you can almost hear the ocean when you breathe in and out. Sometimes when it's quiet, and I'm alone, I think about my grandparents' house near the beach, and the summers I spent there as a kid. I haven't been back since I was sixteen. A lot can change in a few short years.

It's four o'clock. *Ellen's* on TV. Mom's drifting in and out of consciousness, but a part of her mind must know she's on. The steady cadence of her heart monitors slows with every joke, rolling like the tide: in... and out...

I've been picking up extra shifts at the paint store. Four hundred dollars. All I need is four hundred dollars and this all goes away.

This was never the plan. Not at nineteen. Not now... Now, at the absolute worst moment of all; now when Mom needs me mos... when I need her.

But... I can't involve her. Not with this. She's got enough to think about already.

So, I don't tell Mom. She doesn't need to know. No one needs to know. Just four hundred dollars. I can do this. I can get through this.

You know, she asked me about it once. We were doing laundry, and she was watching me out of the corner of her eye, and then she turned to me, and said, "Leah, honey... are you pregnant?"

And what was I going to say? I mean, how many times has she said, "Just look at that, girls: another teen mom-to-be. Don't they know they're throwing their lives away? It's a shame. Just a real shame."

So I lied. "No, ma'am," I said, and we haven't spoken of it again. Because there's nothing to say. In a few weeks there won't be anything left to say.

But...

But then I think about how it happened, and I'm mortified. You know, he tried to put this all on me. Can you believe that? He said that it "wasn't his problem," and that I was "manipulating him." As if I would *choose* this at nineteen. As if I *could make it happen* all by myself. But no... of the two of us, *he* chose. *He* wanted this, and I... I just tried to think about the ocean, and the beach, and just... breathe.

I HAVEN'T BEEN BACK SINCE I WAS SIXTEEN.
A LOT CAN CHANGE IN A FEW SHORT YEARS.

BUDDING BALLERINA

Jessica Gonsoulin

(For Remy)

Big brown eyes
staring around a door
at ballet school

Almond eyes lit up
poised in a door
another afternoon

Couldn't get dressed.
Where's the black leotard?
Hanging by the washer.

Next comes the bun,
hair to be pulled back
smoothly like a tire.

First, the pony tail.
Hair is distributed,
fastened with bobby pins.

Long, wild hair
is not long confined.
A quick elastic band.

Out the door to the car.
Left on the kitchen table:
Pink ballet shoes

I waited until two months after to take the test. I figured... I mean, I couldn't tell— If I had said something *then*— If I had gone to the hospital, or called the police, or told *someone* right *then*... it would have made it all real. Every bit of it. And I can't let it be real. Because, you know, I always thought it had to be a *stranger* to do this to a woman. I never thought it could be a "friend."

But that's fine. It's fine. You know, I've got it under control. I'm fine, I'll just take care of it, and that'll be that, and we just won't speak of it. So I've been picking up extra shifts? So what? That is perfectly normal, thank you very much. I mean, I'm a teenager. I need stuff. That's not so unusual, right? I mean— Just four hundred dollars, I— I can have that in a few weeks, I— No, it's fine. I'm okay. I'm calm. I'm fine. Really.

But...

You see, the thing that nobody ever tells you about certain "problems," is that the farther along— I mean— you know, the longer you wait, the more expensive it is. So... by the time I was going to have the money, more weeks had passed, and the price had gone up. It's almost funny. I guess you can put a price on—

But, you know, that's fine, it's... It's not the end of the world, I— I'll be okay. I can get through this, I can ... I'll be...

Hey, you know, Mom— Mom has been, you know, she's getting stronger, and her tests look good, and she's, she's pulling right along, just— just watching funny movies, and playing with the dogs, and... and being a Mom to Megan and I.

So that's good. That's good news. That's something to celebrate, but, you know... for me— for both of us— time keeps on ticking, and... Sometimes, when I'm alone, and the steady beat of Mom's monitors tells me she's asleep, I go into my room, close my eyes, ball up my fist and... I just close my eyes, make a fist and... And then I stop, and I wait, listening for any sound in the hall, any sign that I'm not alone, that someone is watching over me, that someone might find out.

Megan's at work, or out with her friends, and Dad got out long before this became his problem. It's just the four of us tonight: Mom and her monitors, and me and my problem.

I hate you. I. Hate. You. I hate you for putting me through this. I hate you, who chose this, and I hate you for doing this to me now. And I hate... myself... for not doing anything about it. Well, there is plenty I can do about it. I can just go to the medicine cabinet right now and I can do something about it, I can— Is that Megan? Is she outside the door?

“Just a minute!”

No answer. Good. Nobody has to see. If I hide the marks under my clothes, then nobody has to see. Oh, they can check my wrists all they want. They won't find anything there. But my hips?

N—No, I can't. I can't do this. I— no. NO.

I'll just... I'll just breathe. And I'll—you know, I'll just take it one day at a time, and I'll just make a little trip out of town when it's time. Just another hospital in another town, and no one needs to know. Just breathe.

You know, between working and being there for Mom, time gets away from me. Days turn to weeks, and weeks into months. Mom grows thinner, and I... I mean it's perfectly normal for a girl my age to wear, you know, baggy clothes all the time. I mean, who doesn't love a hoodie three sizes too big? It makes you feel safe, you know?

Like wearing this big, squishy armor. Like having these arms wrapped around you. And anyway, this isn't about me. Okay? It's about Mom. It's about getting Mom well again, about getting her what she needs, and—

And time is getting small now. Any day now I'm going to make that trip to the hospital, and that will be it.

Mom's going downhill fast, but she's alert enough to ask me again, all slow and coherent, “Leah... are you pregnant?”

“No, ma'am.”

“You know you could tell me if you were, honey. We'd get through it together.”

“... No ma'am.”

The day arrives. I'm climbing in my truck by seven. I'm at the hospital by eight, and by noon... by noon a perfect little miracle has happened... for someone else's family.

I am trembling, and raw, but I can't stay here. I can't afford to waste any amount of time feeling sorry for myself, because my mother needs me, and if I don't get out of here right now and go to her... No, it's fine. I'm fine. I'll just take deep breaths... and think of the ocean. Just one breath after another... and think of the ocean.



SPECIAL / LION Navida Sulemi Roman Payne