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Things Unspoken

EVERYTHING THAT MOVES makes a sound, my mother told me once.

It was her response to a firestorm of test-cases, me running around our house pointing and saying, How about that? How about that?

Everything, she said.

Of course there are the obvious examples: feet stomping, drawers shutting, vibrations I can feel. But with other things—the ceiling fan, the flicking of switches and igniting of bulbs—I'm not so sure. Now, sitting bored on the floor behind the reception desk at her studio, I wonder if it's even true. I scan the room for traces of noise, but the students haven't shown up yet and everything is still.

Through the front window the neon sign flickers: YMEDACA EC-NADYDAL RIAF YM.

Maybe light really does make a sound. Or maybe she just said it to shut me up.

Noisy or not, the girly name isn't doing me any favors. It's bad enough I have to spend my afterschools at a dance studio, but I can't even pretend they're doing something cool back there—hip-hop, or that Spanish dancing where the partners look like they're going to punch each other—not with a name like that. The guys at school make fun of me: Chris-sy the sissy, Chris-sy the sissy.

Even my father used to say, Melinda, a dance studio is no place for a boy to be spending his time.

But he took off and my mom says his opinion doesn't count anymore. No, she says, you are only thirteen; I don't want you home alone that much.

From the outside this place is a dumpy storefront, occupying the better part of the strip mall across the road from our house. Inside it is clean and bright and people bring their kids even from East Somerton, two towns over, because my mom was a famous dancer in New York City until she got hurt and wasn't anymore.

At twenty-to-five the skeletons enter in a cloud of hairspray and gossip. My mother's best dancers. They are high school seniors, skinny skinny— their waists up too high, their necks too long, arms and legs drawn out like silly putty. Still, there is something about them that makes

me want to brush up against them when we pass in the hallway. But they never let me touch them.

I glance up at the old lady who mans the front desk. I didn't even notice her come in but now she is staring at me, blowing hot air in the shape of my name as if she hasn't known me since I was two, as if she has no idea I can't hear. I watch her blotchy cheeks expand and contract as she puffs out breath that smells like rotten fruit. She has chin hair.

Chris, move, I need to file these and you're in the way.

At My Fair Lady I usually am. I stand up and she dumps a stack of papers into the fat bottom drawer of the desk.

I dodge a cluster of preschoolers running manic in tutus, and turn the corner into the kitchen, where I jump up to sit on the counter. The skeletons are there, pretending to eat and monitoring how much they are each not eating. In school we learned about eating disorders, but doctors should take a look in here to witness this medical marvel: anorexia as a social event.

I swing my legs so the heels of my sneakers bang against the wood paneling of the cabinet doors. I know this makes a noise and that it's an annoying one.

Stop, Chris, you're giving us a headache, one says, like they have a single collective head I can inflict pain on.

How do you say, me and my boyfriend are gonna be together foreverrrr, in sign language? another one asks.

Like this, I say with my mouth. But with my hands I say, Your boyfriend wishes you had tits.

They copy my motion and giggle.

When I finish my homework I slip through the side door of the big classroom and into the bathrooms, scrub the toilets and spray Windex on everything else, reducing the time lag between when classes are finished and when we can go home. The girls are in ballet now, and I watch as they glissade diagonally across the room, two-by-two, Noah's ark meets *Attack of the Clones*—*sissonne-pas de chat-sissonne-pas de chat-sissonne-back pas de chat-plié-pirouette*. Over the years I've learned all the ballet terms there are to know. They are, after all, my mother's words.

At the end of the night my mother is sweaty, blond hair plastered to her head like the skin of an onion. The fabric of her shirt is almost see-through in the parts it's had to stretch across her pregnant belly.

Chris, carry that for me? She points to a box full of pink baby clothes. What is it?

Hand-me-downs, she says.

My mother doesn't know if the baby is a boy or a girl, and the box of frilly outfits makes me nervous. I stare. She points again, though we both know I've understood.

My mother doesn't know sign language. She read in her parenting magazines that kids who signed would never learn to speak. Then, after I'd learned both and proved her wrong, she declared signing unnecessary.

You talk. You read lips. What's the point?

I've spent my whole life reading her, filling the blanks of misunderstood speech with the meaning behind the twitch of her cheek, the crease above her left eyebrow. Now I've learned her completely, and she has only ever met me through my second language, our thoughts ordered in separate dictionaries.

WHEN WE GET HOME Greg is on the couch, relaxing, he calls it, except that he is still wearing his tie all the way up, tight around his neck. Greg is a schmuck. I know because I had a tie—the real kind, not a clip on—when my parents went to family court. Ties are not for relaxing.

Hiya, Sport, he says, which is another thing about him.

Hi, Schmuck, my hands say. My mouth just says, Hi, Greg.

Every night he turns off the captions on the TV and every night when I ask him to turn them back on he looks surprised, as if he forgot I lived here too, or expected me to come home from the studio *cured* and whistling a show tune.

Did you take care of your mother for me?

Not for you, my hands say. I scrubbed the toilets, I say out loud.

Good man, Greg says.

My mother sits down next to him on the couch, tries to pry a boot from her swollen ankle. Greg watches from the corner of his eye but does nothing, continues fondling the remote. I grab the boot and pull. It comes loose and the heel jabs me in the stomach.

Thank you, Chris, my mother says.

Good man, Greg says, and changes the channel.

GREG PASSES BY MY ROOM as I am getting into bed. He leans in the doorway, watching. His eyes are somehow softer than before and I consider paying attention to whatever he looks like he wants to say. His shoulders rise up, then drop down in a sigh.

Goodnight, Sport.

Schmuck. He grabs my doorknob and starts to pull.

No, no, I say, I need it open; I need to *see*.

Oh, right, Greg says. He stops but doesn't return the door to its original position and I stand in the shadows by my bed, waiting for him to go away so I can put things back the way they're supposed to be.

I wake in the middle of the night, knowing before I know. Lights on in other rooms, their glow meeting in the hallway outside my open door. Still I've learned not to get out of bed in these intermediary times, the hours that belong to grown-ups, times when fathers come home drunk and punch mothers in the jaw. I seal my eyelids down in fake sleep, though my eyes are still moving beneath them, giving me away. Then I feel my mother's clammy hand on my shoulder telling me it's okay to be awake.

It's time to go, she says.

I stumble around on unsteady morning feet looking for my sneakers, shins and furniture legs connecting in the dark. The sky is navy blue and the roads are empty. On the way to the hospital my mother breathes like she's been underwater for too long and I think please please please be a girl. A daughter with rubber band muscles and an ear for music. A daughter my mother can teach to dance, and make her smile her real smile again, the one with teeth she only shows by accident when she's laughing.

I'M IN A WAITING ROOM where they keep the expecting grandparents. They're wheeling my mom away and she is yelling at the receptionist, He's deaf, he's deaf, just so you know. The floor is overwaxed and the reflection of the lights in the tiles looks like flying saucers. I shuffle through stacks of magazines, the kinds that only exist in doctors' offices. What's Wrong With This Picture? What's Wrong With This Picture? After a while, all the pictures start to look ridiculous. What *is* wrong with having mismatched buttons on your raincoat, I think, and I feel cross-eyed. I fall asleep lying sideways in one of those extra-wide chairs made for fat people. Greg wakes me up.

Come see her.

I wonder if Her means my mother or if it means that the baby is out and it's a girl. I'm afraid to walk into the room but I do and my mother is sitting up in bed holding a big ball of blanket and it is *pink*.

Thank you! I actually say aloud and Greg and my mother look at me funny so I keep talking and say, How is everything, how do you feel, what are you going to name her?

We'll call her Skylar, for her big blue eyes.

Skylar is a word I've never said before. I test it out, rolling the syllables around on my tongue. I read once that babies' eyes can change color as they get older, but the name feels sweet in my mouth so I say nothing.

I FIGURE OUT Skylar is deaf long before everyone else. She and my mom come home from the hospital, and I spend lots of time in Skylar's freshly painted pink room, just looking at her. Once her eyes start to open wider she looks back at me, studies the whole room with an intensity I recognize. I hold her in the crook of my arm, sign a word or two with my other hand, and her eyes narrow and focus like the lens of a camera. I put her back in her cradle and clap behind her head, watch her not react. I think I should tell my mother, but when I get downstairs I find her in the kitchen among piles of flowered onesies and pastel stuffed animals. She is smiling. I go back to Skylar's room.

Just me and you, Sky, I say, my hands — useful in this house for the first time — stirring the air into motion. Don't worry. I've got you.

THEY FIND OUT at Skylar's six-month checkup. I sit in the waiting room, and when my mother comes out and tells me I clamp my back teeth together and think don't move a muscle, now is not the time to be talkative.

Impossible impossible impossible, she says over and over in the car.

When Greg comes home my mother hugs him and cries until her snot drips down the back of his shirt. I sit with Skylar and show her nursery rhymes. I tell her the one where the dish and the spoon take off together and she giggles like we are sharing a secret.

Don't worry, Greg says. We can fix this.

SOON SKYLAR'S TINY HANDS begin to form baby-talk signs of their own. I love watching my words on her fingertips. Eat, she says. Eat, more, drink, more. Mom. Mom, mom. Dad. Chris, she says, her hand crunched into a "C" and pressed against her chest. Chris. It's her clearest sign of all.

I HAVE TO TALK TO YOU, my mother says one night, and I think shit shit they've mailed home my report card. I follow her into her bedroom and she makes me sit down. I am waiting for her to say no video games for a week, but instead she starts talking about her dancing.

The way I hurt myself in the ballet was not an accident, she says.

Oh no, I say, because I recognize this kind of story; it's a *tactic*. But she seems to think I'm just worried about her old ballet injury and keeps going.

I was going to be the next big thing in the New York City Ballet, she says. She tells me how she'd gotten the attention of the gray-haired Russians in the audition hall that winter, that she'd been selected to dance the principal duet with an already famous Latino man-dancer, that she was going to be famous, too. I know this part of the story.

But the other girls were jealous. They starved themselves; they ate toilet paper and vomited and got even thinner. They cut skinnier girls' hair at night, just enough so the victims couldn't form the mandatory bun without shorter parts slipping out from under the elastic and pins. In the mornings after, they'd slouch against the bathroom wall and watch the unsuspecting girl try to pull her hair up, then catch her eyes in the mirror, flashing victorious smiles.

In this world of scissors and secrets, my mother should have known to look inside her pointe shoes for acts of sabotage. Instead, when she stepped into the pink satin during her quick-change in dress rehearsal, the razor blades standing at attention inside met her flesh and left her big toes flayed open like a pink pair of raw sausages. They healed eventually, but she never recovered.

I'm telling you this so you can understand, she says. We're going to get Skylar a cochlear implant.

This whole time I have been silent but now I feel myself yelling, You can't, you can't, they'll drill a hole in her skull!

We have an appointment at the clinic next week, she says. Everything will be okay.

Skylar is not like you, I want to say. Skylar is perfect. But the words shrivel inside my mouth and I think I might throw up so I run down the hall into the bathroom and stand with my face over the toilet. Nothing happens, and my mother doesn't come after me.

I want to get out of the house and I look around and why the hell do I always lose my goddamn sneakers? When I find them, I pull them on and slink from room to room, trying to pin down the location of my mother and Greg. I've memorized every place I've gotten caught before and I avoid all the loose floorboards. I peek back in my mother's room, where she is sitting on her bed matching socks, the phone squeezed between her shoulder and chin.

I know, Mom, she says. So I keep watching, trying to guess what my grandma might be saying to her, hoping that she'll tell my mother that Skylar is, that we are, fine. My mother is holding in her crying now, her nose red and flaring at the tip.

And to think, she says. All this time I thought it was Him.

She rubs her forehead with the heel of her hand. As surprised as my mother is that she carries the silence in her own veins, I am just as shaken by the reminder that I have my father's angry blood inside of me.

I feel jittery again and remember I was on my way downstairs and out the front door but instead find myself walking toward Skylar's room. She's asleep in her crib and I pick her up and throw her extra blanket over my shoulder.

OUTSIDE WITH SKYLAR the air is cool and I feel better. We can go anywhere we want, Sky, I tell her, but it's dark and she's asleep, and even I know I'm lying. I wait for a gap in the headlights and run across the highway, Skylar's perfect little head bobbing against my shoulder. At the strip mall I decide I am never going in that stupid dance school ever again, which I prove by walking past a few times, up and down the sidewalk and around the parking lot. Then I get up a little closer for a quick look. I pull on the door handle, jiggling it hard; I kick the bottom metal part and hurt my toe. I turn around to go home. But then I *feel* the place behind me, with the big ugly MY FAIR LADY flashing out a rhythm that looks like a laugh, and I can't let it get away with that. I hoist Skylar up higher, feel her breath quicken against my neck. Then I take a rock from the parking lot— a chunk of tar and gravel and dirt that's rough in my palm— throw it hard, and SMASH the front window. I lurch backward to keep my balance, then reach through the broken glass and release the lock on the other side, let us in.

I know there is a burglar alarm and we don't have a lot of time, so I go straight into the studio and swing my free hand through the giant stack of CDs in the corner, smash them too, jumbo-sized Jenga. I pick one off the top of the pile and slide it into the expensive stereo system. There are a lot of levers and dials and I just turn them all up to where they stop twisting; the music is pounding and I wonder how dancers find all that grace inside this violence. I lay down in front of the speaker and the sound ripples on my windbreaker and up my spine. Skylar, pressed against me, doesn't wake up. Music banging hard inside my rib cage, music like a heart attack. Red siren light streaks along the spidered glass and the vibration swells through my chest and up into hers. The room swirls and flashes and smells like feet, and I breathe in the bass line, squeeze my eyes shut and wait for someone to find me.