

## Sam

Last June, which was exactly one month after my eleventh-and-a-half birthday, Mom moved us to Tucson, Arizona. This was the beginning of the end of my childhood. I was disappointed to discover the end of childhood didn't mean the beginning of adulthood. If I'd known all this before everything happened, I would have tried to enjoy myself more when I was younger.

The day the taxi dropped my mom, Audrey—that's my sister—and me in front of the Oasis Apartments, the asphalt on the drive was spongy and so hot I thought my Jellies would melt. I looked around for the swimming pool promised by a big sign above the office on which a woman in a faded red bathing suit is diving into blue neon. The glare of white peeling paint made my eyes water.

"Where's the pool?" I asked. Audrey picked up on the whine in my voice and kicked me in the leg. She was wearing the yellow flip-flops that matched her toenail polish, so it didn't hurt my leg as much as it hurt my feelings.

Mom didn't say anything, didn't defend me, scold, or try to make a joke out of it. Just lugged the single suitcase stuffed with everything we'd brought from home through the door of our unit.

"But there is supposed to be a swimming pool," I whispered.

Audrey pinched me on the arm. "Just deal with it," she said, giving me the look, head tilted to one side, eyes bulging, that was supposed to make me consider Mom's feelings. But back then I had no clue how Mom might be feeling and only a vague idea of why we'd left my father and our perfectly nice home in Santa Rosa.

In the dim light coming through the dusty windows, I saw the ratty furniture, chipped Formica dinette, broken-down couch, balding overstuffed armchair, all of it smelling like accumulated old crud, and I was painfully aware of how far down we'd fallen. I was also aware that it had been my mother's choice to leave, not mine, that it wasn't my fault, but I was being punished for it anyway, that I had feelings too, but nobody was being particularly considerate of me, and that I had just been pinched for no reason. I started to cry.

Mom has a little scar just under her lip where she sliced it on a chipped glass. It's about the size and shape of a fingernail cutting, and it turns from white to pink when she's hot or happy or sad or about to explode.

It was turning pink right then.

"I'm sorry, Sammy," she said. "This is the very best we can do. It's just temporary." But she didn't sound sorry, didn't hug me, or hold my face between her hands like she sometimes does. Audrey glared at me and flopped down on the couch, dust poofing all around her. She pretended not to notice.

That very day I began keeping lists in a notebook I'd tucked in my backpack along with a half-dozen paperbacks I'd already read, but could re-read in case of an emergency, which this clearly was.

At the top of the page I wrote Santa Rosa. On one side I wrote Advantages and, on the other, Disadvantages. On the Advantages side, I wrote Dad. Other things on that side included my kittens, Willy and Nilly, Tammy Gardener and her swimming pool, and my stuffed animal collection, which was resting on my four-poster bed back in Santa Rosa. On the list I put my bedroom filled with early American-style maple furniture, my desk with a lamp shaped like a spinning wheel that really spun when you turned the handle. The desk had a matching chair upholstered in pale blue velveteen to match my eyes. The walls were lavender, my favorite color, and the dresser was covered with a crochet scarf made specially for me by my grandmother. My closet was full of clothes, lots with cool labels. Most of these are still hanging there because we left in such a hurry, taking with us only the one big old suitcase. Mom promised we'd get new clothes when we got to where we were going. That was a big fat lie.

On the top of the Disadvantages list, I also wrote Dad. From time to time that summer, I would add and subtract and rearrange the items on this list.

In the motor court apartment there's only one bedroom. Audrey and I sleep in the twin beds there, and Mom sleeps on the Hide-a-Bed in the living room. For a while, this sleeping arrangement, me in the same room with Audrey and Mom so close by, was the only item on the advantage side of the Tucson list that I also started keeping that day.

In back of the apartment, which Mom calls our bungalow to make it sound all cozy, there's a little yard, just blank dirt, not even fenced in. In front of the court there's a kidney-shaped island, the missing swimming pool, covered with white quartz rock and cactuses and scraggly bushes covered with gray fuzzy balls the exact size and shape of belly button lint.

Eventually I learned the names for all of these plants, but that first day, all I knew was I could not touch them or climb them or smell them the way I could the trees in Santa Rosa. I also learned that between the hours of 10 and 4, it hurts to look at that white quartz rock, and plants you don't have to water provide very little shade and no comfort.

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The first night in the apartment we slept on top of our coats because we didn't have any room in the suitcase for extras like sheets and towels. All night long I could feel the cooties crawling over me. Next morning, you could tell nobody had slept that good. Though I didn't mention the cooties, I'm pretty sure I wasn't the only one bothered by them.

After breakfast Mom announced that we'd have to buy sheets and towels right away, and I remember thinking Merwyns or Penneys or at least Target, right—

Wrong!

"The manager says there's a thrift shop just around the corner," Mom informed us. Of course Audrey got all excited, thinking vintage, and I was wondering if there'd be used books, but believe me, New 2 U Bargain Center was not what either of us had in mind.

Now I'm a thrift store expert, but back then, it was a shock when we first walked into New 2 U—the yellow walls, not a bright cheery yellow, but the dingy-yellow newspapers get after they've been sitting in the driveway for a week while you're on vacation. And there was a certain smell, like moldy bread, that was hard to take when you're not used to it.

So the three of us are just standing there, surrounded by things you can't imagine anyone actually buying: red leather cowboy boots with cracked, turned-up toes—\$3.50—, assorted straw and cloth hats—75 cents—, racks of used clothes, but nothing old or cool enough to be called vintage.

"Good morning," my mother says to a woman behind the counter who's doing a crossword puzzle.

The woman, eyes magnified behind humongous rhinestone-studded glasses, looks up, surprised. "Oh! Dear me. I didn't hear you come in. Can I help you find anything special?"

She stands up, and Audrey whispers, "Looks like she's her own best customer."

Mother glares at us, the little scar under her lip turning pink, and we pretend to examine a pair of crusty Nikes, tongues hanging out like a couple of tired old dogs—\$2.

"No thanks," Mom says. "We're just looking."

"Take your time," the woman says, all smiles. "Have a good look around. Sometimes you don't know what you need until you see it."

Mom wanders towards the back of the store and I poke Audrey in the arm, whisper, "What kind of people buy this junk?"

"Shut up." she says.

"I was just . . ."

"Shut up." This time she gives me a pinch, and I see what she sees—Mom examining a plastic bucket.

"Only 25 cents," she calls out. Then it hits me. People who buy this junk are people like us. And for the first time I realize we're poor now. A hollow spot in my chest opens up wide, and all I want to do is run out of the store, away from the smell of mildew and the ugly yellow light, but Mom is pointing to a stack of sheets.

"Pick out the ones you want," she says, placing the bucket on the counter.

We start to go through the stack, and I can tell Audrey is feeling just as weird as I am. "I'd rather sleep on my coat," I say.

"Just pick out some sheets, and shut your mouth."

"But look!" I point out some kind of dribble on one of the sheets. "What do you

think that is?"

"Rat piss, I hope."

"You hope?"

"Could be worse," she says, but I don't know how.

Mom comes over then, holding up a T-shirt. "What do you think, Sammy? It's your size."

And I can't help myself. I start to cry.

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For the entire month of June, most of July, and a good part of August, we ate beans and rice, a complete protein, Mom informed us. We ate other things too, I guess, but it was the rice and chalky canned beans, Rosarita refried to be exact, that stuck in my mind, not to mention my throat.

Our kitchen is tiny, like a kitchen in a doll's house. The stove has only two burners and one little oven. In Santa Rosa, we had a range with four burners and a grill, two ovens, a microwave, a dishwasher, garbage disposal, built-in small appliance garage with a Cuisinart, blender, and a juicer.

Mom didn't miss her kitchen one bit. She said, "No time to cook, anyway." She had gotten a job as a telemarketer almost the first day in town and was working 8 to 5 with overtime when she could get it. But I missed the food she cooked in that great big kitchen in Santa Rosa. Missed the steak, chops, meat loaf, potatoes, salads, and at least one vegetable every night, unless Dad, who sold real estate, was working late. Then we ate Weight Watchers lasagna, take-out Chinese, raviolis from the deli, but never Rosarita refried beans. And I missed my Mom, who was no longer a full-time Mom. Even when she got home from work, she seemed only part-time.

There are five other apartments in the court, each a separate little brick unit, with a red tile roof overhang and cement stoop. One by one, I got to know which people actually lived there and which were just passing through the court to get to Miracle Mile.

Besides Audrey and me, the only other kid is Chablee Le Jardin. Her mom,

whose name is Eden, is a little younger than my mom and pretty in a way that mine is not—my mom's a natural beauty, which means no eye shadow, and her fingernails are her own. Eden's white, like us, but Chablee's what Mom calls café au lait.

After they became friends, Eden would bring a six-pack of beer over on her nights off, then Mom and she would pull two kitchen chairs out back and sit in the dark talking until the six-pack was long gone and Audrey, Chablee, and I had been sent to bed. On those hot summer nights, I'd sit by the bedroom window, cheek pressed against the rusty screen, and listen to their whispers, soft and fluttery like the pages of an open book turning in the breeze.

Chablee is just about halfway between Audrey and me in age, but when we started school last fall, we ended up in the same 7th-grade class. Although she was held back a year, it wasn't because she's dumb. In many ways, Chablee is smarter than me, smarter than Audrey, and even last June she already had breasts.

After all the trouble, I moved Chablee over to the Advantages of Tucson side of my list, but that didn't happen for a long time. No, for a long time, she was on the opposite side. That's because she and Audrey were all buddy-buddy and didn't want me around. They did take me on their so-called picnics in the cemetery, but only so I'd keep my mouth shut about it.

The cemetery is just down the street and big enough that we could spend an afternoon there without being noticed. Most people would be creeped out by the thought of a picnic in a cemetery. I was at first, but it's the only place nearby with real grass and trees. We didn't tell Mom about the cemetery because last summer, we were not supposed to leave the court while she was at work. We didn't tell Mom lots of things last summer. Audrey said, "Don't bother her unless we absolutely have to. She's got a lot on her mind."

Even though I had a lot on my mind too, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. And really, there was nothing wrong with going to the cemetery. When you think about it, a cemetery is a pretty safe place to be—safer than the Oasis Apartments, safer than Santa Rosa.

Mom had sold our car so we could leave Santa Rosa, so we never went

anywhere unless we walked or took the bus. I had no idea how big Tucson is, or that there's a zoo and a botanical garden and a university or that there are pine forests, cool and green, on top of the mountains rising up in every direction. For months, my world was just the court, the cemetery, and the street we walked every Saturday to get to the grocery store. It's called The Miracle Mile.

It's a miracle all right—a miracle that we weren't robbed or worse.

Last summer, I hated Saturday mornings. I remember the very first one. We had gotten up early so we could be back with our groceries before the real heat set in. But in Tucson, in summer, the real heat sets in the minute the sun comes up. By the time we're on the return trip, each of us carrying two plastic bags of groceries, the sun is burning the east sides of our bodies. Because I'm small for my age, I get the lightest bags. Even so, when the sweat drips and stings my eyes, I just have to let them sting. As cars swish by, they work up little whirlwinds of dust that stick to my sweaty legs and settle in my sweat-soaked hair. We are walking, heads down, past Tropicana Adult Hotel and Bookstore. A man, bundled up in hooded sweatshirt despite the heat, is curled in the doorway.

"That's a crackhead," Audrey whispers out of the side of her mouth.

"How do you know?" I whisper back.

"I've seen pictures," she says, so I know she doesn't know squat about any crackheads.

A woman in a pink velvet halter top and vinyl shorts is standing in the very last slice of shade alongside a building with a big sign in the window: Freddy's Fast Cash \* Paychecks Cashed Here. She stares at us like we just climbed out of a spaceship.

"Good morning," Mom says, and I want to crawl under the sidewalk. This is Miracle Mile. This is why I hate Saturday mornings.

When we get back to the court, nearly dead from sunstroke, I see Chablee for the first time. She's sitting on the stoop in front of her apartment eating a handful of Kellogg's Mini Frosted Wheats right out of the box and drinking a diet Coke. Her face looks like it's carved out of a big chunk of solid milk chocolate, perfect and smooth, but her hair's a mess, sticking out all over her head like clumps of broccoli. She's still

in her nightgown, which is the silky type I've always wanted but am not allowed to own. She's got boobs. I can see their outline under the thin nightie, and I'm wondering how old she is.

I guess Mom and Audrey don't notice her sitting there because they go right inside. But I hold back, hoping she might say hi, invite me to share her box of Mini Frosted Wheats, not that I'm hungry.

"Hey girl, what you looking at?" she says in a snotty voice.

"Nothing much," I say just as snotty and start to go inside.

"Wait a minute." She sets the cereal box aside and gets up from the stoop. "Where are you going? Did I say you should go someplace?"

I consider running, then set my grocery bags down to free my hands just in case, though I have no idea how that can possibly help my situation, given that Chablis is twice my size. I give her a look that's supposed to say, you're nothing more than a bug, or a speck of dust, a look I've practiced but never delivered until that moment.

"What's your name, girl?"

My mom had told us not to talk to strangers and under no circumstances were we to tell anyone our names, but she'd failed to prepare me for this situation.

"I asked your name. Can't you talk, girl?"

The sun's beating down hard on the bare skin where my hair parts, and I know the way I handle this situation will determine the course of my life on Earth for a very long time. At this point, a fruity voice drifts from inside the chocolate girl's apartment.

"Chablee? Chablee, baby, bring your mama a glass of water, would you sweetie-pie?"

As if by magic, this big bully, this uncombed girl with breasts, who is allowed to eat Kellogg's Frosted Mini-Wheats and diet coke for breakfast—no way a complete protein—drills me with a last hateful glare and runs into the dark entry, drawn there by a voice so sweet, so loving, that it could only belong to the mother of a beloved princess.



Then I hear my own mother yell. "Get in here, Sammy! You've got the milk and it's going to spoil."

I pick up my grocery bags. My mother didn't used to sound so cranky.

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