

Little Mel

Advil, Motrin, Aleve. My eyes keep scanning down the aisle... *Dayquil*, and right next to it, *Nyquil*. I swear under my breath. Stupid store... where else could they possibly keep the Tylenol? As I push my cart with the squeaky wheel down the epoxy-coated floor, Little Mel squirms and nestles further into me, her tiny body shifting against my skin. "Well, Ma," she says with her best lecturing voice, "It's your own fault you forgot to bring some with you."

I shush her, fingers to my lips. It's also my fault that I'm here in a different state, with no friends, no family, and no local Kroger where the bright red Tylenol always sits conspicuously next to the sinister blue Advil, but I'd rather not dwell on that depressing truth. Little Mel constantly reminds me, though. I stole away from home only a few days ago, though it feels like it's been forever. A week before I finally decided to leave, Little Mel found her voice. Now she never shuts up.

"You could always buy the store brand, you know. It's the same active ingredient. I don't get why you're so picky," Little Mel says, drumming her tiny heels against my ribs. I can practically hear the eyeroll in her voice.

"For your sake, I would never," I retort. I sigh and lean against the plastic shopping cart handle, staring blankly at the bag of apples and the pre-cut slice of apple pie I'd already tossed in there. Maybe I should return to the grocery section and swap out the slice for an entire pie.

Under the glaring fluorescent lights, my headache grows into a bloody crescendo. I grit my unbrushed teeth and rub my hands across my crusty eyes. If I don't get my Tylenol, there's no chance I'll be able to sleep tonight, even if Mel lets me. I would ask one of the workers here, but they've all got such a dead look in their eyes that scream minimum wage and student debt, that I don't dare approach any of them.

Little Mel suddenly kicks my stomach, hard, drawing from me a low groan. "Don't look now, but that guy two aisles down is staring at you."

Rubbing my gut, I flick my eyes to the right, and there he is, executing that tricky maneuver where you try to study a stranger without having them know. He's just a skinny kid, probably not much older than me. For a moment, I'm almost grateful for the hours spent in my musty car and for the disorienting, sleepless nights, because the wrinkles that cover my stained, smelly shirt are enough to turn my body into a shapeless and unsuspecting lump, guarding it from prying questions posed by judgemental people.

"Not bad, huh?" Little Mel snickers, the suggestion in her words clear. "Actually, I'd say he's pretty cute."

My face scrunches into a scowl, and I spin around and head towards the cash registers on the far end of the store, my cart going *squeaksqueaksqueak* as I march on double-time. I can't stay here anymore; maybe there'll be a better organized pharmacy somewhere nearby. Little Mel of all people should know that pretty cute guys my age should not be something to feel happy about.

“Nope, not attractive at all,” I tell her. “And I definitely don’t like that premature beard-thing he’s got going on there.”

Mel disapproves. “Come on, Ma. Just because Dad had one of those on his ugly face doesn’t mean you have to be turned off by *every* bearded guy who looks at you. Not everyone’s gonna be as dirty as Jamie was.”

With my matted brown hair and plum-purple rings under both my eyes, I highly doubt Beardie is interested in me, so I ignore her, trying to focus all my energy into pushing the cart forward. I consider just ditching the entire thing, but I want my apples, and I’m not sure if I can carry both Little Mel and my purchases. She’s getting so heavy, too heavy for my insomniac self.

A display of stuffed elephants catches my eye. Little Mel must see them too, because she kicks me in the ribs and commands me to stop. “We need an elephant right now,” she says, her voice laced with the threat of pain if I disagree.

I sigh heavily, and Little Mel moves up and down with my labored breath like a buoy bobbing amongst the waves. “Honey, you know we can’t afford to spend money on nice things like elephants,” I tell her with only a trace of sarcasm. I can feel my shallowly covered anxieties rapidly flowing through me once more, and I really, really don’t want to think about my skeleton of a plan moving forward. A young girl with no connections, barely any money, and touting around a growing responsibility two hundred miles from home was not something I had ever planned to be. Caring for Little Mel was going to be impossible.

Once again, that terrible, terrible idea, the one that spoke unfeeling reason, crept into my mind.

Little Mel knows what’s going on, because she stops whining about the elephants and stays so still and silent that I instinctively tighten my arms around her to make sure she’s still okay. I snatch an elephant from the shelf and hold it against her, hoping she can feel the softness of its cheap polyester lining. “Honey, you know Ma loves you,” I say, my tongue struggling against the words. “We’re going to figure this out together, and whatever happens will be for the best. For both of us.”

“Yeah, right. We’ll see about that, hmm?” Little Mel finally retorts. She starts pounding my ribs again, her tiny legs driving her judgement into me with every kick, but stops when she hears Beardie strolling up to us.

“That’s so sweet, how you talk to your baby like that,” he says. “Boy or girl?”

Little Mel turns, and without looking, I can feel her expecting stare. I guess I should’ve worn something even baggier, something even more filthy. Beardie’s mouth is turned up in a calm smile, like he knows what a generic question this is but will nevertheless listen to the answer so he can continue slaughtering me with his questions. *Oh, really! How many months? Does she have a name? How old are you, anyway?*

My back aches.

“It’s a girl. Four-and-a-half months. Her name is Mel,” I say, my voice coming out curt and disinterested. Little Mel kicks me in reproach.

“Oh, really!” Beardie smiles and his eyebrows lift comically, highlighting just how open and unburdened his features are. His teeth are white and straight, and I feel my own yellow, jagged teeth and feel my chest twist.

He shuffles his sneakered feet a couple of times. “By the way, I heard you talking aloud back there. I found a thing of Tylenol, and it’s for you if you’d like it.” He reaches out his hand, where a beautiful box of the pills sits nestled in his sweaty palm. He continues, “They were running really low, so if you need more, they’re tucked away at the end of aisle seventeen. Or I’d be happy to get it for you.”

He shrugs good-naturedly. For a moment I only gape at him, then Little Mel knees my side with her rod-like legs, and I take the Tylenol. Beardie’s ears turn nearly as red as the cardboard box. I almost smile.

“Don’t be rude,” Little Mel whispers. “Thank him already. And talk to him. Please.”

Beardie offers his hand, which is soft and warm and fits very neatly against my own. His grip is shallow, like shaking hands is something he’s only recently learned how to do. “My name’s Jamie,” he says.

As soon as I hear Mel’s father’s name, Beardie’s hand somehow turns deathly cold. I can’t think straight.

“I know a Jamie,” I say, and Mel cries out in disgust.

Beardie smiles like a dog about to lose its meal. His ears color a shade closer to the Tylenol. “Oh. I’m guessing he’s your boyfriend?”

I look back down at the Tylenol in my hand and the elephant tucked under my arm, and I’m thinking that I’ll need both if I’m going to sleep tonight.

I know exactly what kind of answer Little Mel wants me to give this red-eared boy standing in the grocery store aisle in front of me, but I’m too, too tired. Nothing will change the fact that we’re both just kids, and I’m on a desperate mission and am in no position to date. Nothing will change the fact that no guy—especially a kid fresh out of his teenage years, would want to help raise a child. And it’s then that I finally realize how ridiculous it is for me to pretend that not all is lost, to pretend I can still figure out how to care for Mel.

So I tell Beardie Jamie that it’s time for us to go, that Mel and I have got a very important doctor’s appointment coming up. Jamie’s smile falters, but he doesn’t make a sound as I chuck the elephant back on the shelf and back away with nothing but the Tylenol.

“You’re just a big baby, you know that?” Little Mel snaps as we reach the cash registers. “You can’t give up now. Go back and try harder to work some charm on Jamie.”

“Honey, I need you to stop talking,” I say. I’m surprised at how resolute my voice sounds, and I know it’s not just my imagination because Mel doesn’t say another word.

The pimply high schooler manning the register takes my crinkled bill with a blank look. I remember how Mel’s father told me to shut up when I first broke the news to him, four months ago now, though it seems like it’s been an eternity. The memory makes me clench my Tylenol so tightly that the seal on the cardboard box crumples open, and I quite nearly tear it in

half trying to get to the plastic bottle inside. As I walk out the automated glass doors, I choke down a pill, imagining my fatigue and my headache and Mel's voice disappearing into the bold blue sky, leaving me utterly, lonesomely free.