

THERE IS NO CHILD HERE

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Kathryn Hull turns into the school parking lot and is sucked into a vortex of SUVs and minivans, parents trying to retrieve their children. The line of cars stretches down McCormack Street.

A flood of children pours out, racing toward yellow buses and loving parents parked along the road leading to the school. Not one of those children climbs into her car because Kathryn Hull's son, Mason, was run over when his dad was backing out of the driveway fifteen days ago.

It's chaos as the children race past the attendees with their orange vests and their pleas not to run. "Use your walking feet!" A little girl in pigtails goes screaming past Kathryn's car, dragging her backpack as it bounces off the pavement. Kathryn watches in her side mirror as the little girl boards the bus. The only thing she can see in front of her is the backside of a huge white Lincoln. The stick-family car decals line the back window like paper dolls. There's even one of the family dog.

The driver of the Lincoln pops her perfect blonde head out to greet another mom walking up to the school. They begin chatting through their white-strip smiles, all ponytails and yoga pants, oblivious to the line of cars waiting behind them. No one honks. It's an unspoken rule on school grounds. No one wants to be that mom who honks. Kathryn considers honking, just a polite tap. She wants to be that impatient mom, the one who occasionally cusses without apology, the one who acts like a human being in front of her child. Her hand hovers above the horn.

“Gimme a break,” Kathryn says, as the line begins lurching forward again. The blonde ducks back inside while the other mom scampers off. Kathryn was never one of those moms. She’d always preferred blue jeans to yoga pants and the only club she belongs to is Sam’s.

The line moves slowly today, perhaps the slowest it’s ever moved, Kathryn thinks. She drums the steering wheel with her fingers. She’s waited in the pick-up line patiently, through good and bad moods, through rain and snow. The daily routine. She and Mark had decided once they had kids she would stay home. Daycare seemed irresponsible. The thought of sending a baby off with strangers was unthinkable. Not after the miscarriages and all it took to finally have one. “We’re better parents than that,” she’d said to him.

He’s probably a better dad than a husband, she thinks, as she adjusts the volume on the radio. He’d walk through the door asking, “Where’s my partner?” and Mason, all giggles and bounce, would race into his arms. Mark’s not a bad man, but she has trouble understanding how a good man runs over his son. It’s tragic—that’s what people say. And time—they tell her to give it time—as if the tragedy will decrease in size given a certain amount of waiting. She doesn’t think so.

Their marriage has been the biggest tragedy up until now: an eight year battle as they fought to get to some golden anniversary destination, hallmarked by the kind of home other people drive by and wish was their own, proof to the world that Mark and Kathryn could make it work. All they had to show for it was sacrifices and debt. Seemed romantic when other people did it.

Now all Kathryn can think of is the emergency fund envelope tucked in her underwear drawer. The one she stashes loose cash in case of a car or appliance repair. The one she now thinks of as an escape fund. There’s enough there to get started, sign a lease and buy enough time to find a job. A few calls and she could get back into the swing of things. Who could blame the mother of the dead boy for wanting a fresh start?

But the thought of Mark Hull alone frightens her. How would he continue to live if both his son and wife left him? There are commitments between them, ones she notices every time she writes her last name or

glimpses her wedding ring. The word “vows,” cringe-worthy now, had only felt like a childhood pact, something meant to be stepped through to move on into adulthood. There was no mention in these vows of “until death” when referring to children.

Kathryn understands the harsh reality that Mark probably can't go on without her. She also understands that she probably can't go on living like this, either.

A woman trying to herd twin boys to their car walks by Kathryn and gives a quick glance. Kathryn has been getting a lot of these lately. It's been two weeks of enduring *looks* from neighbors, but she's already tired of their stares, as if they are waiting to see how the dead boy's family crumbles. Like a grand experiment. She considers getting out of the car and walking across the parking lot, stepping between the twin boys and asking, “What am I supposed to do? My husband killed the only reason I have to get out of bed.”

Kathryn doesn't get out of the car to ask that mom questions no one could possibly answer. She lets her drive away and sits there alone in the pick-up line, slowly lurching forward.

The sympathy lilies haven't begun to wilt yet. Mason's room, untouched. She can't bring herself to even open the door. She wonders if it would be easier to carve out a place in her body, perhaps the soft spot below her ribs, empty the flesh and remove all the things she no longer wishes to carry with her.

Kathryn hasn't been paying attention. She slams on the brakes and barely avoids rear-ending the Lincoln, who has stopped to gab again. Collisions happen in the pick-up line. Crumpled minivan bumpers and soccer moms circling each other in cockfight strut, flapping their arms and circling around the damage.

Kathryn taps the horn. Everyone stops and looks as if by command. The code of silence broken. She sees the woman in the Lincoln's hand-raising expression of annoyance. Kathryn is quick to apologize. But there's no one in the car to witness this, no child in the backseat to reassure that everything's okay.

Mark was driving his truck when it happened. He'd backed out without even

looking, hardly noticing the tiny bump beneath the back wheel and then again as the front tire rolled over Mason's body. Halfway down the driveway he looked back up and saw Mason there motionless, his arms at his side and head twisted looking away from Mark.

When Mark carried him through the front door, Kathryn could only stare at Mason. Her eyes fixed on the dark smudge right on the apple of Mason's cheek.

They held him together, sprawled out across the kitchen floor, waiting for help to arrive. She half-dreamed in those moments that it was her who'd been run over by the impossible weight of those tires, the braille-like tread pressing down on her skin. The only sounds they made huddled together were the weary, tortured sounds of grief.

The hardest thing to get used to has been the silence: Mason, the creator of noise and laughter, the tiny voice speaking her name into being.

What she wouldn't give to hear Mason ask her for a juice box or pull him into her arms and smell his hair, that sunshine scent lifting her slightly off the ground. He was a small boy, below average for his age, but so was she. She told him he wouldn't always be so small. These unfulfilled promises a mother makes to her son, cracked her wide open.

Long after they'd wrenched the boy from his mother's arms, Kathryn Hull lay awake wondering who was supposed to be watching Mason that day. Mark thought Mason was inside with her; she thought Mason was going for a ride with daddy. It became a shared blame that left both speculating how the other could have been so irresponsible.

Kathryn wished it had been her, but that was easy and it would always be Mark behind the wheel looking back up to see Mason there in the driveway. All she really knew was some things are harder to live through than die from. Losing a child is one of these things.

There is no escape for Kathryn Hull. The line of cars is too long and it would be impossible to try and do a u-turn, not with the steady traffic of parents leaving with their kids.

Kathryn is almost to the front of the line when she notices the woman in the orange vest and clipboard walking up to her window. She's

never gotten this far down the line without having Mason fastened in the backseat.

At first Kathryn tries not to make eye contact, avoiding the glow of the vest. The woman stares at Kathryn trying to get her attention, and then mouths something she cannot hear. She hopes the lady will leave her alone. Don't they know she's been through enough?

They do not.

The attendee approaches her and goes as far as to knuckle tap the car window like a traffic cop asking for license and registration. Kathryn rolls the window down halfway.

"Name and class."

Kathryn considers this for a moment. Mason Hull. Mrs. Applegate's kindergarten class. Is his name still on the attendance sheet? Has Mrs. Applegate removed his name from her roster already, the same Mrs. Applegate who sobbed loudly at the funeral even though it had only been the third week of school? In the short time Mason has been in her class, how could she possibly have learned anything sob worthy about her son? Did she know how he sang the "Five Little Monkeys" song when riding in the car or the way he cocked his head to the side when searching for things to pray to God about before bed? The whole time she'd listened to this woman mourn her son as if he were her own. It made Kathryn want to strangle her. Anything to make the weeping stop.

Kathryn stares blankly at the pickup attendee's silver whistle dangling from her neck. She wonders what the worst thing that's ever happened to her was. Has she heard about Mason, the boy who was run over by his dad? She thinks about asking the woman her advice while she's got her attention—what would you do if you were me?

Mark is probably on his way home right now. They already replaced his truck. A man called them after he'd heard about the accident and offered to buy it. Acted like he was doing them a favor. *This actually happens*, she thought at the time. Vultures disguised as people, offering cash.

Kathryn pretends to be confused as she glances at her watch. She thinks about Mark. He's pulling in right now and pressing the button for the automatic garage door. He's somewhere above the place her son died,

and then he's in the garage, climbing out of the car and sliding his dress shoes off and putting them on the shoe rack alongside Mason's sneakers. He'll pull up a chair at the kitchen table and wait there, face planted in his hands like he's spent every evening since that day. The funeral, that's all the time he took off. They offered more and he turned them down. He said he needed to work and she marveled at the luxury of such distractions.

Kathryn doesn't ask the attendee to check the list on her clipboard, to flip through the pages of names before going to the classroom where her son won't be, the confused look on Mrs. Applegate's face when the woman in the orange vest asks where Mason is, and the simple response: He's gone.

"Oh gosh, it's Tuesday, isn't it? It's my husband's day to pick him up. He must've..." Kathryn trails off, that reassuring shrug like *I'm one of those moms, the one with too much on her mind, the kind who forgets her kid*. But she hasn't and won't forget her son.

The attendee gives her a glance, the one she reserves for flighty, irresponsible parents. The feeling begins to sink in and Kathryn knows she doesn't belong in this line.