Kailyn McCord

Can I Visit?

I am moving to Akiachak, Alaska. I know nothing about Alaska. I know especially nothing about Akiachak. I am moving to follow my fiancé, Cameron. He teaches math, has been in the village six months already, is home in Portland for the summer. We will go back to Alaska together in the fall. I will write and substitute; he will teach and mostly support us. Akiachak is remote, accessible by bush plane and boat, population five hundred and almost entirely Native Alaskan, save for the teachers, who are almost all white. We leave at the end of August. It's June now.

I read about Alaska, about the bush, about rural village life. I listen to an episode of Radiolab, "Adoptive Couple vs. Baby Girl," which explains something called ICWA (pronounced ick-wah), short for the Indian Child Welfare Act. It's a law passed in the 70s, intended to address the record number of Native children being removed from their homes. It was a milestone for Native communities, continues to determine federal policy to the present day.

Cameron talks about what the ICWA means in Akiachak, how it functions on a practical level. Someone reports to the Office of Child Services, and then local police investigate, and then custody decisions are remanded to Tribal Court. Most often the Court places children back with the families they came from; good or bad, this is what happens. The judges who sit on the Tribal Court, Cameron explains, can be family members of the kid in question, or friends, or they're just people in a very small village, so, as good as a family member or friend. There aren't a whole lot of places for the kids to go, he says. Some children cycle through the system dozens of times, pulled out of their houses, held in an interim facility or given to temporary foster care, then sent home. For some, this doesn't end until they reach adulthood. For some, things get better, whether with a different family in the same village, or in a different village, or in one of the few permanent group-housing situations available in the Kuskokwim region.

Cameron tells me about Samantha Peter, who he's mentioned before. She's seven, maybe eight, and a Peter, of the poorer branch of the Peter family, as opposed to the slightly-less-poor Peters, which means she comes from the poorest family in Akiachak. She has a thousand-watt smile, Cameron tells me, smiles himself when he says it. She asks how he's doing every time she sees him, says his name like it's something special, "Mr. McFee! Mr. McFee!" She plays in the mud puddle around our house, or what will be our house. He walks by every day after work, and there she is.

Sam probably has a case file inches thick, he says. He doesn't know for sure, but he assumes.

I read about ICWA. I learn that the fight eventually resulting in its passage started because in 1960, one third of Native children were in foster care per mandates of the state. I learn that the reasons given for taking these children were often based

in traditionally Western ideas about familial structure or housing conditions, and that most justifications would not, if challenged, have held up in court. I learn that there were entire Native communities that, by 1970, had no children left at all.

The result of a decade of court battles around this crisis is ICWA, which dictates explicit preference for the placement of Native children who cannot live with their parents. First, the child may go to any relative. Second, they may go to any member of their tribe. Third, they may go to any member of any Native tribe. Only after these options have been exhausted can a Native child be considered for adoption by a non-Native family.

I tell Cameron all of this. I ask him if it applies in the village.

"Yeah," he says, "sort of. It sort of doesn't get there. I don't know. It's just … complicated. It's really complicated."

* * *

I meet Samantha on my second day in Akiachak. We see her on the road, walking alone. She follows us across town to the store. We buy pops. I ask which kind of pop Samantha would like. This is a special treat.

"Pepsi," she says, and Cameron is right: Her smile is dynamite. She wraps her skinny fingers around mine while we wait at the register. I've known her an hour.

We walk to the Post Office, and Sam sips the Pepsi in loud gulps, burping between. She wipes her mouth with the back of her wrist, smearing a clean spot on her cheek. We walk up the ramp to the Post Office. She crushes the can underfoot and chucks it over the side.

"Hey, that should go in the trash," I say, partly because there is a trashcan, one of two in the whole town, a foot from where Sam has thrown the can.

She shrugs.

We walk back to our house with letters and one small package, my first Alaska mail. Sam stands on our steps, outside our porch, and asks if she can come inside, if she can visit, if we have snacks.

"Visit? You have snacks?"

She says them as facts but asks them like questions, which is how everyone talks here, I'll learn, and also how I will talk after a few months: the speculative tense, used to indicate uncertainty, a version of possible reality, the question of it held in the tone as opposed to syntax or grammar. Or, it's a different syntax and grammar, one that I do not yet understand.

"Not today, Sam," Cameron says.

We get inside and shut the door.

"Why not invite her?" I ask.

"Just, I don't feel like it. And she'll ask again. She used to ask me every day," he says. "It's partly good natured. Like, she likes you, obviously." He smiles when he says this, and it is a good feeling, to hear him say Samantha Peter likes me. "But also, we have food, and heat, and … I don't know, windows that aren't busted." He nods to our one window, in the living room, that looks out on the road and the river. He puts our groceries down on the table and takes them one by one out of the bags.

* * *

The Peters live a little ways behind us, past Mandii, the fourth grade teacher, and across a short stretch of grassy dirt. Their house sits on stilts, like every house in town. It's painted bright pink. The back porch railing is hung with laundry, the window beside it cracked through with a round hole, lines in the glass spidering out to the edge of the pane. I walk Sam home sometimes, when I find her playing outside our house. I watch her climb the front steps, around a broken washing machine and a broken four-wheeler and a broken snowmobile. On the porch is a chair with three legs set behind sunken cardboard boxes full of trash. She walks up the steps, sits, and waves to me, putting her feet up on one of the boxes.

Max Peter is Samantha's youngest older brother. He is in seventh grade, and gets suspended for fighting within the first two weeks of the school year. He's maybe the one who starts the fight, but he's not the one who finishes it. It happens in assembly. Cameron and I are both there. All I see is a bigger kid, older, whaling his fist against Max's head. A teacher pulls them apart. Both kids leave the gym.

Max is a Peter, so even though he was the one getting beaten he's not allowed in school for a week, or until he "speaks with someone about his anger problems," the principal says. Her name is Peggie. She's terrible at her job, in this instance and over the course of many others, and it's unclear now as to what she means for Max to do, or with whom exactly he should speak. Max tromps around town during the days, his long boy legs splaying beneath him, knees bulbous, scattered scabs across the skin. He is visibly thinner every time I see him.

"They're starving him," Cameron says, and he does not mean Max's family, although that is also true. "Don't go to school means don't eat—it's a fucking death sentence." He shakes his head and wrings his hands out like there's something sticking to them. Cameron was the one who found Max after the fight, who sat with him, who asked him what happened and listened to the answer.

Eventually, Max goes back to school, gets his Title 1 breakfast and his Title 1 lunch. He skips classes often. We never hear if the anger management requirement got worked out, or if he just showed up again one day and no one told him to leave. Likely it's the latter.

Kagan Peter never goes to school. He is fifteen. He is sometimes in town, and sometimes not in town. I don't meet him for several months, but Cameron and Mandii mention his name often. He's spending time somewhere else, where they're not sure. He's on everyone's roster at school, but he's absent the first day, and the second, and after a while, no one calls his name anymore.

I meet Shanna Peter, Samantha's older sister, on my first day in Akiachak. Cameron and I are walking across the broad, flat junction where the two roads in town connect, a kind of town square with nothing in it. At night it fills with people, the crowd drinking, talking, fighting. We can hear it from our bedroom sometimes. That day, Shanna is walking with a friend, her hood pulled up over her face and held closed with one hand, the other hand stuffed in her pocket.

"Hi Shanna," Cameron says.

She says nothing, but giggles, stumbling, running away with the friend. Her lips are purple and the only part of her face that I can see.

Cameron turns to me.

"Huffed herself stupid over the summer," he says.

"Huffed?" I ask. "Like glue?"

"Like gas," he says.

It's an ongoing problem. The State of Alaska will mail anyone as many locking gas caps as they want, for free. Almost no one in Akiachak has a locking gas cap.

Ira Peter is Samantha's oldest brother, the oldest kid in her generation of Peters. He has fast eyes and slow hands, Cameron says, by which he means Ira Peter steals things. Ira is nineteen, tall, thin, recognizable by his walk even from far away, and after the first time Cameron points it out I can't miss him, loping Ira, like he's bouncing over little hills I cannot see. When I pass him in the village and I'm with Cameron, they nod to each other. Cameron is part of the reason Ira isn't in school anymore. Ira stole a computer, last year, from the school, tried to sell it in town. It was a doomed plan from the beginning.

* * *

Sam comes to our house most afternoons. She asks to come in, to visit, if she can have snacks. I let her in every third time or so, and she sits on our couch and asks over and over again if we can watch TV. She points to the big monitor on the living room wall. I explain to her that it's not a TV, that it's a computer. I turn it on and show her, clicking the mouse around, trying to find something familiar to show a computer is a computer: the internet, an icon, a picture. She stares blank-faced at each thing, because nothing about a computer is familiar to Samantha. She looks for the remote.

Usually we eat something, crackers or cookies. Sam asks for more snacks when we're done. As a tactic to get her out the door, I let her pick something from our pantry "for the road." She stands in front of the shelves, industrial quantities of flour and pasta and oil, drink mixes and teas, all ordered off Amazon and shipped to us in cardboard boxes. If we do not have Chewy bars, Sam usually takes some dried fruit, which is the only kind of fruit we can get in Akiachak. If we do have Chewy bars, she takes a Chewy bar, sometimes two.

I walk her to the door and wave goodbye. About half the time, after I close the door, there is a knock a few seconds later. I open the door again.

"Hi Sam," I say.

"Can we watch TV?" she asks.

"No Sam," I say, and wave a second time, and close the door as softly as I can, her still standing at threshold. Sometimes it's half an hour before I hear her walk down the steps.

At Mandii's house, we talk about Sam and the visits.

"People know, you know," Mandii says. She's closed the blinds so that Sam, who is knocking on her door today, can't see that we're here. We sit on the couch and

drink tea. "It's just—it's not bad, necessarily. Just, people notice. You're a teacher, she's a local kid. People will talk about it."

"I'm not a teacher," I say, because I'm not.

"Yeah but, same difference."

I nod. I hadn't thought about that. I have thought about whether it's strange, or whether it's appropriate, and mostly I've decided that it is, if only because I like Samantha and she seems to like me. But evidently people will talk about it, or, they already do.

From then on I try to do outside things when Sam comes. This seems somehow less gossip-worthy. I ask her if she wants to walk to the Post Office with me. I sit with her on the porch when it isn't too cold, and then send her with a snack, or sometimes a whole dinner wrapped in tin-foil, hot enough that I have to get a plastic bag with handles so she can carry it home.

I let her in the house only very occasionally, maybe once every few weeks. When I do, I set a timer on the microwave—Mandii's suggestion—so Sam knows exactly how long she can stay. We pick the amount of time together when she first comes in, anything between three and five minutes. I let her push the buttons. When it dings she stands up, opens the door herself, and does not look back when I close it behind her.

* * *

I am walking out to the airport, because it is somewhere to walk, when I see Samantha playing in the grass at the edge of town. I ask her if she wants to come with me. She says she does. The weather looks like it might turn bad, the temperature just above freezing, so I try to warn her. I tell her it's a long way, that the airport is far. She says nothing, and falls in step next to me.

"It's far, Sam," I say.

"I know," she says.

We walk a few miles, and it's cloudy and a little cold, but not too bad. The airport is not so much an airport as it is a strip of cleared tundra with a single trailer, always locked. When we get to the strip we stop and look a minute, then turn back toward town. The first rain, more like mist, blows up in our faces. The wind is steady. I look down the long road. Sam is seven, or maybe eight, she's not sure although I've asked her many times, and it is plainly stupid now that I let her come here, that I let her decide for herself.

We walk, and talk. It's cold, and I try to keep her talking. I ask her about school, about her friends; she asks me about when Mr. McFee and I are getting married, and when we'll have babies, questions I get often here, from everyone. I sing songs I hope she knows, kid songs, but she doesn't know any of them, or doesn't want to sing them with me. She starts to shiver with about a mile left to go, maybe more. She turns to walk backward, shrugging her shoulders against the wind. I am wearing quilted overalls and long johns and a down-lined jacket. She is wearing jeans and a t-shirt and a thin purple sweatshirt with hearts on it. Her sneakers are brown, sloshing with mud, and I can see her bare feet through the holes in the sides. Even

for a kid who is used to this, which all the local kids are, it is not enough clothes. She pulls her sweatshirt around herself, balling the ends of her sleeves in her fists, and holds her elbows.

"Here," I say, and stop walking and sit down. I take off my boots and my socks. I can feel the wet seeping in through my pants. I pull Sam onto my lap, and take off her shoes, and work the socks over her feet, which are wet, so it's like pulling on clothes after swimming, the dry socks sticking and stuttering on her skin. Her feet feel cold in my hands, which are also cold. I shake out her sneakers, squeezing the puffed sides against the rubber bottoms, and then push them back over the socks.

I stand us both up.

"Better?" I ask. My naked feet squeak in my boots.

"Ya," she says.

It's five minutes before she's soaked again. I take off the outer layer of my jacket, the shell, and wrap it around her, but she's already wet. I squint into the wind, which is picking up, and the rain, which is a thicker mist now. Sam is starting to shake.

"You want a piggy-back ride?" I ask. I am trying to sound fun about it, even though this is not fun anymore. She nods, and I bend my knees and squat down.

I shout to Sam, over the wind, to hold on tight. I shrug her higher every few minutes, and she hugs her legs around my hips. I turn my head sideways against the rain, and it's just rain now, regular and heavy. Sam tucks her head below my shoulders, and I can feel the side of her face on my back.

No one is going to die; it isn't so bad as that, I know. Town is close enough, and I know that, too, but it's just that she's thin, and her clothes are thin, and it's not how cold she is but how long she's been that cold and how long it will be until she can get warm again.

My arms are aching, and I can feel the skin on my ankles bubbling to a blister. I look up every few steps, checking the stop sign that marks the beginning of the road into town; it's closer all the time. We get to it, and pass it, and I can see my house through the rain.

"Okay, you wanna race?" I ask. I'm panting. Sam doesn't reply, so I put her down—it will be fun, it can be fun, this last part—and I say "ready, set, go!" and we run through the mud, past the abandoned trailers, across the high grass and up the stairs. I fumble with the keys.

"You have—" Sam starts.

"Yes yes I have snacks. Come in, come in," I say, and push the door open.

Cameron is home, and I am ready to apologize that Sam is inside, that I have brought her in, which is something we said we weren't doing anymore, but he takes one look at us and goes to get some towels. I sit Sam on a chair in the middle of the kitchen and take off her shoes and socks, both of us dripping a muddy puddle across the floor. Cameron finds her a pair of dry socks and a clean t-shirt, both mine. I rub her hair with a towel, shucking it around her head. I hear her giggle underneath. I pull it off and kneel in front of her and smile. She smiles back, big and wide.

"We'll just warm up for a bit," I say, "just a few minutes." I get her dressed, and she shivers, smiling, warming up. She goes to sit on the couch under a blanket.

After many more than a few minutes, I tell her she has to go. She burrows farther under the blanket, and I pull it off her, trying to make it silly, but it feels mean even with the masquerade. I make her up a bag of food to take. She puts her still-wet shoes back on her feet. I hand her the bag across the threshold, foil-wrapped chicken and bread in hunks, thick pats of butter pressed between them. I wave goodbye, and watch out the window as she walks away down the road.

I shower. I put on dry clothes. I eat chicken and burrow under a blanket on the couch. Cameron and I watch a movie on the computer, which is basically just a TV.

When I see Sam at school the next day, I ask her if she liked the bread, and how was the chicken, and did she cozy up warm when she got home?

She shrugs at all the questions. I ask her again about the food, if I should make her something else next time.

"I gave it to Max," she says, and walks away down the hall.

* * *

Samantha shows up at the door in the late afternoon, maybe a few weeks after the airport. It starts the same way it always starts.

"Can I visit?"

I say what I always say, now:

"Not today, Sam." I start to close the door.

"Mr. McFee told me," she says, and I stop.

"What?" I say.

"Mr. McFee told me to come."

I look at Sam. She's fibbed before, which is understandable. I try to stay especially firm about the boundary when I know she's lying. This doesn't feel like a lie.

"Hang on," I say, and think. "Can you wait here?"

"It's cold," she says, and she's right.

"Okay," I say, "the entryway then."

Our house has two doors, one from the outside into the artic entryway, a tiny room where we leave our boots and coats, and one that opens from that room into the kitchen. I let Sam in and close the outside door, leaving her next to our row of shoes. I close the kitchen door behind me.

The phone rings before I can call out. It's Cameron.

"Hey," I say, "Um, Sam is here."

"Yes," he says.

"She says you sent her?" I say.

"I did," he says.

"Oh," I say.

"She came to my class, after school—look, I don't know what's happening, but she said her dad kicked her, and then I told Peggie, and then Peggie talked to her, and then she ran off. But before that, I said she could go to our house."

"Gotcha."

"You've got her?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, except that when I hang up the phone and open the door to the entryway, Sam is gone.

I look up and down the road, but she's not there. I call Cameron back, but there is no answer. I look at my boots and my coat. I pull them on, no socks, and find a scarf, and walk out the door to look for Samantha Peter.

* * *

What follows is a confusing timeline of phone calls and permissions. I do not find Sam the first time out, but instead she is back on the porch when I get home, and I let her all the way in this time. I call Cameron back, and he has made more calls. The Office of Child Services knows what's happening, and the State Troopers are trying to come, except they can't because the winds are too high to fly, and the river is too choppy to boat, and plus it's almost five, which means almost dark, which means no travel of any kind.

Cameron gets home and we move to Mandii's house, where the local police come and interview Sam and me and Cameron and Mandii. Carla, the nicest of the three cops, leads Sam into a bedroom in the back and takes pictures of her bruises with a camera "only for very awesome little girls." We feed Sam snack after snack, keeping her busy. She smiles through the whole thing.

The kicking itself is not the problem. Abuse in Akiachak is a problem, yes, but it's a normal problem, not something anyone calls the police over, not something anyone worries about. The problem, the reason why everyone is responding this way to the well-understood fact that Samantha Peter (and all the Peters, and half the kids in town) get tossed around at home is that Samantha said something about it. She said something out loud, to a teacher, who is legally obligated to report what Samantha said. Which has turned this all into something different.

After the interviews are finished and the cops close their notebooks, Carla tells us to take Sam to her grandfather's house, which is across the town square, while they go interview Samantha's father. Mandii and Cameron and I bundle up, and then we bundle Sam. We all leave at the same time, cops included. As we cross the grass I watch Carla and the two other cops disappear around the front of Samantha's house. There is one light on, in the back.

Samantha's grandfather is not home. We knock and knock at the top of the stairs, but there is no answer. It becomes clear quickly, then, what has happened, and how we have fumbled. We have walked through town and back, the four of us, as if to say: "Did anyone need to know where Samantha Peter is? In case they did, she is here with the white teachers, in this cluster of houses; this is who has her and exactly where they are." In the pink house down the road, the cops are still interviewing Sam's family, which means that when they are finished with the interview, Samantha's family will know what happened, and why it happened, and if they care to ask anyone at all, exactly where their daughter is. We make it back to Mandii's house, barely, before the police finish.

Mandii puts on a movie, some cartoon, and we turn out most of the lights.

Mandii double-checks all the curtains. We wait in the kitchen. The police come back, and Carla tells us not to let Sam's family know she's here, although they probably already do. Carla tries to call the ICWA worker, whose responsibility it is to find temporary housing for Sam. The ICWA worker's name is Georgiana Wassilie. We have three different phone numbers for her. One is disconnected, one rings and rings, and one does not produce Georgiana at the other end, but someone else who does not know where Georgiana is.

"Can she stay with you guys?" Carla asks.

"What?" I say.

"Can she stay here?" Carla repeats.

"Um," I say, "I don't know."

We try all the phone numbers again, and Carla goes out on the four-wheeler to where she thinks Georgiana lives, which turns out to be the wrong house. The Office of Child Services is closed, and the Troopers are officially not coming. All six of us stand in the kitchen. Mandii offers everyone tea.

"Just for tonight?" Carla asks. She's asking me and not Mandii for a few reasons. I'm closer with Sam, but also we have an extra bedroom, and Mandii does not, and also Cameron and I are two adults, and Mandii is one. I am starting to feel sick. It is the second time Carla has asked, and we need to answer, one way or the other. It is not that I don't want Sam to stay. It is that I am a white woman who is not from here and Samantha is a seven-maybe-eight-year-old Native girl. It is that we walked across the square. It is that people talk.

"I don't …," I start to say, and then stop, and then start again, "I don't want to put her up unless it's the last resort, I guess. I mean, there's no one she could stay with?"

Carla shakes her head and stares at the floor, thinking. We decide to try, one last time. The two other cops leave on the four-wheeler and Cameron and Mandii and Carla leave on foot. Carla designates me to stay with Sam. We watch another movie. Everybody else spends the next hour knocking on doors, trying to find Georgiana Wassilie. They do not find Georgiana Wassilie, but come back and shake their heads in the kitchen. I step outside to smoke a cigarette.

A man walks around the corner and up the boardwalk that leads to Mandii's porch. It's Kagan Peter, I think, so not a man exactly. He stops at the foot of the stairs.

"Hello," I say.

"You know where my sister is?" he says.

"I don't," I lie. My hand with the cigarette is shaking.

"Is my sister in there?" he asks, jutting his chin at Mandii's living room window.

"Nope," I say, which feels like more of a lie than the first thing.

"Is my sister in there?" he asks again. His hood is up, and his pants are too big, and all I can really see of him are his cheeks, pitted and dark in the shadow from the porch light.

"You got my sister?" he asks, one last time, raising his voice a little.

"No, Kagan, I don't know," I say, which feels the most like a lie, and obvious,

because I've said two different things. I put out my cigarette, which is smoked only halfway down, the tobacco crumbling against the porch post when the paper splits along the side.

I close Mandii's front door behind me. Everyone looks up. They've been listening.

Carla looks at me, and the other cops look at me, and Sam looks at me, which is when I say what I do not want to say, which is that it's okay, that Sam can stay with us.

She's standing at the corner of the kitchen.

"I stay with Ms. McCord?" she asks, already smiling.

"Yeah," I say, and walk over, and she puts her arms around my waist and I rest a hand on her hair, which is thick at the roots with white pins of lice. "Yeah Sam, you can stay."

* * *

We have to get Sam to our house, which is in front of Mandii's house, very close, but our front door faces the main road, the thoroughfare, the way to the makeshift town square and one of the busiest corners in the village. Cameron goes ahead of us, to unlock the door and close the blinds. Mandii and I wrap Sam in an extra raincoat, adult-sized and bright red, and with the hood up we can barely see Sam at all, the hem dropping almost to her feet. We open Mandii's door and look outside. There is no one, so we scuttle Sam down the boardwalk, me on one side and Mandii on the other, up and over the bridge that spans the lagoon between our houses, down our boardwalk and up my stairs just as headlights flash around the corner. I push the door closed behind us. I breathe. Mandii helps Sam out of the rain coat. I am doing what the cops have told me to do. I repeat this in my head, over and over again, trying to believe that someone else has made the decision.

Mandii says goodnight. She tells us to call if we need anything. I find sweatpants and a t-shirt for Sam, both too big. I show her our spare room, which has a twin bed against one wall and a little desk against the other. I let her pick which sheets she likes. I take her to the bathroom where I pop an extra toothbrush out of its plastic packaging and hold it out to her. She looks at me. She doesn't know what to do with it.

Cameron and I try to keep things light. We feed Sam dinner, what I don't remember, and it is almost eleven, so I get her a glass of water and walk her to the bedroom. I tuck her in bed, and then she sits up and drinks the whole glass without stopping.

"Can I have more water?" she asks.

"Sure," I say, and after that it is a third glass, and after that she has to pee, any excuse to stay up, which is oddly comforting, like any kid at bedtime. I tell her, finally, that we have to go to sleep, because she has to get up for school in the morning. It's almost one in the morning. I tell her goodnight. I tell her I love her, which I do. I sing her a lullaby. She asks me to stay, and so I sit on the floor, my back against the side of her bed. It's quiet for a few minutes.

"I miss my mom," Sam says.

"I know," I say. "I bet you do."

I have never seen Sam's mom. She's been downriver in Bethel, or a nearby village, or somewhere, Sam isn't sure. She's been there for as long as I've been in Akiachak, which is four months.

"I want my mom," she says, and starts to cry a little.

"I know," I say and turn toward her. "Do you want a hug, Sam?" I ask, and she doesn't answer but takes my hand from where it sits on the blanket and holds it with both of her hands. I stay where I am until the crying stops, and her breathing slows, and it sounds like she's finally asleep.

Cameron is waiting for me on the couch.

I curl up in a ball and lay my head on his lap. Outside, past the drawn curtains, headlights flash along the road. We hear voices chatter on the boardwalk, and I listen hard, my heartbeat in my ears, wondering who is looking, wondering if they will think to check here, if there will come a knock between now and the morning. Any second, it could come.

I hear the bedroom door open. Sam peaks her head out.

"Sam," I say, shaking my head. "Time to sleep, honey."

But she just grins and runs across the living room jumps onto the couch, feet splaying over the armrest and her head on my belly. I lean against Cameron, and Sam leans against me, and I forget about the lice, and the dirt, and that Sam cannot stay. I let my hand fall on her head and we lean against Cameron, who puts something on the TV. When she finally falls asleep, I carry her to bed.

* * *

The next morning, we are all up early. Sam has to go to school and Cameron has to go to school. Cameron makes coffee and gets in the shower. I make Sam breakfast, and she eats at our kitchen table, juice and toast with jam.

The phone rings. It's Peggie.

"Can you sub today?"

"Sure," I say.

"Okay. Second grade," she says. It is the only class I do not want her to say.

I do the dishes, and Sam gets dressed, and then I sit her back down in her chair.

"Sam, we have to talk about something."

"Okay," she says.

"I'm going to be your teacher today," I say, and before I can finish, her eyebrows go up on her head and her smile cracks open and she throws her arms around my neck.

"Yessss," she says.

"I know, and I'm glad, too. But Sam, we can't—"

"Don't tell, I know." She says it comfortably, and fast, and like she's said just those words, just like this, many times.

"Right," I say. "It's not that it's bad, Sam. It's just probably not a good idea

for people to know."

"I know," she says, and I feel wrong in every way to ask her, but I don't know what else to do. She hops down from the chair like it's nothing, which for her, it probably is.

We walk to school, the three of us, together, Sam in the middle in her big red raincoat. We go very early, on purpose, so there's hardly anyone out yet. Down the road, a ways off from the school, I drop her hand, ready to crouch down so I talk right to her, to tell her she should go in the way she usually does, the front, the way the kids go, but she's off before I can say anything, running ahead of us. She goes in her way, and we go in ours. I take a deep breath.

The cafeteria lights are bright. There are a few other kids around, and Peggie is standing at the door to the office, checking her phone, talking with teachers. Sam is already sitting at a table. She's eating a cup of oranges in syrup, school breakfast.

I wave to Peggie. I follow Cameron down the hall. We drop our things in our classrooms and head back to the cafeteria, where the kids will line up when the bell rings. It's more crowded now. I wave to different students, and I wave to Sam, who stands and pulls the red raincoat from the back of her chair and folds it across her arm. She walks up to me and says hello, tells me that she's going to play basketball before the bell rings.

"That's great," I say. "Have fun."

"I will!" she says.

She puts on the coat, standing in front of me, why I'm not sure, probably so she doesn't have to carry it. I want to tell her that she doesn't have to, that she's inside now, that there's nothing we need to cover for. I want to take it for her, even though it might give us away. I want to adjust the buttons, because she's done it up one off from where it should be, sides hanging canted. I would roll up her left sleeve after, because it's slipped flat again, hiding her hand in a deflated flap. I would crouch in front of her, both of us laughing at how big it was, her slightly embarrassed, me reassuring her that it was fine, that she'd grow into it by next winter, or the winter after.

Instead, I do none of these things.

Sam tilts her head to the side, and looks me in the eye, and smiles. "Bye Mom!" she says, and disappears into the gym.

I watch her go, and do nothing at all.

Kailyn writes fiction and nonfiction in Oakland, California, her hometown by way of Oregon, Alaska, and New Orleans. Her work has has appeared or is forthcoming in *Ploughshares, Brevity, The Believer*, and *The Rumpus*, among others. She holds a BA from Reed College and an MFA from the University of New Orleans, where she was the editor of *Bayou Magazine.* Kailyn has received support from the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, Montana's Open AIR Residency, the Ucross Foundation, and the Mendocino Coast Writer's Conference. She is currently working on a book about the myriad nature of disaster. When not writing, Kailyn likes a good camping trip.