

Little or BIG (Fiction 2: Heather)

"Jenna? Jenna? Can you hear me?" There was panic in Travis's voice.

All I could manage was a grunt.

"I've just called your mom. She's going to watch Addy while I take you to the hospital."

I moaned, "Don't—want to go."

"We have to go. Honey, you just had a seizure."

I shut my eyes. No—no. A bitter taste. I'd bitten my tongue. It hurt to swallow.

The next twenty minutes were exhausting. I heard my mom's voice as she pulled Addy from the car and whispered, "Call me" to Travis. After that, every bump in the road felt pronounced, and I stumbled twice as Travis led me into the hospital. It wasn't until the emergency room nurse called out, "Pamela, I need a gurney out here immediately!" that I fully sensed fully the seriousness of the situation. I looked down at my clothes. My gray stretch pants were stained red with blood.

Time sped up then. I found myself being wheeled through the arterial hallways of Jefferson Regional Hospital, with Dr. Waddell walking-walked beside me as I stared up at the lights above my head.

"We'll have to do a e-sectionC-section right away," he said. "Travis, there won't be time to change. Stay here. I'll send the nurse out as soon as I can."

I shut my eyes. The doors banged a couple of times. The nurses strapped me to humming monitors, then murmured-murmuring to each other through pursed lips as they scurried back and forth between the closets and tables. There was only one thing I only heard one thing clearly before the IV went in and darkness resumed. It was from Dr. Waddell. "Let's not lose them both."

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I could see watched the leaves being get tossed in the October gusts like lettuce in a giant salad. We were at Porter Park, two-year old Addison and I, and she was on the swings. Though it had taken place on a day five months earlier, the scene came back to me so clearly, so easily, as the voices in the hospital room became more distant.

"Push me again, Mama."

I smiled, then backed up and pushed my hands against the stiffness of her back until she and the swing beneath her gained enough momentum to lift her little two-year-old body parallel to the ground. The highest reach of her toes heavenward lasted for only one exhilarating moment before gravity pulled her back to me.

"What a big girl you are, Addy! You were in the clouds!"

She giggled and cried, "Again! Again!"

I drew the sleeves of my striped sweater down over my fingers as a chill ran down both of my arms. My daughter would have liked to spend the winter slipping down icy slides and pushing around a snow-covered merry-go-round until she became frozen solidly to the metal bars. No matter what protests and pleas she mustered later, this would probably be our last autumn visit to the park. I rubbed my hand over the gentle roundness of my abdomen. *Maybe we will come back in April—after the baby is born.*

Our second baby. An unexpected and frightening gift. My epilepsy medication made it dangerous to carry children at all, but during the long hours of Addy's birth, I had had experienced a grand mal seizure. It had been was a miracle either of us survived. For four months afterwards, the seizures continued. We were compelled to hire a neighbor to sit with me at home

Comment [J1]: Contradiction: The scene is clear to her, but then the hospital voices get more distant? This needs to be rephrased.

Comment [J2]: The timeline is confusing here.

Comment [J3]: Why a neighbor? Why not a nurse or someone who would actually know what to do?

until Travis came home from work. I had to crawl around the floor, fearful of falling on the new baby at any moment. Travis and I had been in the process of resigning-resigned ourselves to only one child when a missed period had turned things upside-down again.

Comment [J4]: Why didn't the neighbor take care of the newborn, then?

A kid with tousled brown hair and freckles came running up to a smaller blond boy sitting on one of the swings beside us. "Hey, Mike! Wanna ride over to the store and get some pop?"

"Yeah!" The two boys ran off to where they'd left their bikes leaning against the trunks of a couple of shedding maples.

Addy began kicking her feet wildly. "I go too, Mama! I ride bike!"

"No, Sweetie. You're too little to ride a bike. Don't you want to keep swinging?"

She remained silent for the next two pushes, and then ~~she~~ suddenly began to cry. Her sobs grew in intensity each moment.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart? Are you hurt? Do you want to get down?" I reached ~~protectively~~ for her protectively and brought the swing to a sudden stop.

As her little chest convulsed, the only words she could get out were, "I big."

"Yes, you are a big girl."

She twisted her head from side to side and frowned. "No, I little."

"You're little?"

"No! I big! I little! I =="

More tears piled up and overflowed the lower rims of her eyes. I slipped her tiny frame from the swing and held it to me, then let out a slow breath of understanding. *How confusing life can be.*

Once she calmed down, I covered Addy's precious hand with mine. We crunched leaves as we walked the three blocks home. She stomped on each leaf with a firm step while I replayed in my mind conversations she and I had shared the week before. Too big to use a pacifier, too little to pour her own cereal. Big girl using the toilet, little girl drinking out of a sippie-sippy cup. I made myself a mental promise to speak more carefully in the future. But how could I explain it? Was she little or big?

* * *

A baby's high-pitched cry sounded in another room. My fingers inadvertently crimped the edges of the hospital blankets. As the noise faded, my mind began to grope its way through the haziness until another image gradually sharpened. A tall man dressed in was speaking — it sounded like Darren Gage. The details soon revealed the Sunday School room at the church on a day four months earlier. As the chairs and chalkboard became clearer, his voice grew louder.

Comment [J5]: Dressed in what?

Comment [J6]: The timeline here is confusing.

"How is it that the Nephites could become so rebellious after having literally decades of peace and happiness following the visit of the Savior?" Brother Gage peered over the top rims of his glasses. "Yes, Tim?"

I looked over to see Brother Rogers scoot his generous behind to the edge of his seat, causing-making it ~~to~~ creak loudly. "Well, I think back to Helaman twelve when it says men are considered less than the dust of the earth because even the dirt obeys its Maker. The Nephites had let go of their hold on the Savior and fallen back into what they really were — sinful human beings who didn't amount to much without their faith."

Comment [J7]: 12 or Helaman chapter 12.

Brother Gage nodded, his silver sideburns bobbing. "Right. Remember King Benjamin's counsel for us to always keep in mind our own nothingness. How's that for a self-esteem talk?"

A low chuckle went in waves across the room, but I didn't join in. As Brother Gage continued to explore 4th-Fourth Nephi, I flipped the pages of my scriptures until I reached a

familiar verse in Romans: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ—"

I tapped the worn eraser of my marking pencil against my bottom lip as my mind seesawed back and forth between the concept of nothingness and the idea of divinity. There were certainly days when I felt like dirt, days when I blew up at Addy or got into a screaming match with my husband or felt guilty for staying home from church just to enjoy some alone time.

But there were also days when I remembered a neighbor's birthday with a homemade cake or received an important insight from my scripture study, days when my toddler acted so polite at the dentist's office that the receptionist ~~smiled her~~flashed a flawless smile and said, "What a good daughter you're raising."

I sighed and rubbed my palm against the tautness of my silk maternity blouse.

So who am I? Dust of the earth—or joint-heir? One of the parable's five unprepared virgins or a candidate for the Celestial Kingdom?

Little—or big?

~~Brother Gage turned toward the chalkboard and began to write. "Next week, we'll get some insight into Mormon's views as he says—"~~

* * *

"It's okay, ~~k~~Kiddo," a smooth voice said. "I'm just going to check your blood pressure again."

I turned my head toward the voice.

"That's it. Just relax."

My arm went limp as she wrapped the stiff cloth around it. The band began to squeeze. I slowly opened my eyes to see a plump, gray-haired woman bending over me. Her eyes met mine and she smiled.

"Your husband will be happy to hear that you're waking up. You've been pretty out of it for the last few days, ~~m~~Missy."

As the pressure grew, my eyes fluttered closed again. I could see myself standing at my kitchen sink. My husband ~~was sitting~~ sat at the dining room table on my right, and I was filling a pitcher with water.

"Do you think God is okay with me getting my tubes tied?" I heard myself asking.

Travis set Addy's plate of mashed potatoes and chicken down in front of her. She reached for her fork.

"Prayer, Daddy?"

He didn't seem to hear her. "We've thought about it, Jenna, ~~p~~PPrayed about it. I think it would be crazy to ignore the doctors on this one."

"I know. There's no commandment saying how many kids a good Mormon family has to have. But I can't help thinking there's some divine number out there. Like, 'true' Latter-day Saints have seven or more children, and mediocre ones have six or less. Kind of a Celestial minimum that only the really in-tune people know about."

Travis chuckled. "I guess the bishop's not gonna make it."

"Okay, so maybe the limit is five. It's just—why do we have to stop? Most people now ~~just~~ have one or two, and that's all that they want. We want more kids. Do we just need to have more faith?" My voice broke. "We promised the Lord we'd keep having kids until He said to stop."

"Maybe that's exactly what He's telling us."

Comment [J8]: I think this section would end much better if these paragraphs were completely removed.

I sighed as I reached for the brown potholders on the kitchen counter. As I put out one hand to open the oven door, everything in my range of vision—the stove top, the sugar and flour cans, the Anne Geddes calendar hanging on the wall—all blurred and darkened.

A thick, dark line. Pain. Head throbbing. Jaw. Oh, oh, sore. What—was it? Tired. A line. Carpet. Line of carpet. I was—the dining room carpet. I was lying on the carpet.
“Jenna? Jenna? Can you hear me?”

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My eyelids stuck, draped over my eyes like two thick plastic tarps. I struggled to peel them back again. The first sight that met my gaze was a huge vase of purple irises on a tray table near the foot of the hospital bed. In the middle of the bright petals stood a stark white card bearing the words “With Sympathy” scrawled across the top in dark lettering.

My heart contracted at the sight of those words, and I turned away. The dimly-lit room was crowded with furniture; a second table stood on my left, several machines with wires stood on my right, an oak wardrobe dominated one corner, a large television took up the other corner, and a large blue recliner lay behind the machines with a rumpled blanket draped over it. I was alone in the room.

I reached automatically for my belly, dragging a tube along with my hand. Underneath the thin white sheet I could feel it—the large bump had been replaced by a flabby, empty, shrunken mound. I thought of the blood, of the words, “You just had a seizure,” and, “Let’s not lose them both.” I felt small. I felt like something insignificant, one small woman with a large emptiness inside. A forgotten body swallowed up by the huge stomach of Jefferson Regional.

Beyond the door, I ~~could~~ envisioned nurses rushing around, busy, needed. ~~Beyond-Past~~ the ~~hospital~~ walls were mothers, driving kids to music lessons, taking them to McDonald’s, shopping at Wal-Mart with babies in car seats being driven in carts. The world kept turning, ~~and~~ time kept ticking, insensitive to the fact that my world had stopped cold.

And where was Heavenly Father? In the worlds without end that He monitored, with all of his spirit children and every creation named and known, had He forgotten my name? My eyes clouded. I couldn’t feel Him. I couldn’t feel anything. Something squeezed inside my chest. Even He seemed to be busy elsewhere. “Couldn’t you watch with me one hour?” The words ran through my mind again and again.

~~Slowly, a~~ low murmuring interrupted my thoughts. A voice. I looked up and realized for the first time that the television was on, with the volume turned down to a soft hum. A man in a dark suit was speaking. He was surrounded by greenery interspersed with pink and yellow flowers. It was General Conference. Travis had told everyone in the ward, “We’re going to have an Easter baby, right after Conference.”

The speaker, unfamiliar to me, said, “Amen” and disappeared. Then the darkness withdrew. The camera pulled back to a full view of the choir, in red dresses and navy suits. With one movement, they stood and began to sing.

“Jesus, once of humble birth, now in glory comes to earth—”

As I listened, my heart yearning for something to replace the emptiness, the words seemed to unfold two contradictory images—one of a helpless little naked baby, the other of a strong figure who could move mountains with a single word.

“Once a meek and lowly lamb, now the Lord, the great I Am.”

I pictured Addy on the day she was born. She wore a little white bow and curled her fingers into fists. Even before she could hold her head up, she ruled our universe. I imagined the

Savior, a baby, held in a mother's arms. He had saved her with His innocence, saved her by needing her, saved her long before He ever entered Gethsemane.

"Once He groaned in blood and tears, now in glory He appears."

I saw in my mind the blood running down my legs and heard the fear in Travis's voice. Then, with a gentle flow, the Spirit began to fill the raw places in my heart.

"Once forsaken, left alone—" He knew what it was to be little.

"Now exalted to a throne." Because He had become little, He was lifted up to become big—bigger than He had been before. Bigger than His pain. Bigger than my pain.

I ~~sunk~~sank back into the pillows ~~behind me~~ and let the stream of peace flow over me. In my mind, I heard words spoken, low and soothing. *Jenna, you're only little when you try to do it alone.*

A soft click sounded at the door. My eyes flicked open as my husband entered the room. His chin was covered in stubble, and wrinkles criss-crossed his plaid, button-down shirt.

"How are you feeling?" he asked, sitting next to me and taking my hand in his.

"Okay." My tongue moved slowly, as if my mouth ~~were was~~ stuffed full of quilt batting. "I'm glad to see you."

"The doctor thought you'd wake up a whole lot sooner." Travis's eyes fell down to our hands. "Jenna, the baby—"

"I know."

Travis squeezed my hand. We sat in silence for a long moment. Then, he cleared his throat and pointed back toward the door. "Addy will be coming over with Grandma in about an hour. She's been asking for you non-stop."

"I want to see her."

"Grandma's been spoiling her. Would you believe, she climbed on top of your dad's recliner, took the car keys off the hook, and told Grandma she was ~~just~~ gonna drive ~~on~~ over here?"

I managed a soft smile.

He shook his head. "I thought she'd be excited to have her grandparents to herself. But she's been asking when ~~can~~ she can go back to her own bed, ~~and~~ when ~~can~~ her mom can take her to the park again, and why ~~are~~ all the shadows are different at Grandma's house." He placed his other hand over mine and locked ~~his eyes on mine~~ eyes with me. "Addy needs you, Jenna. She always will."

At his words, images began to merge before me. Pictures of park benches and autumn leaves meshed with those of car keys and recliners, grandparents and hospital monitors. In the middle of it all was a precious two-year-old girl in blond pigtails. And then I imagined the Savior with her, His wounded hands reaching out to push her on the swings.

As the images dissolved, I looked back into Travis's face. All I could manage was a whisper.

"That's my big girl."

Comment [J9]: Describe the imagery more clearly.