

Mena and Natalie

By Melissa Franckowiak

When I arrived at the Larkin house, the first thing I noticed was that everything was sharp. The peaks of the house, tall and very pointed. Mrs. Larkin's nose, her high-heeled shoes, narrow, tapered. And the timing schedule—everything ran to the minute.

School ended at 2:07.

Sharp.

The piano teacher, Mr. Kapernik, arrived at 3:35.

Sharp.

And my day ended at 4:05 sharp, because Mr. Larkin got an extra five minutes out of me, without having to pay for another fifteen of overtime.

I was a nursing student during those days and by no means lazy, but I believed in letting kids express their interests through free play, and in this household, there seemed little time for this kind of nourishment.

Furthermore, their job interview had given me the impression that the family ran like a well-navigated, tight ship. I didn't realize then that I was tasked with creating this pedagogical achievement from the ground up.

I found the children, while kind-hearted, ready to dispute this reputation of daily rigor, with acrimonious expertise. My initial doubts with my assignment were not a problem of money, or any issue of mine with a rigid schedule. I'd never been late a day in my life in any of my previous, lower paying jobs, which included waitressing at the Bull and Finch Pub in knee high socks and a plaid skirt that rode up my bum, or while selling shoes at the mall to old people with doughy feet.

My challenge as a nanny lay in getting the children to conform to their routines.

The littlest, Arianna, could barely put her own shoes on without pitching a fit on the floor. She was prone to attention seeking behavior and transforming everything that should've taken no more than five minutes into interminable acts of drama. The eldest, Martin, had a collection of bugs that numbered 106 when I arrived. He found the most inopportune times to show me his Japanese beetles, South American cockroaches, and subterranean earthworms.

The middle child, Natalie, was unabashedly my favorite. Patient and kind, never demanding, she had my heartstrings knotted from the first day. I especially like the way she would blush before asking me if she could help with dinner. Then, once she was in the kitchen, she became a culinary sorceress, tossing anything into the mixing bowls that she could get her hands on, not excluding coffee beans, potato chips, and ice cubes.

Oddly, most of our joint creations were quite tasty.

“I want to help,” she’d insist, pulling rank over her younger sibling, but always seeking my permission first.

“Thank you, Natalie.” I’d smile, thankful there was one child under my care who seemed attached to me, and preferred my company to an electronic tablet, or to being parked in front of the television watching an episode of “Word Party,” and this gave me courage, at 33, that I might one day succeed at motherhood myself.

This was good for my soul.

But it did not last, and it was what made the terrible news so devastating, gave me pause, and made me rethink that ambition entirely.

On my third Thursday of my employment for the Larkins, when I was feeling like I’d finally begun to adjust to the sharpness of the children’s routines, everything changed. I had Martin practiced and ready for his piano teacher’s arrival, and Arianna had woken from a nap that was not too short and not too long, one that had begun precisely at the prescribed time of 1 pm. She had her shoes on and was ready for a walk with her sister that would allow Martin to have a peaceful lesson. I had even started chopping vegetables for dinner, when something terrible brought the daily routine to a halt and would do so with or without me for years to come.

It was 3:16.

The piano teacher was due at the door in fifteen minutes, when I noticed something terribly wrong with Natalie. Her face was swollen, so much that she could barely open her eyes. Her breathing was heavy, labored.

“I can’t breathe, Mena,” she said as she ran out of her playroom. The others called me Philomena, including the youngest, whose speech was excellent at three, but Natalie used my nickname. She was the closest to me.

I should’ve called an ambulance, but I panicked. I wanted to care for Natalie myself, though I had no idea what to do. Her parents were away for three nights, on a trip to West Palm Beach, celebrating their anniversary. They weren’t expected back until Sunday.

I put the kids in my car and raced to the Emergency Care clinic three blocks away. Natalie was crying now. Martin was making fun of her, told her she looked like a Shar Pei, the way the skin of her head and neck had puffed and wrinkled in coarse folds.

“Cut it out,” I said, losing my cool.

The doctor must have been having a bad day, because she snapped at me when I explained that the children’s parents were out of town. I had no note indicating that I had permission to bring them in to be seen, but this was an emergency. Mr. and Mrs. Larkin could not be reached for several hours, which prompted Dr. Crabby to notify child services. Since this was apparently done anonymously, Mrs. Larkin presumed it was me who called, and I later lost my job with them.

Maybe Mrs. Larkin let me go because I was a reminder of the guilt she struggled with, the hard truth that I was there for Natalie then and she was not.

It’s hard to say.

While I waited in the emergency clinic with Natalie, trying to reassure the other two that their sister would be fine, not even considering the piano teacher who had probably been wondering where we were, I wondered how I could ever deal with the stress of being a parent, bringing a child into the world.

The doctor fired questions at me.

“Is she allergic to anything?”

“Not that I know of.”

“The parents didn’t tell you?”

“No, not specifically. If she was, I assume they would’ve mentioned it.”

“You assume?”

“Yeah.”

“You should’ve asked.”

“Okay.”

“What about peanuts?”

“She eats those all the time,” said Martin, looking up from his bug collection. He held a shellacked praying mantis before my eyes, between a pair of tweezers.

I forced a smile.

“What did she eat today?” asked the doctor.

“Oatmeal, plain pasta and a banana, some Fruit Loops.” I shrugged.

After I was done being questioned, the doctor scooped up Natalie, whisked her off for a test. By this time Natalie was screaming, her heart was pounding on my chest from the epinephrine they’d given her, and as she left my arms, she kept calling, “Mena! Mena!”

When the doctor returned, however, something was different, something was softer about both of them.

Natalie settled easily, snuggled against my chest.

The doctor leaned in, spoke quietly, slower.

Something was wrong.

While the epinephrine shot had taken down some of the swelling in Natalie’s face and chest, the doctor explained that this was not the allergic reaction she had originally suspected.

Natalie had a mass compressing the large vessels in her chest, causing her breathing symptoms. It was visible on the chest x-ray and later, on the CT scans. At that moment, I didn’t just hold her like a mother. For a moment, I became her mother, summoning every protective and nurturing and defensive instinct that I had, emotions that I took with me into her surgery and her first rounds of chemo before the Larkins let me go.

I still hold a place for Natalie in my heart, as if her pain was mine, and while I didn’t know the outcome of Natalie’s treatments as I held my first child, Jessica Nicole, for the first time, I think perhaps it was better. I knew Natalie was a strong little girl, one whose parents loved her with immense hope and dedication, one who helped shape the human experience I enjoy as a nanny, and one that touched me far into my own journey of motherhood. And even with the heartache it brought, I wouldn’t have traded my time with the Larkins for any other family, nor for any other job.

Melissa Franckowiak is an MFA student and a practicing anesthesiologist in Buffalo, NY. Her short fiction recently placed in the Writer’s Digest Literary Fiction Awards, and her work has appeared in Parent Co., MothersAlwaysWrite.com, Motherly, Ghost Parachute, Rio Grande Review, Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review, and the anthology, *Children of Zeus*. She writes thrillers as Melissa Crickard. Melissa carney-barked and scooped ice cream before becoming the mother of two children and the owner of a chatty Amazon parrot.

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