

The phone book was rapidly shrinking as the pages of failed phone calls were being tossed into the garbage. The last page of the childcare section of the book lay in front of him as he held his head in his large hands. He grabbed the phone with the last bit of energy he had and dialed a set of numbers.

“Hello, I am looking for a nanny for my two children” he said with a deep voice. There was a long pause as a person on the other side of the phone call talked about prices. He laid down the phone that slightly buzzed with a perky voice.

The door creaked open and a woman with messy short hair entered the room. “Ned! How are you?” she said.

“Ella,” Ned said standing up from the table, “What are you doing here?” Ella stood still and looked at him for a moment. She noticed the new deep lines from age on his face. They weren’t there when they first met and she introduced Ned to his wife.

“I heard about everything going on,” Ella said in a sympathetic voice. She walked over to the small wooden table with piles of papers covering the surface. The phone was still buzzing with a stranger’s voice. Ella gently picked it up and listened.

“Three o’clock on Thursdays and twelve o’clock on Saturdays. And the name of our company is ‘Nannies are us.’ The fee is...” she put down the phone.

“I can’t listen to another high pitched voice trying to inform me how they will look after my kids!” Ned said grabbing his head.

“Ned, it’s okay. I can help out! I love Audrey and Bari. I will be your nanny,” Ella declared.

“Ella, how do you always manage to save the day? Now I know why Keri,” he paused and looked at the gold wedding band on his left hand, “liked you so much.”

“Don’t worry Ned! Keri will always be with you even if she isn’t here,” said Ella softly. She reached for the phone that was still buzzing and turned it off.

“Thank-you so much. Can you come by in the morning before I leave for work?” Ned asked eagerly.

“Sounds good Ned, I will see you in the morning then,” Ella said as she put her bag on her shoulder.

“I am just concerned with their learning,” Ned said as he opened the door for Ella, “The kids just really need to focus on their work.” He waved goodbye as she walked to her small car and drove away. He climbed the old stairs and stopped in front of an old wooden door which was covered in pink stickers spelling ‘Audrey.’ Ned quietly opened the door and walked over to the pink bed. He leaned over and gave her a kiss on the forehead and whispered goodnight as he quietly slid out the door again. Down the hall a door with a picture of a dinosaur and racecar pasted on, was slightly opened. Light poured out from the cracks in the door and filled the hallway. Ned glided quickly down the hallway and swung open the door. A little boy was sitting on his bed drawing a picture. His face was wet with tears and his eyes were red and puffy.

“Bari, what is wrong?” Ned asked softly.

“I miss Mommy. Daddy when is she coming home?” Bari said using the blue crayon to draw tears from a stick figure’s eyes.

“Mommy will be back before you know it. You know she loves you very much,” Ned said walking back to the door, “Goodnight Bari-boo, go to sleep.”

“I love you Daddy,” said Bari in a whisper as his door was closed and room’s light

was dimmed.

“Good morning Audrey, Good morning Bari!” Ella sang. Audrey and Bari jumped out of bed and ran to the cheerful voice.

“Ella! What are you doing here?” Audrey said in a squeaky voice.

“I am here to see you guys! I am going to be your Nanny.” Ella gasped struggling to speak as the two kids hugged her tightly.

“We have missed you so much,” proclaimed Bari.

“We have! We have!” agreed Audrey jumping up and down.

“I missed you both as well,” Ella said, “Lets go to the kitchen and have some breakfast.” She led the kids to the kitchen table and walked to the cupboard.

“If I remember correctly ‘Crispy corn’ is Audrey’s favorite cereal and ‘Cas-O’s’ is Bari’s favorite cereal” Ella said confidently pulling out the cereal boxes.

“Yes! Yes! You got it right,” squeaked Audrey. Ella put two bowls and two spoons on the table along with the milk and cereal boxes.

“Delicious,” Bari said quietly as he scooped the cereal into his mouth, “Thank-you!” Ella glided to the counter as her grey sleeves slid down passed her hands. She grabbed her coffee mug and attempted to hold her hand steady. She sat down at the table spilling some coffee on herself.

“Oh my,” she said patting the wet coffee stain on her sweatshirt.

“Is Daddy working today?” Bari asked giggling at the mess of coffee on the table.

“It’s Tuesday, of course he is working; he always works on Tuesday.” Audrey said shaking her head. Her long straight ponytail moved back and forth.

“You are right Audrey! Dad is working but he left me with a list of things he wants you to do,” Ella said pulling out a sheet of paper he left on her door in the morning before he went to work.

His messy handwriting was barely legible but she could make out the words “work on math.” And in bold print on the bottom of the page it read, “Remember to focus on learning.” She folded the note up and put it back in her pocket.

“Your Dad wants you to ‘work on your math,’” she said in a mocking tone.

“Yes! Everyday Daddy gives us a math problem to do” Audrey said firmly

“Even during the summer like today!” Bari added excitedly. He ran quickly up the stairs making the old steps creak to the rhythm of his feet. When he arrived back to the table he was holding a blue and pink exercise book. He collapsed on his chair trying to catch his breath.

Audrey took the pink exercise book and flipped through the pages showing Ella the math problems she solved. The children both opened their books to a new page that had a math question written on the top of the page. In the right corner of the lined paper there was a heart that said ‘I love you’ in it.

“Well you two work on your math and I am going to get this stain off my sweater,” Ella said smiling at little Bari who was giggling, “After we will go to the park!”

Bari looked at Audrey excitedly and whispered “We haven’t been to the park since Mom went on her trip.” Audrey’s old eyes lightened and she smiled back at him.

After Ella rinsed her sweater and removed the stain she put her short hair in a

ponytail. Her green eyes were tired but still looked bright. She wiped her face and went to the table where the kids were working. Bari and Audrey put down their pencils when Ella came into the kitchen.

“We are all done!” they said in unison.

“That one was an impossible problem.” Bari said softly.

“No Bari. It was not impossible it was difficult. There is a solution to the problem therefore it is not impossible,” Audrey lectured shaking her head.

“Audrey are you twenty years old? You are very mature for your age,” Ella said winking at Bari.

“I am Seven and three quarters, silly, not twenty!” Audrey said blushing.

“I am only two years younger than ‘miss maturity,’ I am five and a half!” Bari said laughing.

“Go get ready and we will go to the park!” Ella said in a singsong voice. They gave her a quick hug and galloped up the stairs. Ella pulled out the folded note again from her pocket and read the words in bolded print over and over. “Remember no imagination.” She couldn’t come up with an explanation why Ned would not let his kids be creative and imagine things that are ‘impossible’ and beyond reality. Bari and Audrey came flying down the stairs with their hats on and the smell of sunscreen suggested they had already applied a layer of cream.

“Lets go!” Bari said as he jumped up and down with excitement. With both children on either side of Ella they walked down the street, hand in hand, to the park. The trees engulfed them when they walked into the park. Ella ran towards a tree in the center of the park. Her ponytail fell out and her short wavy hair swayed

behind her. Bari and Audrey followed her to the bottom of the massive tree. The bright green leaves swayed slowly in the breeze and the moss that covered the ground extended onto the base of the tree. Ella began to climb higher and higher until she was looking down at the children. The light that passed through the holes in the blanket of leaves created patches on Ella's face.

"Wow, how did you climb so high?" Audrey yelled.

"You just climb, but not too high that you will fall," she said laughing. Bari ran to a smaller tree and wrapped his arms around a branch and began to feel a rhythm.

He sang, "Grab a branch, push up, stand, grab a branch, push up, and stand." He climbed high in the little tree and Ella watched him cautiously shouting "weak branch" if he was about to grab a thin branch that would not support his weight.

"I feel like I am floating, it's amazing," Bari shouted and birds flew away from nearby trees. Ella glanced down at him and for a slight second he appeared to be floating above the branch hanging freely with the leaves. Ella shouted and tried to grab Bari but he was standing back on the branch after she blinked. With a sigh of relief she looked at the bottom of the tree where Audrey still stood in shock. Audrey tried to scout out a small tree that had thick branches but there was none that fit her criteria.

"Come up with me," Ella shouted, "I can help you up!" Audrey nodded. Her eyes seemed to grow and brighten with every branch she grabbed. When she was about to grab a 'weak branch' both Bari and Ella yelled. When she reached Ella they sat on a thick branch and Bari did the same in his tree. They all smiled at each other and laughed.

Ella closed her eyes and said “Imagine a warm beach with the ocean waves hitting the sand.” Audrey and Bari both closed their eyes and imagined.

“Now imagine stepping in the warm sand and the cool ocean grabbing your feet,” Ella said, “imagine the fish that live and swim in the ocean and all the bright colors.”

“Wow,” shouted Bari, “That was so beautiful.”

“Yes it was wonderful” Audrey agreed. Ella remembered the note in her pocket, and the last line. The words began to echo in her head, “Focus on learning.”

Ella looked at her watch and said quickly, “Your dad will be home soon! We better get going!” They climbed carefully down their trees until they reached the ground. They continued to laugh and play all the way out of the park. When they reached the road Ella looked behind them and saw a trail of small wet footprints. She bent down and felt Bari’s feet. They were wet and he had sand stuck on his sandals. She looked for puddles that occasionally lined the road but there was nothing.

“Why are your feet soaking?” Ella asked concerned as she found that Audrey’s were the same as Bari’s. The children just giggled and grabbed her hand and continued walking. When they arrived back at the house Ella instructed them to wash off their feet and get ready for supper.

“Ella, I haven’t had such a fun day since mom had to go away! Thank you!” Audrey said sweetly as Bari ran up the stairs. Her perfectly long and straight ponytail fell out. Now her hair was in her face and wavy. She ran up after Bari laughing and smiling.

Ella sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands, “What did I do?” she asked herself over and over again until the door creaked open.

“Hello. Ella how was the first day?” Ned said cheerfully as he closed the door and sat down next to her.

“I think I made a mistake,” Ella said shakily.

“What happened? What did you do?” Ned said firmly.

“I...” she paused, “we imagined a beach and waves and the children’s feet were soaked by the ocean.”

“What? Did you not understand the note I left for you,” he said raising his voice.

“Your right, I didn’t understand! It wasn’t your messy writing that confused me, it’s the fact you don’t want your kids to have fun!” Ella uttered.

“You don’t get it. I need to show you something,” he said softly, “I will bring the kids over to the neighbors house!”

“Okay” agreed Ella. Ned and Ella got in his truck. It was a red pickup truck that smelt like cheap air freshener.

“Where are we going?” Ella questioned. Her hair was tied back but some pieces fell on either side framing her face.

“The hospital.” Ned said slowly with out emotion. The rest of the drive out was silent. When the car stopped it was outside the hospital, which Ned worked in. They walked in together awkwardly far apart. Strangers that passed Ned greeted him with a,“Hello Dr. Goodly.” He said hello or gave them a smile and continued onwards. They walked until they were in the special care unit on the medical floor. They stopped when they were outside room 5-17.

Ned’s eyes were red and a tear trickled down his face. He opened the door for Ella and led her in. Lying on a bed hooked up to machines and wires was a thin pale

woman. Her hair was long and covered the pillow she was lying on. Her eyes were closed and her heart beat was displayed on a monitor. Ella's eyes filled up with tears and her knees became weak; she sat down next to the woman and gently grabbed her hand.

"I thought she went on a trip," Ella said as her voice trailed off. The woman's hands were small and thin and on one finger was a wedding ring that caught the light.

"I didn't know how to tell you," Ned said quietly.

"How? How did this happen?" she questioned softly. He looked at her and wiped away the tears on his face.

"That's what I need to tell you," he whispered, "this goes against all science and everything I believe in but I think she is lost in her imagination."

"What do you mean?" Ella hesitated.

"She could always paint a picture in your mind and transport you places, she made everything real when she held your hand. She was explaining and imagining the first snowfall. She closed her eyes and described it to me, and then her hand became so cold. I tried to get her to open her eyes but nothing happened. I think her mind is still in that place. I think she is lost," Ned said quietly.

"If that is true, we must find her and get her back" Ella said dabbing her eyes with her sleeve.

"I have tried to imagine her and the snow but I don't have that gift she had," Ned said grimly.

"I think your children do," Ella said, "They can save her. We will find her."

“I can’t risk losing them too,” Ned said, “It’s much easier to get lost than to be found,”

The next morning the note on Ella’s door just said, “I can’t risk losing them too.” Ella folded it and put it in her pocket.

“Audrey Good morning! Bari Good morning! Wake up!” Ella said in her singsong voice. Audrey and Bari both jumped out of bed and ran down the stairs. They ran towards Ella and hugged her tightly.

“We have to do something very important now,” Ella said trying to keep her voice steady. Ella took both of their hands and led them to the couch.

“Imagine with all your heart your mother,” Ella instructed, “Imagine her thin hands and long fingers and pink nails. Imagine her long hair that dangled behind her.”

“Imagine her big blue eyes. Imagine her tiny noes,” Audrey suggested.

“Imagine her spirit. Imagine her personality. Imagine how much she loved us. Imagine that time she helped me get up after I fell off my bicycle” Bari whispered.

“Imagine all the times she helped me with my math problems,” Audrey said slowly. The windows flew open and snow began to float gently in the house.

“Imagine her hugs and how she sang Lullabies,” Bari said loudly, “Mommy! I see her! Take my hand mommy! No she is too heavy.”

“Bari, you are strong enough to pull her up!” Ella said squeezing his hand that was becoming cold.

“Imagine how much we miss and love her!” Ella and Audrey shouted.

“Mommy just a little bit further! You are almost here! I love you!” Bari shouted.

The wind died down and the snow started to melt inside the house, which was quickly growing warmer. They sat silently for a few minutes, holding one another’s hands tight.

“I feel like Mommy gave me a hug,” Bari said breaking the silence.

“I think she did. I felt it too. You can’t even imagine how good it was to see her again,” Audrey whispered.