

Maia Siegel

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educators: Brittany Cavallaro, Maia Siegel

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Office Politics

My mother was a finalist in a big writing contest, and people were speaking to her differently, like she was smart.

She had just quit her job at the university, and I had seen her cry a lot this past year. She had quit because the man who had hired her twelve years before turned to her and smiled tight and told her the graduate students were making more than her and did she know that? She did not know that, no.

My father tried to snub the people at work, the people who had wronged her, as much as possible; he'd close the door on them, eat all the donuts so none could be passed around, skip the company picnic. He described this at the kitchen table: how a box of Krispy Kreme was set in the middle of the table, how he grabbed each glazed ring after another, how he looked everyone in the meeting straight in the eye, sugar coating his chin. How he ate all twelve, even though he didn't like sweets that much. *But those, those were real sweet*, he said. *Real sweet.*

I was disgusted by how petty my parents could be, how much they hated their coworkers. It also thrilled me a little; I hated the children of their co-workers as a debt to my family. I wanted their children to be unpopular in school, to get bad acne, to do something really wrong, so I could be justified in my hatred. Betrayal spread through blood, in this cosmic widening of office politics. I wanted to fight the department chair's children on the playground, for my family. I wanted all the adults to watch. I wanted to punch what my parents couldn't. I needed to redeem them in front of the faculty, on the lawn below all the offices.

It felt as if my mother being a finalist (and everything around it: the buying of the awards ceremony dress, the self-conscious tucking of the award into her desk, the inviting of plus-ones, the hushed applause for the other finalists) was all meant for my mother's old co-workers, a redemption arc of sorts. My father couldn't wait to return from the awards show, whisper to the guy next to him in a meeting how good the lobster was. The lobster was terrible. They didn't need to know that.

What really happened after my father returned from the awards ceremony: he sat silently before the department meeting, buzzing. Finally, someone huffed: *Alright, how was it, then?* When my father retells this, he looks intently into the square of my face, puts on an alien voice of smooth calm: *Well, actually, it was fucking fantastic.*

Once, I said I wanted to have a playdate with the child of the woman who had stolen my mother's job. The story of this job-stealing is complicated and bureaucratic and I love simplifying it into this, into a robbery of sorts. It doesn't matter if this is how it actually went. This is what I was told, what I, at twelve years old, felt in my bones was a great injustice: my mother was robbed of something, and the robber had been her friend. And the child of the robber was my friend from birth, one of those that parents put side-by-side as babies, so the children have no choice but to cleave onto each other. I felt a deep urge to see her now, even though I had never particularly liked watching *Martha Speaks!* with her, or how she always wanted to pretend to be wolves, roaming around her bedroom.

My mother would not allow this playdate, and so I suddenly cut all contact with her, my friend. I knew the girl's mother was the reason we had less money now. I knew my mother could barely speak her name out loud. The robber, the mother, wrote books with teenage girls' legs on the covers. They were frilly, fruity covers. The accomplice, the father, was an alcoholic. He wrote about birds.

My parents knew the father of my friend was an alcoholic, and that he smoked weed with his students. They held it

against him after his wife took my mother's job. Why did my parents let me sleep over? They knew all this long before they hated him. They always let him drive me home, in his Jeep with no doors.

There was always a vague sense of danger at the house of the woman that stole my mother's job. I loved that, how I always seemed like the sensible one, next to her daughter. Case in point: the first time I saw a real gun was in the hands of the seven-year-old neighbor of the woman who stole my mother's job.

Her daughter and I had been playing with the neighbor children; there was the boy with the gun, who was a little younger than us, and two girls, his sisters, who were four or five. We didn't see any adults in the house. The boy asked us if we would like to see his grandfather's pistol. Did we say yes? We climbed up the stairs, stood near the door of a bedroom with a large floral bedspread laying dead over a Queen bed. He dove under the bed, and got out a wooden box, inside which laid the gun, quiet. I didn't want him to pick it up. I pointed to his BB gun, lying close. I wanted to see him shoot *that one*.

We all went outside, where the girls ran around in the yard. The boy lined up a Fresca can on his porch, hoisted the BB gun up higher. We stepped back. He shot an orange pellet through the can. Metal flared around the edges of the hole. The girls were still running around in the background. *Stop*, I said, *stop. You're going to hit them*. He kept shooting at the can, losing his orange pellets, and I looked at the girls in the yard, just milling about. I don't know what happened that made him put the BB gun down. We had to go, maybe. Without an audience, there was no reason to shoot.

The daughter of the woman who stole my mother's job walked behind me, back to her house. While we were gone, her mother had made chocolate bark, with nuts and fruit sticking out like jewels. My mother never made anything like this. My mother baked pumpkin bread on Teacher Appreciation Day, and let the family eat the extra ones. Her pumpkin bread was flat, and disc-like. No jewels.

I moved away after my mom found a job in a new state, a better job, offered to her because of the new award shoved in her desk, but I still heard stories about the daughter of the job-stealing woman from my old friends. She left school because people spread rumors that she thought she was a wolf, and that she was attracted to them. She started running cross-country at her new school. She wore a bra outside on Halloween, with no shirt. She sat on a boy's lap and fed him grapes by hand at a school carnival. The boy was in a wheelchair and she wheeled him around, shaking her hips as she pushed the chair. The publicness of this stunt forced her to move schools again. I never wanted her to settle, the way I hadn't been allowed to, after my mother had been forced out by hers.

I also admired her in these stories, even though the reason for my move from my friends and my home was directly related to her mother. I wanted to strangle her in a dark alleyway, just like how I had wanted to fight her on the playground when her mother's betrayal first happened. But I also wanted to braid her hair, to lay down next to her and ask what it was like to pop grapes into that boy's mouth. This last feeling was forbidden, and so it made me want it even more.

I had hated this girl and her family so much that my hands buzzed when I thought of them. I had never talked to her about any of this, and she had never talked to me, and yet I hoped she held equally strong opinions about me. An unequal hatred scared me.

I wanted her to find out how terrible her parents were, how her father made a fool of himself at company events after a handful of drinks. I didn't want her to know what fools my parents had made of themselves, too, how silly my father must've looked in that meeting, reaching for yet another donut. I wanted to protect her from ever knowing all this, and I wanted to yell it at her. I wanted to tell her and then act like I had never seen her before in my life. I wanted to hurt her and heal it right after. I wanted to spin around with her, both of us equally off balance. I wanted to grab her hands while we spun. I wanted my fingernails to imprint into her palms, so she would be marked by me the same way I had been marked by her family. I wanted to spin in silence, become too dizzy to absorb the anger of my family. I didn't want to plan past the spinning.