



Photo by Josh Kenzer

Fortune Cookie #9

Braden inches sideways so Sissy can squeeze in beside him on the upstairs landing. Now he can't see the living room wall downstairs where Mom or Dad's shadow falls sometimes. He wants to see their shadows. When he does, he imagines their fight is like those shows with puppets behind the screen, where, in the end, nothing bad ever happens.

Downstairs, Mom says, "You left your phone on the table. I checked your recents. God, are you stupid."

"You checked my phone?"

"I knew—"

"What the hell gives you the right? Your deranged need to manufacture drama? Your psycho-pathetic projections? Your—"

"You said no secrets."

“I fucking don’t believe—” Mumble, mumble.

Sissy jerks. “Daddy said a bad word.” She pulls away and scoots along the landing, pressing her ear against the bannister. Braden hears swishing, Mom’s long floaty pants. She’s walking fast. He yanks Sissy back.

Dad says, “She’s the new departmental secretary. She has lots of questions.”

The swishing stops. Mom says something but Braden only gets “email.”

Dad growls something, and Mom yells, “Her personal number? Her personal, unlisted number? At ten o’clock at night? While I’m putting the fucking kids to bed?”

Sissy flinches. Her elbow jabs Braden’s ribs. He puts his arm around her. Through her nightgown, she feels sweaty.

“Priya,” Dad says, like this funny name is a piece of candy in his mouth. Now Braden can see a shadow on the wall, whose he can’t tell. “Her name is Priya Singh. Call the department tomorrow. She’ll answer. It’s her job.”

The shadow leaps away.

“I’m not giving you my goddamn phone,” Dad shouts. “Stop it.”

Braden hears wrestling—they might be on the couch—then a thwack, a thud, and Mom laughs the laugh that makes Braden feel like he is shrinking inside his skin. Sissy squirms. He holds her closer.

Stumbling sounds in the living room. He and Sissy scramble to their feet as Mom appears in the archway downstairs.

Braden pinches his sister to keep her from talking. “I took Sissy to the bathroom. She had to go.”

“Get back in bed,” Mom shouts up. “Now.”

Sissy runs into her bedroom. He follows her in and pulls her comforter up to her chin. She asks, “What’s Mommy’s boyfriend’s name?”

“Jerome,” he whispers.

* * *

The next day it’s Dad’s turn to pick them up at school. Sissy is in pre-kindergarten, Braden in first grade. Dad promises them a trip to the pet store. They can get fish, one fish each. Braden doesn’t like fish—they’re icky. Sissy can have his, he says. They’re not supposed to know Mom has a boyfriend.

They stare at the tanks. The fish come in cartoon colors and strange shapes. Braden doesn’t like the plain black, fish-shaped fish either. All the fish move as if invisible threads connect them. When one turns, they all turn. He is glad he’s not attached to anyone.

Sissy taps on a tank.

“Can I get two of these, Daddy?”

The fish have dangly fins and are the red and purple of bad bruises.

Dad says sure.

The shop girl he’s been talking to whips out a little net and a plastic bag and says they’re Siamese Fighting Fish.

“Siamese Fighting Fish. That’s great,” Dad says. “What are you going to name your fish, Sweetie?”

Sissy holds up the water bag with the two ugly blobs inside. Before she can answer, Braden says, “Priya and Jerome.”

A friend is a present you give yourself.

Lucky # 9, 13, 4, 16, 5, 6

