A MILLION TINY MISSILES ALL AT ONCE

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For Justine, for everything

1983

I got kidnapped when I was four years old.

Well, not really kidnapped. I kind of agreed to be a part of it. My dad said that the guy who took me wasn't all there in the head, but he also says that I'm not all there in the head. Everyone panicked and lost their minds for a short time. We were living in the middle of nowhere, even more in the middle of nowhere than where we live now. Mom didn't work then; she stayed home and took care of my brother Bo and me. Dad had just started working with the police – he was always out on twelve- or thirteen-hour shifts because it was his first year as a policeman and they work you like dogs when you first join just to see if you got the guts to handle it.

That's what my dad says, anyway.

Mom never let us go outside in the backyard on our

own because we had black bears that would get into Dad's vegetable garden. Black bears are almost always scared of you but if you get in between them and their food or their little cubs they'll tear you to pieces.

I don't have very many memories of that house or that neighbourhood. Mom said she left most of the pictures behind when we moved. I guess she hated it there. We still have a couple of pictures left in the photo album, though. Faded, orange-brown shots of me and Bo making forts out of tired-looking brown sofa cushions and another of us on the roof of our house with a toboggan. That winter, the snow piled up over the top of the back door. Both of us have frozen grins stuck to our shiny red faces, cheeks blazing, eyes looking out towards the sea of white. Happy.

I don't remember it.

My only real memory is going for walks with Mom. There were no sidewalks or street lights out there so we always walked during the day but in the winter when the snow piled up and the wind screamed through the creaky bones of our old house, I guess Mom probably got pretty desperate and would take us out for walks even after it got dark.

In this memory, me, Bo and Mom walked down the road. There were barely any cars and the sidewalks were chest-high with snow, so we'd walk down the middle of the cracked and empty street. The sun dropped real fast below the line of trees at the bottom of the hill. Mom said we were going to walk around the block. In my head, I pictured us circling a giant yellow block of LEGO. I got

excited to see it and did that thing I do when I'm excited which is twist my wrists and crack my knuckles. When I realized there was no LEGO, I got real upset. I remember Bo giving me a big hug and saying, 'Don't worry, 'Lias, I'll make you a giant block of LEGO when we get home,' which made it all better.

We walked around the block, Bo's arm around me, Mom walking behind us. The sun went down and the sky cleared. The cold wrapped around your bones and got into your blood and we just walked in the quiet with a million stars spreading out above our heads like buckshot.

On the day I got kidnapped, Mom was helping Bo because he'd tripped down the small flight of stairs that led to the living room and twisted his ankle. I had wandered outside.

Mom thinks what happened was that this guy came along on a bicycle and asked me if I wanted to go get some potato chips with him. Because I was only four and because my dad says I'm autistic and don't know good from bad, I said 'yes' and he put me on the handlebars of his bike and off we went.

It was the easiest kidnapping ever, I bet.

Whenever Mom told this story, Bo would pipe in and say how the guy on the bicycle was the 'R' word, except he didn't say 'R-word' he said the real word and Mom would always shush him and tell him not to say it.

'Why not?' Bo would ask and Mom would say because it's mean to say that word and Bo would hoot a little and say 'whatever' and Mom would just suck her teeth, frown

and keep going with the story. I get called that word a lot nowadays but Bo never calls me it.

Anyway, the guy who took me on his bicycle to get potato chips forgot to tell me that the nearest place that sold them was over an hour away by bicycle and by the time Mom went out to look for me I was long gone, churning down the side of the highway sitting on the handlebars of a rusty old bike with no idea where I was or who I was with.

Mom called Dad and then Dad had half the police force in the area out looking for me. She was convinced I'd been eaten by a black bear, grabbed by the scruff of the neck and carried away to the woods behind our house where it was pitch-dark and empty, then torn apart and eaten, my bones spat out all over the ground. I guess thinking that kind of thing about your own kid would be kinda heavy.

After it got dark, the fear really must have sunk pretty deep into Mom's guts. The police and the volunteers Mom had rounded up still couldn't find me. She told me that after a while she just sat on the stoop and cried into her lap with the dark Canadian wind howling all around her and the red and blue flash of the police-car lights painting the side of our rot-heavy house.

Bo did not sit down. He got on his bike and pedalled around the neighbourhood, calling my name for hours. He pedalled and pedalled and banged on doors, showing everyone that would open their door a picture of me and when he got too tired and his legs cramped up he sat on

the side of the road and rubbed them until he drove the cramp out and then he got back on his bike and looked some more, his nine-year-old heart pounding out his chest like some kind of wild animal.

I'm not sure Bo ever had much of a voice in his head telling him not to do something. And if that voice ever started talking, I think he got to strangling it fast. Sometimes I wish I could do that.

Mom said Bo was gone so long she thought he'd gone missing too and when he finally came back he was covered in sweat and bug bites and dark tears. He was so furious that he couldn't find me he got off his bike, picked it up and slammed it into the side of the house over and over again until it was bent and twisted and no longer a bike and Dad had to wrap his big arms around him to get him to stop.

After a few more hours, the police got a phone call from a guy in town who ran a little corner shop. He said that he had a kid with him who wanted potato chips. He said some guy on a bike had dropped him off and rode away. He said the guy must've been some sort of nut.

Like I said, I don't remember any of it. I sometimes think I remember the flashing blue and red lights of the police car when Dad raced down to get me. He drove full speed even though the guy at the store said I was fine.

As I got older, Mom and Dad still argued about it. Dad would bring it up when he wanted to get back at her for something. He would say it was her fault I got kidnapped, how she couldn't take care of us properly and that she

should know that I wasn't smart enough to figure out good from bad even though I was only four. Dad would say that she'd just have to accept that I'd never be a normal kid. Mom said that any kid could've been picked up by that guy and just thank God I wasn't hurt.

I think about that guy who took me sometimes. I wonder what was going through his head when he decided to do that. I try to remember riding that bike high up on the handlebars, the wind brushing my face with its soft fingers.

But what I think about most is Bo riding around like a lunatic on his bike, beating on doors, trying to find me. I think he would've chewed through a concrete sidewalk if he thought I was under it. I like to think that he would've rode to the other side of the world on that ratty old bike to find me.

Anyway, I'm not too sure he'd even bother, now.