

The Forever of Remembering

by

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This story starts on a Friday evening at a kitchen table in Santa Monica, California, me on the phone with a pediatric-neurosurgeon son of a friend of my mother's. "Unilateral coronal craniosynostosis," he is saying, and he is explaining it to me: a baby's skull, unlike an adult's, is made of several plates of bone that meet at the baby's soft spot—plates that grow together after the child's brain is grown. In my four-month-old son's case, the bones on his right have grown together prematurely, leaving his skull unable to grow on that side. His brain, undeterred, has grown disproportionately on the left, leaving him with the beginnings of a lop-sided head. The solution—this is when I first start crying, when I hear this—is to cut my baby's head open, cut off the front half of his skull, reshape his forehead or perhaps cut it into tiny pieces they will wire together, and replace it forward on his head, for him to grow into. Optional surgery, but not really, the neurosurgeon tells me. My son's brain will be fine even if we do nothing, but without the surgery every time we walk into a grocery store, people will turn to stare. "His brain will be fine," the surgeon repeats. "He'll understand they're staring at him."

A week later, I am at a thrown-together, best-friends-only private baptism despite my Episcopal priest's assurance that "we"—unlike the Catholic Church I grew up in—don't believe little babies are barred from heaven just because they haven't been splashed. And then I am at the doctor's office, being read the awful list, the your-son-may-die stuff. And then it's the day, May

tenth, and we are handing our son over to the nurse who will take him into the operating room. I have been warned how devastating this will be, but my imagination has failed me. Somehow, I imagined this moment to be like when I'd handed my happy, healthy son over to the nanny the first time, wondering if she was, underneath her all-American girl exterior, a direct link to the black market in baby adoptions or Jacqueline the Ripper or simply incompetent. But this is nothing like that. When I cried on that first drive back to work, I was not imagining a scalpel slicing through my baby's pale skin, or the saw cutting through his bone, or his brilliant brain exposed to even the smallest disaster of a mistake. Not once that morning did I see little baby-sized coffins.

This is just the backstory, and maybe I could tell this story without it, but I can't think the story without it, so there it is. But the story does have a happy ending. Our son survives the surgery, grows up strong and healthy and handsome, makes the high school tennis team, gets straight A's, plays an extraordinary game of chess. Mac and I survive the surgery, too, against all odds. We have a second son, a soccer-playing thespian mathematician, and we move to Baltimore, to Nashville, to Palo Alto. We abandon lucrative legal careers for writing lives. And our nanny, Sonia Aguilar—our housekeeper first, and then the fourth and last nanny we will ever hire—gets a happy ending too: three children and one grandchild, and a day care center in her own home.

That all comes after that moment at the hospital, the handing over of my baby. At the time, Sonia is our cleaning lady, whom I prefer to think of as "housekeeper," a term with more dignity, and we are already on our second nanny: a mature, responsible woman who will not be intimidated by the bruised and scarred baby who comes home after the operation, who will never

forget to put the antibiotic ointment on his scar, who hold him close and comfortable in her lap. She will last only a few months, though, before returning east to care for her own grandchild, leaving us to hire a perky British girl who will lie about her citizenship, who will record in a journal that she feeds and bathes our son and takes him to the park when the truth is she lounges in my swimsuit in my jacuzzi tub, ignoring the squawking on the baby monitor, that she abandons him to Sonia's care while she goes off with her boyfriend. And we will be left, for the fourth time, in the throes of a nanny search which—have you ever done a nanny search?—is no easy thing. How do you trust your judgment after you've hired this false Mary Poppins? How can you be sure you'll find someone who is not just smart and kind and loving, but also as unrelentingly careful as you are, who will keep your son's cap on over his sun-sensitive scar, who will tell him how handsome he is, who will not, God forbid, let him fall off a slide or the monkey bars onto his fragile new forehead, his skull with the gap where the bone has not yet filled in?

Mac and I paid a decent wage for a housekeeper on the west side of L.A. at the time, which would not have been enough to live on anywhere in L.A. even working full time, which Sonia wasn't. It was more than most people paid non-English-speaking, probably-illegal-immigrant-so-just-don't-ask "housekeepers," but it was a pittance. We paid our nannies considerably more, and we employed them full time and then some—they started at 8 a.m. and stayed until one of us got home from work, rarely earlier than 7:00 and sometimes midnight and beyond. And we had not once considered hiring anyone who wasn't Mary-Poppins pale and English-speaking to fill that post. We interviewed candidates from nanny schools and nanny agencies, candidates who read the want-ads, nannies who'd heard about the job from other nannies in the neighborhood—it was that kind of neighborhood; the nannies knew each other, but

no one else much did. We spent evenings reading nanny resumes in the library, a room that was all bold patterns screaming for attention set perfectly off balance by an insipid earth tones and aqua couch, a room without coffee or end tables because we'd tired of the painters and crown-molding installers and all of it before we reached the coffee-and-end-tables aisle.

That's what we are doing the night we decide to hire Sonia as our nanny—we share the library couch with a stack of nanny-candidate resumes and a plate of cheese and crackers, wine glasses on the floor. The library is sparkling clean—this was a Sonia cleaning day—and the sheers, vacuumed free of dust, are billowing in the warm evening breeze; even the desk, a huge, leather-topped, not-quite-antique partners' desk I'd found dusty and forgotten in a corner of an antique warehouse storage-room looks almost respectable.

Mac, grinning a toothy, Bugs Bunny grin though he is much more handsome than that sounds (turn-around, drop-dead good-looking when he is not smiling, and utterly, boyishly charming when he is) asks if I'm hungry. "Sonia left a chicken," he says. Sonia cooked a chicken for us every week: pale, flaccid things that were still red and raw at the bone, things Mac left for me to throw out because it amused him that I could stomach neither sticking a still-warm Tuesday night chicken back into the oven nor suggesting to Sonia that she cease these offerings—not even in her job description, but dinners she made because she thought we ought to eat dinner at home at least this once a week. Which we did. We had cheese and crackers and wine every Tuesday night after I threw the chicken out.

"This one doesn't look too bad," he says. He's talking not about the half-cooked thing in the kitchen, but about a nanny candidate whose resume he's handing toward me.

I sit there on the awful couch in the too-loud room with the cheese and crackers and the

wine and the thought washing over me that I almost cannot bear to go through this again. I think of the day we found the partner's desk, when I'd imagined someday yanking one of those stuck drawers out and coming upon a five-dollar gold piece, or a daguerreotype photo of a baby in christening lace, his perfectly formed forehead framed by a white bonnet, or old love letters from Robert Browning to that woman who wrote the poem about the moose that I love even though I can't remember her name or much about the poem except the moose, and I have no idea, really, who Robert Browning is or if he was even alive at the same time as the poet—Mary Someone? I'd had this idea that someday Mac and I would abandon our high-stress, high-finance jobs to sit across from each other at that desk every morning and . . . and write poems about moose caught in headlights, and drink strong, politically-correctly-grown coffee, and laugh.

And the idea bubbles up again—not the idea of quitting work to write, because I don't have the confidence to see that as more than a dream yet, not quite yet. But the idea about Sonia.

I try to swallow, but my Adam's apple has grown unwieldy. It's the stupidest idea I've had since I got engaged to my college boyfriend winter break of my junior year. Mac will think it's a joke.

"Or this one," Mac says, pulling another sheet from the pile, another fine candidate from the same agency we paid big fees to assure us Nanny #1 was well-trained and experienced, Nanny #3 was here legally, Nanny #2 would be a long-term prospect, that she wouldn't have a new grandchild who needed her care.

"I was thinking . . ." I start, and Mac peers at me expectantly, his haircut making his ears stick out like a ten-year-olds, leaving him goofy-looking in a way that only enhances his boyishness.

There's a rustling on the baby monitor, and I imagine my son growing up to look like his father. And then quiet.

"I was thinking . . ." I say again, and I try to play out this scenario like we used to play out legal theories when we worked together, when any thread of a possibility was something to be explored. "I was thinking we should make Sonia the nanny."

Mac smiles, the beginning of a laugh, then purses his lips. He always knows when I'm about to cry, though he never can imagine why; it's one of his many talents, that he can always tell what a person is going to do even though he has no idea why. I have no idea why either, but I can feel the tears crawling up my throat, trying to make their way by my over-sized Adam's apple, which is climbing down into my empty stomach, making it swell.

"You know, Sonia doesn't speak English," he says cautiously.

"I know." My voice not quite steady.

He looks down at the stack of resumes. "And you don't speak Spanish."

"No."

"And neither do I?"

"I know."

He sets the stack of resumes on the cushion beside him, scoots a little closer. "We can't figure out how to tell her not to bleach the towels," he says. "Or how to cook a chicken."

I look to the sway-backed old desk, completely dust-free, wanting to say something about that but knowing it will sound ridiculous, that the fact that Sonia can dust a house to a polished shine and leave a window so clean you'd think it wasn't there has nothing to do with, say, how well she might teach our son his alphabet or his numbers in a language she doesn't even speak.

“Or even not to *bother* to cook a chicken,” Mac says.

I feel a smile somewhere behind my teeth, under my tongue.

“And her passport, I’m afraid, went into the same washing machine as Nanny #3's.”

“But she’ll *love* him.” My voice a pathetic wail Meg Ryan could turn into a great comic scene. “She loves him already.”

And it registers in his eyes, then, that we do know one thing about this maybe-illegal immigrant with whom we can’t communicate: she loves our son and his chapped cheeks and cradle cap, his staring eyes that are already behind glasses. She loves him without even the simple excuse that he is her son. It’s there in the way she touches his toes, his cheeks, his long pink scar that is slowly disappearing behind beautifully wispy blonde curls.

“She loves him,” I repeat, crying full-bore now, and Mac puts his arm around me, pulls me close, pats my head. “Shhh. Shhhh. It’s going to be okay,” he says. “He’s going to be fine. He’ll be fine, you’ll see.”

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“Does she drive?” Mac asks two mornings later, after the sitter has strollered our son and set off for the park, leaving us listening to the sputtering Honda that is Sonia’s husband dropping her off. I say I’m sure she drives, we’ve both seen her drive, though I do wonder how she reads the street signs—yield, stop, merge. He says we’ll have to provide her a decent car, and I say she can have the BMW, and he’s considerate enough not to point out how ridiculous this is: we will give our only reliable car to the nanny for her occasional use, leaving Mac to his daily commute in a ten-year-old Alpha, me to my longer one through some pretty bad neighborhoods late at night in an old Mercedes convertible that caught fire at La Cienega and the 10 freeway well after

midnight one night, before we started dating. (The police dispatch officer, who'd promptly told me to get back in the car, responded to my "The engine is *on fire!*" with something like "You are not in the Midwest anymore, Dorothy. Get back in the car and lock the doors.")

"We'll have to get her on the insurance," Mac says as Sonia's husband pulls to a stop. I try not to look at the dented front bumper, the scrape across the back passenger-side panel.

"Mrs. Clayton! Mr. Clayton," Sonia says, startled to see us. I'm usually gone long before she arrives, and even Mac is generally heading out, having left a check for her on the kitchen counter. She smiles uncertainly—has she done something wrong? is she being called to task for the half-cooked chicken? is she going to be fired?

"Everything is fine, Sonia," I say. "We think you're doing a great job." It sounds like my negotiating skills at work: The contract looks great, we just need to change everything but the signature line.

"We just have something we want to talk to you about," I say.

She might understand "fine" and "job," and maybe "talk," but she hasn't put these words together well enough to be reassured. I look down at the piece of paper in my hand. I've had my bilingual secretary write out the sentences I think I'll need—"We'd like you to be our nanny." "We'll pay you what we were paying Ellie"—but this isn't one of the phrases I anticipated needing.

"El . . . vaccuum?" Sonia says uncertainly. "Necesita..."

"No problema," Mac says, a phrase he picked up from his own secretary, the wonderfully ebullient Raquel. He motions with a hand—will Sonia come into the library? She hesitates, then follows us, standing even after I sit. Mac, raised in the South, is constitutionally unable to take a

seat until all the women are comfortable, and no one could describe Sonia as anything close to that. He motions to the near wing chair. “Please,” he says. “Have a seat.”

Miraculously, she does.

“Sonia, Ellie is leaving,” I say in Spanish, reading the first sentence on my cheat sheet, crinkled where I’ve gripped it too tightly. Mac looks at me, thoroughly astonished. I smooth the paper. “My secretary . . .,” I start to explain—to him, to her. I’m more prepared for this than he has imagined. I’m going to make this work.

“We need to hire a new nanny,” I read, again in Spanish.

“Nanny?” she says.

“I know you don’t speak English and I don’t—” I look down at my paper. Again, not a sentence I’ve written out.

“We think you would be a wonderful nanny,” I say, giving up on the Spanish. “All you have to do is love him. We can do the rest—the alphabet, the numbers, the college applications. We can do that ourselves.

“I know you already love him,” I say.

It’s a sign of my incredible presumptuousness that it hasn’t occurred to me that Sonia won’t be thrilled with the opportunity to be our nanny. She says several sentences, not a word of which I understand, but I get, anyway, that she’s not leaping at the job. I haven’t heard “si.”

The front door opens then, and at the sound of baby giggles, Sonia’s face lights up. The stroller fills the library doorway, and Sonia coos in Spanish. Our son isn’t speaking yet, but he takes in every word she says.

Mac picks up the phone, dials. “You’re on, champ,” he says to Raquel. “I think she

understands we want her to be the nanny, but we don't understand her, and the little guy isn't old enough to translate yet." This is why he is so much more effective than I am. He delegates to someone who knows what they are doing. I try to do everything myself.

He hands the receiver to Sonia, says "Raquel." Sonia's face lights up again—she adores Raquel and, unlike me, she isn't shy about showing it. She doesn't worry, that, say, she'll end up liking someone who doesn't like her back, that she'll look the fool. It's a moment I'll come to remember when approaching awkward social situations—how amazingly quickly one generous smile can spread.

Sonia listens to Raquel, then speaks, listens, hands the phone to Mac. Mac listens, says, "I see . . . Hmmm . . . Right," while I say, "What?! What?!"

"We hadn't thought about that," he says. "Can you ask her what would work for her? Hours-wise, pay-wise, commitment-wise." He listens for a minute, then says, "No, you're a better negotiator than I am. Look at the salary I'm paying you."

While Sonia and Raquel speak, Mac explains: Sonia has a family, a husband and a daughter. She loves our son and would love to care for him, but she knows the long days our nanny works, and her daughter needs her, too, her husband needs her, too.

I sigh. I'm an associate at a big law firm; the many things I can do in my life don't include being home regularly at five o'clock, or even at six, or seven, or eight. But Mac and Raquel and Sonia work it all out: the hours, the pay, the responsibilities. She can start at nine—Mac never leaves before nine, anyway. And he will be home by six every evening. We won't ask her to babysit on weekends, we'll find someone else for that—a someone who will eventually be Sonia's daughter Claudia, though that is years later.

And when I hand my son to Sonia that first morning, she runs her hand gently over his head like it is the sweetest little skull she has ever seen. “Mi amor,” she calls him. “Mi amor.”

It’s a small thing, Sonia’s comfort with my fairly-well-healed-now son, but it will make me weep three years later when he comes out of his second operation, a one-hour cosmetic touch-up that stretches on and on. An hour that turns into five hours and endless panic, that turns into forever before an exhausted young doctor finally enters the waiting room, before he explains that our son’s skull inexplicably failed to regenerate well after his first operation, before he describes the new forehead they have constructed for him with artificial bone. Before I begin to weep uncontrollably at the thought of the eggshell-thin skull my son has had all these first vulnerable years, at the thought of what might have happened if we’d left him in the hands of anyone less careful than Sonia all that time.

It’s then—we’ve moved to Baltimore and Sonia and her family have moved with us; the second operation is done at the University of Virginia, three hours away, and we are home recovering—that I ask Sonia why she and Hugo left El Salvador. I’m a fiction writer, and sometimes I can’t keep straight what is fact and what I have spun from fact, but I’m left with the impression of a bomb exploding, of a child screaming in her bed in a house engulfed suddenly in flames. I am left with the image of a young mother and father grabbing their daughter from that bed, of Sonia and Hugo rushing Claudia out and away, turning from the safety of an open field finally to watch their home collapse. It’s an astonishing story; as I listen, I wonder how I have known Sonia for years already and never known this is part of her life. But it doesn’t surprise me, or if it does it’s like that inevitable surprise I’m always striving for in fiction, that “of course, I should have seen that.” She has lived the same unbearable fear of losing her child that I have;

she, too, is left forever living it, forever searching through empty spaces for the unscarred face of a child in a photograph, long since grown into a full, rich life.

Approx. 3400 words