

## The Kinder Things

If I am being honest, and I try to be, at least with myself, I think it was the drugs that made me fall in love with Lucas.

Everyone thinks it was his personality, his looks, his quick-witted mind, the parties, the bonfires, but it was not that. Yes, some of those traits played a role, but what kept me there was the never-ending supply of pills and powders and the promise that I would not have to feel the full weight of my own life. If I am truly honest, the kind of honesty that strips everything down to bone, it was the stillness after the high settled in. The quiet. The way gravity seemed to loosen its grip on my chest. I felt like I could float. I could see clearly. I could feel nothing at all.

When the night thinned out and the sky began to peel at the edges, Lucas and I would sit on the curb with our backs against his car tires. The world would shrink into something small and manageable; the noise drained from it. In that quiet, he would press his forehead to mine and whisper as if he were sharing something sacred.

“This town is too small for us, Celia.”

He always said “us” as it meant forever. We were twenty years old and terrified of becoming ordinary.

The pills came later, or maybe they were always there. It’s hard to remember the exact order of things. Time bends when you are high often enough. Days smear together. Weeks dissolve.

At first, it felt harmless. Prescription bottles passed around like party favors. Little white and peach tablets with long official names that made them sound safe and controlled. They always came from someone who “didn’t need them anymore.”

We weren’t addicts. We were just curious.

That is what we told ourselves. We said we were experimenting, smoothing the sharp edges of a town that seemed determined to swallow us whole. Lucas would crush the pills carefully with the back of his lighter, tapping the powder into straight lines across the cracked screen of his phone.

“Just expanding our minds,” he would say, grinning at me like we were pioneers instead of bored kids with too much time and nowhere to go.

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When I found out I was pregnant, I didn’t cry.

I sat on the edge of the bare mattress and stared at the two white lines on the dresser until they blurred together.

“Lucus,” I said quietly. He knew by the sound of my voice.

He didn’t shout. He didn’t panic the way you see in movies. He went very still.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said, but his knee bounced the whole time.

He tried for a while. I’ll give him that. He stopped partying as much. He took a job stocking shelves at the hardware store. He came to an ultrasound appointment and squeezed my hand when the technician turned the screen toward us and showed us the small flicker of a heartbeat.

“That’s ours,” he whispered, and I could hear the awe trying to rise above his fear.

But fear is louder than awe.

By the seventh month, he was staying out late again. By the eighth, he stopped answering my calls. One morning I woke up, and everything of his was gone. The empty spaces were louder than any argument we could have had. I felt something close inside me that morning, something that would not open again.

“You’re strong,” he told me the last time I saw him. “Stronger than me.”

He said it as an apology. It felt like abandonment.

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Labor lasted thirty hours.

Thirty hours of fluorescent lighting and machines that beeped without rhythm. Thirty hours of gripping metal rails until my palms blistered, and hearing nurses tell me I was doing beautifully when I felt like my body was splitting open with no promise of being put back together correctly.

When they placed Aaliyah on my chest, she screamed, then blinked up at me with eyes too steady for someone so new. As if she were already assessing me. Already measuring the distance between who I was and who I needed to become.

“She’s perfect,” the nurse said.

She wasn’t.

Her left ear folded slightly at the top, like it had been pressed the wrong way. Her eyebrows angled downward just enough to give her a permanent expression of skepticism.

I loved her instantly for that.

The pain after birth was worse than I had imagined. My body felt stitched together with thread too delicate to survive a strong wind. The doctor handed me a prescription.

“For the pain,” he said, not unkindly.

The first pill felt like relief.

The second felt quiet.

The third felt necessary.

I breastfed her. I changed her. I held her when she cried. For the first year, I was present more often than not. I was tired, but I was there. I told myself I would stop once the pain faded.

But the pain did not fade. It changed shape.

I told myself I deserved something to make the crying easier — hers and mine. I told myself I needed to sleep so I could be a better mother. I told myself many things that sounded reasonable in the moment and ridiculous only in retrospect.

When the prescription ran out, I found more. When the pills became harder to afford, I found something cheaper. Something stronger. Heroin is less forgiving than hydrocodone. Fentanyl does not pretend to be kind.

The first time I left her alone, it was only twenty minutes.

She was asleep in her crib, her small chest rising and falling into a rhythm that soothed me. I kissed her forehead.

"I'll be right back," I whispered.

I remember hesitating at the door, my hand resting on the knob, a brief flicker of something sharp and warning in my chest.

But she was asleep.

And I needed something stronger.

The second time was an hour.

The third time, I lost track.

Aaliyah was two when I started leaving her alone longer. "She's old enough to understand," I told myself.

She was not old enough.

By three, I was using every day.

Not just for pain. Not just for quiet. For survival.

There were days I forgot to feed her until she tugged at my shirt and said, "Hungry."  
There were nights I locked the door and left her asleep so I could meet someone who promised something stronger.

Aaliyah learned the rules of me before she learned the alphabet.

If she needed me and I didn't respond, she would try water first, pressing a cold glass into my hand. If that failed, she would sit quietly beside me and wait. She did not cry loudly. She did not scream. She learned early that noise did not bring help.

The last clear memory I have is of her standing by the window in a pink shirt with a stain near the collar. She was trying to open a juice box by herself. Her folded ear peeked through her hair.

"Mama, watch," she said.

I told her I would be right back.

That was two weeks ago.

Or three.

Time bends.

I know she got sick. I remember her skin feeling too warm when I brushed past her. I remember thinking I should take her to a doctor. I remember choosing to lie down instead.

When I woke up, she was very quiet.

I knew then.

I knew in a place deeper than denial.

But knowing is not the same as accepting.

I held her for a long time. I told myself she was sleeping. I told myself that toddlers sleep deeply when they are growing. I told myself I would call someone once I felt steady enough to speak.

Instead, I used.

And when I used, she grew.

In my mind, she stood up and walked into kindergarten. She learned to read. She made ramen in the microwave at seven. She punched a boy in middle school for calling me a junkie. She filled out college applications without my help.

When the acceptance letter arrived, she didn't scream or cry. She stood in the living room holding the envelope, her expression unreadable.

"I did it," she said.

I framed the letter and hung it crooked above the couch.

In my mind, after graduation, she became a social worker because she understood broken homes. She married a quiet man named Thomas. She had two children of her own. She forgave me.

In my mind, she grew old. Her hair was streaked with gray.

My hands trembled more than they used to

In reality, she remained three.

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The apartment is quiet now.

It hasn't changed much.

The carpet is still stained near the couch. The blinds were still yellowed. The framed acceptance letter hangs crooked on the wall, though the paper inside has faded until it is blank.

She lies on the floor where I placed her when my arms became too heavy. Curled on her side, her thumb near her mouth, her folded ear visible.

The air smells sweet and wrong.

I step over her carefully.

The kitchen sink is full. I keep meaning to wash the dishes, but the faucet drips in a steady rhythm that almost sounds like breathing.

I avoided the hallway mirror. It warps my face. It makes me look older than I feel.

There is a knock at the door.

Sharp. Official.

"Aaliyah," I call softly. "Baby, someone's here."

She does not move.

The knock comes again.

"Celia Harrison, open the door."

I smooth my hair. My hands are shaking. The drugs on the coffee table glint under the light. Little glassine bags. A syringe. My real love. The only thing that has never left me.

I open the door.

Two police officers stand there. A woman from Child Protective Services stands behind them.

Their eyes move past me.

One officer steps inside. He stops.

The smell hits them first.

His face drains of color. He presses his hand to his mouth and turns away, gagging. The younger officer stares at the small body on the floor and then at me, his eyes filling in a way that surprises me.

“How long?” the woman whispers.

I smile, “she’s getting old now.”

The officer kneels beside my daughter. His shoulders begin to shake. Not with anger. With something closer to grief.

I know she is dead.

I have known since the first morning her chest did not rise.

But when I use, she breathes again. She laughs. She grows. She forgives me.

Without the drugs, there is only this room. This smell. This silence.

I begin to breathe too fast.

“I need something,” I whisper. “Just a little. Then I can think.”

“Ma’am,” the officer says, his voice breaking.

I look at Aaliyah.

Three years old.

And in my mind, she got to see the world.

I love her.

But I love the drugs more.

Because they are the only things that let me live with what I did.

“She never needed me,” I whisper. “She was always stronger than I was.”

I stand there, swaying slightly, already calculating how long it will be before the high fades and she disappears again.

Drugs are kinder than truth.

And I will always choose the kinder things.