The rain drops incessantly as my feet splash through the puddles, step after step. I squint up at the sky, where the white fog mists into a thick layer. My hands are clutching my lunch box where Hannah Montana's smiling face stares at the ground. My backpack is heavy on my shoulders, and I run into a boy, his shoulder smacking mine, and I almost fall over. People snicker as I walk by, their acne-ridden faces scrunched up, red and furious. I grab the handle of my mother's green Jeep Liberty, the handle nearly rusted off. The door croaks open, and I jump in, shaking the water off my rain jacket.

I smile at my brother Michael in the back seat, eyes closed, bottle dripping on his shirt. I reach back and pick up the nearly empty bottle, putting it in the cup holder. I study his face, which looks soft and innocent in the car that suddenly feels dark. I play with the cuff of my jacket and wait for my younger brother Chris to get in the car.

Through the crusted window, I see Chris approaching. He's holding his ninja turtle lunchbox, Donatello glowing through the fog, purple bandana and all. He waves at us furiously, wind blowing back his hood as he runs to the car. He tries to open the back door several times before shuttering it open. Hair dripping wet, he shakes off like a dog, and starts laughing.

I look back at him and put one finger on my mouth, and he giggled more quietly. I smile and mess up his blonde-brown streaks of hair, turning back around to face mom.

My mom's eyes lock with my own as she softly nods and puts the car in drive. Her nail-bitten fingers turn the wheel as we drive out of the lot, moving through to some backroads.

Tires scraping over the gravel, we pull into the parking lot of Midview Middle School. My brother doesn't have a coat, an umbrella, or a poncho. There is a bang of thunder. He walks up, his brown hair plastered over his eyes. He opens the door with one fluid motion and jumps in the car. I nod in the direction of my brother, and he doesn't respond.

She pulls out of the lot, and we get on the highway. I take a book out of my bag—a beat-up copy of the Magic Treehouse. In the static of radio silence, I flip through the same chapter three times. The rain drops run down my windows.

"So, have you guys talked to your father lately?" my mom says, eyes looking blank and cold at the ongoing road.

"Not since we saw the man in the suit," says Chris, fidgeting around in the back seat.

William sighs heavily and says, "Well, I talked to him on the phone yesterday. He's really upset that he hasn't seen us for two weeks."

Mom sits there, and her eyes twitch. "Was that before or after you told the lawyers that I'm a horrible mother?" I blink and realize that I've read the same line six times.

Electricity fills the air, the small space of the Jeep pushing in on us. Our car starts to slow down, 65, 45, 35, 25 miles on the freeway. I look up from the pages, my eyes darting back and forth between the road and my mother. Although we are miles from our
destination, the car is now completely stopped, and she unlocks the doors. I set the book down, putting my hand on my mom’s shoulder. She pushes my hand off her and stares at me—eyes glossing over.

She quietly observes outside the window and starts to relentlessly whisper “Following me... They’re following me...”

“Mom,” I say, gathering my backpack in my chest, “Why did you call the police that day dad was taken away?”

The fog wraps around the long, empty stretch of road. She turns to me with her eyes glossier than ever before.

“I called because you will always choose dad, not me,” she whispers. “Hey guys! Raise your hands if you don’t want to live with me!” We all remain silent. She screams and starts honking the horn, and passersby on the highway honk back.

“Give me my phone back,” she barks while turning, open palm snapping towards me.

I move my fingers into the soft fabric of my pocket, unsteadily take it out, and hand her the phone she bought for me a month ago for my tenth birthday.

“Get out of my car!” She says and reaches across my torso to open my door violently, shoving me out of the car and locking the door. I tumble over the asphalt, knees scraping, hair soaking. Her eyes glare out the window, and I look up at the still parked car, sitting in a puddle, knees bleeding. I am still holding my copy of Treehouse, the pages stained with rain water and my blood, my blood, my blood. My mom sits completely still, continuing to stare out her window, as if she is waiting for an animal to jump out of the shadows.

I can hear the echo of Michael crying, Chris and William bang on the glass and throw open the door. William pulls Chris out with him, turns to my mother and screams, “This is why we hate you!” and turns away, face scrunched up. He slams the door and runs to enclose me in his arms.

“Wh-where’s Michael?” Chris says, shaking and holding his purple Donatello backpack.

William sighs, and says, “We can’t carry him in the rain, buddy. He’ll be okay.”

Her Jeep is still loitering, the engine vibrating it, dusted orange falling off. Mom sits there in silence, holding her head in her hands. Her blonde hair glows through the misted window, and she starts to shake. I enclose Chris’ small hand within my own and turn to the blacktop, rain-flooded road and start walking. I rub my knees, wincing, and one warm tear trails down my face. You wouldn’t be able to tell with the rain.

The car zooms in front of us, old engine ruffling, and her tires lift water from a nearby puddle to enclose us. I remember the last moment where I stood with Chris this way, in our old house, 221 Finch Drive.

The walls of our house were painted beige, a crowning of fruit bowls filled with green grapes, apples, and faded pears etched close to the ceiling. Photos of me on the jungle gym with my dog going down our scratched yellow slide hung on the wall. Photos of me and Will in our red mini-jeep with hot rod flames aligned next to those, my smiling face holding a fairy wand with a fuzzy pink and sparkly tiara lacing my head.
I fell off my couch, and Chris rang with laughter saying, "The floor is lava. You just died!"

My cat Muffin walked by my face, tail smacking me as I got up from the floor and made my way to the couch again. "I've got another life!" I said.

My pink small-footed socks were stark against the couch, that not-quite-black-but-green color. I was wearing a shiny white feather boa and my old tiara, pink fuzz getting in my eyes. Chris was wearing a cowboy hat and clutching his new Indiana Jones whip he got for Christmas in his small hands.

Mid-jump, Chris screamed, "WAIT! TIME OUT! I want to lie this to both couches so I can balance on it. Pleaseeee??!!?" he whined. I nodded, laughing, and he jumped from the couch to the floor. He put the rope on the arm, looped around, and tried to do it on the other couch arm. He lifted it, and it fell. He tried again, but to no avail. His lip started to wobble, eyes welling up with tears, and I silently got up and picked up the rope. I held his hand over my own and looped the end under the circle twice.

"See? We can do it together. Now, pull both ends really really tight," I said.

He pulled them as hard as he could, his face turning red. When both sides were tied, I tested the new tightrope by putting one foot on it.

"Seems pretty sturdy to me," I said, flipping fuzz from my eyes.

He got back on the couch.

He put one foot in front of him, shaking for balance. Arms held out, his blue Pacman t-shirt riding up, he took another step. Shook a little, and almost fell. I jumped up and down in anticipation - I wished I could take him off his tightrope, cover the whip with duct tape so we could balance and stick forever in place, so he won every time. He put one foot, then another foot, and finally, his sockless toes hit the sofa edge.

I jumped on the rope and began my balancing act. Facing him, socks off, I made my way backwards, sliding my foot to locate the small rope. Focusing on my feet, I made it close to the edge. A loud crrrrch sound erupted through the room. I looked up and found there was a shiny and steel end protruding from the cushion, right in-between Chris' feet.

Screaming, he scrambled from the couch rubbing his toes, his body frozen on the floor, curled up with his hands covering his knees. I yelled and fell off our makeshift tightrope, face first into the brown carpet full of cat hair.

"What is going on?!" yelled dad as he ran into the living room, holding a wooden spoon with its end covered in pasta sauce, glasses half off his nose.

He ran a hand through his black hair and stood frozen for a second.

Then he looked behind him and screamed, "Becky!"

Sirens blared outside.

"Becky!"

Jazz music flew in from the kitchen, the saxophone solo proceeding.

Dad unfroze and ran to Chris, picking him up off the floor and hugging him, and moved forward to examine the couch.

He picked up the cushion and gasped. I ran over to get a closer look, knees picking me from the floor. I stood next to dad and saw that in the couch were enough knives for
an artillery set—hunting knives that were carved from makeshift wood, steak knives from
the knife block.

Mom walked in and gasped, saying “What are you doing Steve? We need those in
case a burglar comes in the house!” She rushed forward and snatched the cushion from
his hand, placing it gently back on the couch.

“Liz, Chris, go to your rooms so I can talk to your mother,” said Dad. “It’s bed
time.”

He put Chris back down, and I walked over to him. We went to our rooms, and
when my head hit the pillow, my head danced with silver knives.

The next afternoon, my hands held open the cover of my Magic Treehouse
book. The waft of mac and cheese lifted through the air, the kitchen sink ran with water, and all
I wanted to do was jump in the pages. I looked up and exchanged a funny look with Will
and Chris, who tapped on my book, gesturing to my bookmark on the table. I put it in my
book and looked up at Mikey in his seat, clapping his hands while holding a pastel green
spoon. Light shined through the tall, sliding glass door-windows looking over our back
porch and illuminated the room, and my dad who was mixing the mac and cheese spoon
in the pot, eyes fixed out the window.

My mom silently walked in from under the arch of the living room and messed
around with stuff on the counter. Her blonde hair was clipped up, red painted lips
pursed, her hands in coat pockets. She walked out and sat on the couch near the
mahogany and glass front door. She crossed her hands with a phone in her lap and stared
at our grandfather clock. It was half past one.

“Kids, food’s ready,” said Dad. “Come and serve yourselves while I talk to your
mother.”

The boys raced to the stove, but I remained and stared at the white ceiling. A hint
of gray still stained it from the time Will got his Spider-Man web shooter on his tenth
birthday two years ago. The lines and tracing of the web were as familiar as my palm. I
watched the running faucet at the sink under the window overlooking the backyard. Dad
cought a garden spider once and put it in a jar sitting at the windowsill. The spider stayed
in the jar until it suffocated. For a second, I was the spider in the jar. I shrank down, lid
closed over me, and I could no longer look at the ceiling. No longer play on the monkey
bars or jump rope. No longer read and sing to High School Musical. A heavy knock at the
door made me grow larger again.

Will and Chris, who were digging into their mac and cheese, froze mid bite.

My dad got up from the living room couch and made his way to the door. It
creaked open for him to find a tall and hefty police officer. My mother cheered, hands
held in the air, and said “This is him!” pointing to my dad.

I was frozen in my seat, feet not responding to my internal plea: get up get up get up.

Mom picked up and examined my dad’s favorite the Smiths record. You could see
her face off it, but warped and slightly unrecognizable. “Take this piece of shit and get
out!” she screamed, handing it to my dad. “Officer,” she gestured to the man, “Officer,
this is the knife he threatened me with,” she spat, holding up the carved hunting knife
dad found in the couch.
“Ma'am, you will have to calm down, everything's going to be fine.” The officer sighed, turned to my father, and said “Sir, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the premises.”

Am I in a body? “Your stuff is on the porch, so you can leave right now. You're welcome,” she spat to dad. My fingers curled around the bottom of my chair, nails digging into the carved wood. Mikey started to cry and banged his spoon off the table.

My dad was silent. He didn't move, but whispered, “Why Becky?” His face was scrunched up more than I've ever seen. Mikey continued to cry.

The officer repeated his mantra, and my ears started to ring. My vision started to become spotted. Dad walked over to us at the table, holding a backpack and his guitar case. He examined us for a moment and started to shake. He put down the guitar and engulfed us all in a hug. Dad held on, squeezing so hard I could barely take in air. When he pulled back, my shirt was wet from where his face was buried on my shoulder.

“I'm coming for you guys, don't worry,” he said, “dad will get you back.”

Will nodded to dad, and he clasped his shoulder and bent down to pick up his guitar case. Mom watched the clock with her hands wrapped around herself. It gonged twice, and with each gong, dad took another step near the door. The officer tapped his foot. The Police must believe that they are the good guys in every story, ah, a lucky savior! I never liked the police. I could still hear the faucet running. I was still clutching the bottom of my seat.

I unfroze and clasped on tightly to Chris' small hand. We ran to the window overlooking the driveway and stand there. Dad got into the car, waved to us, and drove away with the officer following him. Mom remained in front of the grandfather clock, whispering to herself. My face was hot, my vision blurry. We stood there until mom fell asleep, long after the mac and cheese was cold.

My feet hit the driveway of my grandparents' house, with the crunch of gravel under my pink sketchers. My body feels like it has gone through a hurricane. My glasses are spotted with rainwater, and I can barely see my brothers as they walk beside me. They are in a similar state, water dripping from their hair, soaked into their shirts, making them look like different colors than they really are.

We reach the front door and William uses his key to unlock it. We walk in and stand in the foyer for a second. It looks the same as I was here before. I look to my right to find Grandpa on the couch, reading the New York Times. I slowly walk over there, finding my feet again.

I sit down on the beige sofa. The room has old printed wallpaper, with gold framed versions of the DuBois motto Don't Give Up the Ship! plastered around. The grandfather clock gongs five times. I knit my fingers together on my lap.

Grandpa snaps his head up and says “Ah! I didn't know it was five. You guys are home rather late.” The newspaper crumples, and I hear steps from behind in the foyer walk upstairs.

I nod, and he cranes his neck back to the paper. “Where's mom?” I say.

“I thought she was with you,” he says while thumbing the newspaper.

I shake my head. I continue to shake my head. He doesn’t look up. “No,” I say.

“She wasn't with us. We walked home.”
He looks up then, glasses hanging on his hooked nose. He sets the newspaper down on the coffee table. “Well, why didn’t she drive you guys home?” he says.

“She was upset about the lawyers,” I say. “And dad.” My hands tighten, my nails biting my palms, and I wince.

He sits there holding his chin in his hand. “Steve needs to be out of the picture. It’s causing Becky too much stress,” he says. He reaches to pick up the newspaper again, opening it.

“Dad is already gone. He left when we left the house,” I say. I unknit my fingers and feel the cold wetness of the couch.

He looks up again, kind eyes shining. “Yeah. Grandma and I were happy about calling the police that afternoon,” he says, turning the page of the newspaper. “We were scared for you kids when Becky found knives in the couch.”