

Small Great Things by Jodi Picoult

Ruth

The miracle happened on West Seventy-fourth Street, in the home where Mama worked. It was a big brownstone encircled by a wrought-iron fence, and overlooking either side of the ornate door were gargoyles, their granite faces carved from my nightmares. They terrified me, so I didn't mind the fact that we always entered through the less-impressive side door, whose keys Mama kept on a ribbon in her purse.

Mama had been working for Sam Hallowell and his family since before my sister and I were born. You may not have recognized his name, but you would have known him the minute he said hello. He had been the unmistakable voice in the mid-1960s who announced before every show: *The following program is brought to you in living color on NBC!* In 1976, when the miracle happened, he was the network's head of programming. The doorbell beneath those gargoyles was the famously pitched three-note chime everyone associates with NBC. Sometimes, when I came to work with my mother, I'd sneak outside and push the button and hum along.

The reason we were with Mama that day was because it was a snow day. School was canceled, but we were too little to stay alone in our apartment while Mama went to work—which she did, through snow and sleet and probably also earthquakes and Armageddon. She muttered, stuffing us into our snowsuits and boots, that it didn't matter if she had to cross a blizzard to do it, but God forbid Ms. Mina had to spread the peanut butter on her own sandwich bread. In fact

the only time I remember Mama taking time off work was twenty-five years later, when she had a double hip replacement, generously paid for by the Hallowells. She stayed home for a week, and even after that, when it didn't quite heal right and she insisted on returning to work, Mina found her tasks to do that kept her off her feet. But when I was little, during school vacations and bouts of fever and snow days like this one, Mama would take us with her on the B train downtown.

Mr. Hallowell was away in California that week, which happened often, and which meant that Ms. Mina and Christina needed Mama even more. So did Rachel and I, but we were better at taking care of ourselves, I suppose, than Ms. Mina was.

When we finally emerged at Seventy-second Street, the world was white. It was not just that Central Park was caught in a snow globe. The faces of the men and women shuddering through the storm to get to work looked nothing like mine, or like my cousins' or neighbors'.

I had not been into any Manhattan homes except for the Hallowells', so I didn't know how extraordinary it was for one family to live, alone, in this huge building. But I remember thinking it made no sense that Rachel and I had to put our snowsuits and boots into the tiny, cramped closet in the kitchen, when there were plenty of empty hooks and open spaces in the main entry, where Christina's and Ms. Mina's coats were hanging. Mama tucked away her coat, too, and her lucky scarf—the soft one that smelled like her, and that Rachel and I fought to wear around our house because it felt like petting a guinea pig or a bunny under your fingers. I waited for Mama to move through the dark rooms like Tinker Bell, alighting on a switch or a handle or a knob so that the sleeping beast of a house was gradually brought to life.

“You two be quiet,” Mama told us, “and I'll make you some of Ms. Mina's hot chocolate.”

It was imported from Paris, and it tasted like heaven. So as Mama tied on her white apron, I took a piece of paper from a kitchen drawer and a packet of crayons I'd brought from home and silently started to sketch. I made a house as big as this one. I put a family inside: me, Mama, Rachel. I tried to draw snow, but I couldn't. The flakes I'd made with the white crayon were invisible on the paper. The only way to see them was to tilt the paper sideways toward the chandelier light, so I could make out the shimmer where the crayon had been.

"Can we play with Christina?" Rachel asked. Christina was six, falling neatly between the ages of Rachel and me. Christina had the biggest bedroom I had ever seen and more toys than anyone I knew. When she was home and we came to work with our mother, we played school with her and her teddy bears, drank water out of real miniature china teacups, and braided the corn-silk hair of her dolls. Unless she had a friend over, in which case we stayed in the kitchen and colored.

But before Mama could answer, there was a scream so piercing and so ragged that it stabbed me in the chest. I knew it did the same to Mama, because she nearly dropped the pot of water she was carrying to the sink. "Stay here," she said, her voice already trailing behind her as she ran upstairs.

Rachel was the first one out of her chair; she wasn't one to follow instructions. I was drawn in her wake, a balloon tied to her wrist. My hand skimmed over the banister of the curved staircase, not touching.

Ms. Mina's bedroom door was wide open, and she was twisting on the bed in a sinkhole of satin sheets. The round of her belly rose like a moon; the shining whites of her eyes made me think of merry-go-round horses, frozen in flight. "It's too early, Lou," she gasped.

“Tell that to this baby,” Mama replied. She was holding the telephone receiver. Ms. Mina held her other hand in a death grip. “You stop pushing, now,” she said. “The ambulance’ll be here any minute.”

I wondered how fast an ambulance could get here in all that snow.

“Mommy?”

It wasn’t until I heard Christina’s voice that I realized the noise had woken her up. She stood between Rachel and me. “You three, go to Miss Christina’s room,” Mama ordered, with steel in her voice. “*Now.*”

But we remained rooted to the spot as Mama quickly forgot about us, lost in a world made of Ms. Mina’s pain and fear, trying to be the map that she could follow out of it. I watched the cords stand out on Ms. Mina’s neck as she groaned; I saw Mama kneel on the bed between her legs and push her gown over her knees. I watched the pink lips between Ms. Mina’s legs purse and swell and part. There was the round knob of a head, a knot of shoulder, a gush of blood and fluid, and suddenly, a baby was cradled in Mama’s palms.

“Look at you,” she said, with love written over her face. “Weren’t you in a hurry to get into this world?”

Two things happened at once: the doorbell rang, and Christina started to cry. “Oh, honey,” Ms. Mina crooned, not scary anymore but still sweaty and red-faced. She held out her hand, but Christina was too terrified by what she had seen, and instead she burrowed closer to me. Rachel, ever practical, went to answer the front door. She returned with two paramedics, who swooped in and took over, so that what Mama had done for Ms. Mina became like everything else she did for the Hallowells: seamless and invisible.

The Hallowells named the baby Louis, after Mama. He was fine, even though he was almost a full month early, a casualty of the barometric pressure dropping with the storm, which caused a PROM—a premature rupture of membranes. Of course, I didn't know that back then. I only knew that on a snowy day in Manhattan I had seen the very start of someone. I'd been with that baby before anyone or anything in this world had a chance to disappoint him.

The experience of watching Louis being born affected us all differently. Christina had her baby via surrogate. Rachel had five. Me, I became a labor and delivery nurse.

When I tell people this story, they assume the miracle I am referring to during that long-ago blizzard was the birth of a baby. True, that was astonishing. But that day I witnessed a greater wonder. As Christina held my hand and Ms. Mina held Mama's, there was a moment—one heartbeat, one breath—where all the differences in schooling and money and skin color evaporated like mirages in a desert. Where everyone was equal, and it was just one woman, helping another.

That miracle, I've spent thirty-nine years waiting to see again.

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