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The Warsaw Ghetto boy looks at me pleadingly as my young mind tries to process the horror on his face. He is such a small child – a baby, really, in my eyes – his feeble arms hoisted over his head in surrender. *How on earth could someone possibly point a submachine gun at this frail, sweet-faced wisp of a boy?* His heartbreaking expression tugs at every sliver of my humanity, triggering a physiological response that weakens me. I sit, not quite voluntarily, on the stiff library chair to my left.

I set the book flat on the table, keeping it open to the black-and-white photograph of the boy trailing behind countless other victims at gunpoint. I can't stop staring at it. These poor souls are undoubtedly marching to their deaths as Nazi soldiers follow. Who knows how long after this snapshot was captured the boy died. Minutes? Days? Or maybe, by some miracle, he escaped. Maybe he was rescued. Maybe someone raised him gently and loved him and held him safe at night.

Maybe.

The weight of being alive overcomes me for the first time, and I cry.

I'm eleven.

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My mom hands over my lunch as she opens the car door for me. I exit the front passenger side, careful not to crush the brown paper sack in my eagerness to get out of the rain and inside the warm, welcoming haven of the library. She calls after me as I throw open the heavy French doors, but I simply give her a quick wave of my hand in response.

I'm twelve now, and much too old for people to know I have parents.

The security guard offers his familiar greeting as I make my way toward the literature section. Yesterday Mom picked me up before I had the chance to see how Fitzwilliam Darcy's trainwreck proposal to Lizzie panned out and I've been having separation anxiety since.

I can't really blame my mom, though, for being in a hurry all the time. She works two jobs now, ever since she and Dad divorced. She's always so tired and Dad's always out of town, so she doesn't have much patience anymore for my dilly-dallying. But thankfully the library stays open late. It's the safest place she knows to leave me while she's gone.

I've made a plan to read all of the books in the "Classic Literature" section in alphabetical order, beginning with "A" for Austen.

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I've fallen asleep again with my ear to the vent in the floor, my worn copy of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* lying open beside me. Ever since my stepdad came into our lives shortly after my fifteenth birthday, I've gotten into the habit of listening extra carefully for his comings and goings. If it's after 10:00 pm, he's probably drunk. If it's after midnight, there will probably be a fight.

It's the fighting, mostly, that makes me so afraid – the hitting. The last time I tried to intervene, I was rewarded with a proper, throbbing shiner where Stepdad's fist connected with my eye. Damn near knocked me clean out. I caught myself on a window drape as I fell backward and managed to regain my footing long enough to fumble for my phone in my pocket and call 911.

The cops came but they really didn't do anything. Stepdad told them he knew the difference between discipline and abuse. I was out of line, he said. Defiant teenagers, you know. He shrugged and the cops left.

At least Maya Angelou gets me, I think. She's been in a cage too.

\* \* \*

The narrow bathroom stall feels like it's about to close in on me. I can't breathe. The plus sign means it's a positive test, right?

The room spins. *I can't be pregnant. I just can't.*

I'm twenty-one. I have three months left till graduation. And then three months till grad school after that.

There's no room in my life for a baby.

I stumble out of the bathroom, attracting attention from my dorm mates. I quickly slip the pregnancy test into my purse, right between my wallet and *The Adventures of Robin Hood*.

*Marian*. That's a nice, strong name for a girl.

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Marian is five when her brother is born. He's a blue-eyed, sweet-tempered little thing. He brings out the best in all of us.

I wish my father had been able to meet the baby, but Dad died when I was three months along. There are still boxes of his things in the basement that I can't bring myself to sort through just yet.

But one day, Marian discovers the boxes and explores their contents. She digs out a hat – my dad's favorite scally cap he loved wearing around in the winter. She playfully sets it atop her brother's head and remarks how much he looks like Grandpa.

He does look like Grandpa. But something about the way his cheeks are shadowed by the too-large cap reminds me of someone else.

From the box, I search for a book – one I remember very clearly from my childhood. I open to a well-worn page and bring my hand to my heart.

Warsaw Ghetto boy stares out at me.

He looks like *my* boy. The weight of being alive overcomes me for the second time, and I cry.