



"Monkey Bars"

as it appears in the book

*Nothing But The Truth So
Help Me God: 73 Women
on Life's Transitions*

Kerri Devine

Monkey Bars

My daughter runs her dimpled hand over the shoulder of my soiled green tee shirt, down the length of the sleeve, stroking my arm the way you would a stray cat. "N i c e mommy," she says. Hardly, I cringe, thinking about all the times today I wished I could lose her.

It's noon. Already, we've wrestled with getting dressed (D o n 't W A N T a sweater!), played restaurant (I made a grilled cheese while she cut plastic root vegetables with an imaginary knife), and colored. "Draw a cat," she demands, tossing her Dora coloring book on the floor and handing me a crayon. "Purple!" Her fine blonde hair skims the top of her cheeks where her creamy skin is newly dotted with freckles. When I leave the kitchen to put the damp dishtowels in the laundry room, I hear her calling from her high chair, making sure I'm still near, "W a n t t o s e e Mommy?"

Each day they come. Somewhere between lunch and arts and crafts, items from my to-do list appear in my mind – a running catalog of resentments: Take up yoga. Make gaspacho. Clean out the hall closet. I'm angry I have no time alone anymore, wondering how long this phase will last.

"Whiskers!" Meredith says, reminding me to add a few brown lines fanning out from the cat's face. Her hand is warm, and she smiles at me as we hold the bent crayon together and trace the cat's tail. Her sweetness washes over me like the high from a grade school crush.

That's the way it is now. These feelings come in pairs, uneasy to reconcile. I'm never quite sure whether I want to hold her or cry, exhausted as I am by her neediness.

I hired a sitter, a girl down the street, to come for an afternoon or two so I could catch up on things. Stripping the sheets from the bed, I watch them from the upstairs guest room. My daughter is running around in circles on the grass, dizzying herself until she takes a tumble. I can hear her through the open window: "a l l f a l l DOWN!" She is both taller and leaner than I remember, but her legs still hold those last folds. I know when summer ends, they'll be gone. I see her running across the lawn with Kelsey, running away from me. Soon she'll be in school. I want to run after her, tumble to the ground together, hear her ask, "Tickles?" and do a belly laugh when I blow loud raspberries on her bare feet. I worry there won't be enough moments like this before she goes to school, prefers her friends' company to mine, and each one I give away to someone else brings a temporary twinge, the subtle pain of something missing, a memory we won't share.

As I fold her clothes, I notice the framed photo of us on my dresser. Meredith is wearing one of those heathery skull caps with ears they make so your children look like newborn bear cubs. Her face is pressed against mine and I have the distant look of a new mother who is at once besotted and overwhelmed. The photo is in black and white; the finish holds the blur of those early moments

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together. They say infants don't know where they end and you begin until around six months. My daughter just turned two, and I'm still trying to figure it out.

I remember those days. I was a jumble of nerves and neuroses – afraid to go outside, paralyzed by her crying, worried I might dislocate her tiny arm every time I changed a onesie. Yet as insecure as I was then, I miss my daughter's babyhood. I miss the roundness of her, the scent of pink lotion even when she wasn't wearing any, the way her entire body moved when she breathed against my chest after an inconsolable cry.

The sitter is gone now. After Meredith's nap, we head off to the swing set. Before I can get to her, she's on the top rung of the monkey bars, the one I didn't even know she could climb. "Stop on the top step," I say, nervously. "That's for the big kids."

I scoop her up and into the swing, tickling the inside of her thigh as I slide the plastic panel down the ropes to her knees. "Nice Meredith," I say, as I begin to push my big girl up to the sky.

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