

KRISTINE SCARROW

COUNTING THROUGH IT

DINA STACKED THE DIRTY PLATES and set them on the granite counter. The dishwasher hummed with a mouthful of lunch dishes. Now, four place settings and a mismatch of glassware waited for their turn. James would be home from work soon. Or so he said. Day often bled into night before she'd hear the rumble of the garage door opening, signalling his arrival. There were meetings, drinks, rounds of golf, overtime—circumstances that James insisted were part and parcel of making partner one day.

That morning, Dina sat nursing the baby on their bed and observed James buttoning his cufflinks in front of the mirror. He posed regal in a crisp, grey Italian suit worth more than what she'd spent on her own wardrobe since she'd given birth to their first baby. He spun from his hip to get a side view of himself and smoothed the ivory silk shirt that skimmed his taut abdomen. Once upon a time, his physique and trendy fashion sense had impressed her and made her feel fortunate. They'd made a handsome pair. Now, her own belly spilled from the elastic waistband of her pants and spread like bread dough around her. Her head throbbed with intense envy at his ability to leave the house so polished.

James, satisfied with his attire, moved to his hair. She pictured spilling coffee on him or the baby vomiting on his shoulder. Something to keep him in the trenches with her. He whistled as he finished combing his hair with his fingers and checked himself one last time before he stepped away from the mirror, kissed her on the forehead, and exited their bedroom. Dina peered down at her now stretched, threadbare grade-twelve gym T-shirt that clung to her engorged breasts. She couldn't remember the last time she'd worn another type of outfit or gone shopping in a brick-and-mortar store instead of clicking on discount stretch pants online.

Now, as night descended, Dina watched the crisp amber leaves skip along the pavement under the streetlight. She closed the blinds in the living room. She tossed the menagerie of toys that littered the floor into the

wicker baskets. She folded the last of the laundered towels from their trip to the swimming pool and carried the basket of laundry up the stairs. As if on cue, she heard the deep, barking coughs of two of her three children. Dina flinched at the sound. Surely, there couldn't be another virus in circulation. They'd just made it through strep throat a couple of weeks earlier. She set the basket down and peered into the dark bedrooms, but the children were still in their beds. Dina blew her overgrown bangs from her eyes and decided she'd turn on the TV downstairs and fold another basket of clothes.

She thought she'd wanted this—leaving her caseworker position to stay home and raise the kids. Her own mother had stayed home with her until she started school. Initially, she'd certified as a fitness instructor and taught a spin class a few nights a week. She'd enjoyed it. It had been enough of a balance. By the time they'd had two children James was working longer hours, and she could no longer justify the cost of childcare while she was teaching at the gym. She'd been home full-time ever since. She'd also quit working out altogether. She couldn't remember the last time she'd carved out time for exercise. Her muscles had atrophied, and she'd morphed into a soft, plumper version of herself. The days were beginning to blur into an endless monotony of trying to please cranky kids and keep their four walls together.

On her way to the TV, Dina glimpsed the tired, yellow dianthus that hung limp from the vase on the middle of the dining table. The murky water smelled sharp, and the petals had shrivelled. Dina had let them fester in the olive water too long. She spotted the kids' plastic plates sitting there from bedtime snack. She'd carefully quartered the grapes. She'd cut cheese slices into shapes using cookie cutters, with the requisite thinness that the children insisted upon. Most had bites taken out of them but were largely uneaten and would likely be wasted. Although Dina often ate the leftovers on their plates, she wasn't hungry. She hadn't been eating well for days now. She waved at the fruit flies that circled the food bits. With the cool fall weather and the harvest of their small garden, the tiny bugs had taken residence in her dining room. She moved the plates onto the waiting stack of dishes in the kitchen.

“Mommy?”

Dina was startled by the sound of her son's voice. Her first instinct was to yell. How hard was it to go to bed and stay there?

She set the plates down and shut her eyes. She took a deep breath before

answering.

“Yes, what is it?” Austin, as the oldest, was the one child she could usually count on to help her or to listen. “You’re supposed to be in bed.”

“I know, Mommy, but you need to come upstairs. Sydney’s sick.”

“Again? I didn’t hear anything . . .” Dina looked up at the video monitor that rested on the kitchen island. There, she could see her two-year-old curled up in a ball on the floor. Sydney liked to press the buttons on the monitor, and she’d muted it without Dina noticing. She flicked on the sound. Another sharp bark of a cough and a whine. Dina’s whole body tensed.

Austin followed her up the stairs. Before reaching Sydney’s room, Dina peeked into the master bedroom. Her eyes searched for the baby’s figure in the maple crib stationed across from her own bed. She watched for any movement, but three-month-old Sarah was still. Dina said a silent prayer of thanks to the darkened room. At least one of her children was sleeping.

Dina tiptoed past. The light from the hallway cast a path of golden light on the carpet that led right to the top of Sydney’s dark coils. Sydney’s newly acquired “big girl” bed that she’d been so excited to sleep in was still dressed in pale pink cotton, the edges crisp and tight. Dina imagined her toddler crawling out of the top of the bed as gingerly as she could, so as not to ruffle the pretty covers.

“Mommy’s just going to scoop you up,” Dina whispered, reaching down for her. Sydney’s bangs stuck to her forehead. Dina touched her wrist to her slick skin. It burned to the touch. When Dina put her arms under her child, Sydney flopped into her, listless. How could she be sick again? Hadn’t the antibiotics done their job?

Dina wheezed after she got downstairs with her. Her own exhaustion made her dizzy and disoriented. She hadn’t slept a full night in months and could feel a scratchiness in her throat. She set Sydney on the living room sectional and walked to the bathroom to get the thermometer. Before she could pull it from the medicine cabinet, she heard the first retch. Dina closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Surely, this was not happening.

“Mooommmmyyy!” Austin called. She thought she’d sent him back to bed, but he was sitting at the base of the staircase, monitoring his sister.

“I know. Mommy can take care of this. Back up to bed.”

Austin’s chestnut hair, still damp from his evening bath, was mussed from tossing in his bed. He bit his lip and turned back up the stairs.

The contents of Sydney’s stomach had splattered across the couch and

the area rug in a spectacular burst. Dina's own gut felt twisted and pressured, as if vice grips had taken residence in her and wrung her insides out. Sydney had curled back up into herself, but she'd rolled right through the mess. Dina cupped her mouth. She could feel tears building at the corners of her eyes. She looped her arms under her daughter's tiny frame and carried her back to the bathroom. She peeled off Sydney's nightgown, balled it up, and threw it into the hallway. She realized her own shirt was soiled too, so she pulled it off and continued in just her nursing bra and pants. She set her little one in the bathtub and tested the water before letting the shower head rain down. Sydney whimpered.

"I know, sweetie. Mommy's just trying to get you cleaned up. I'll be quick." Dina poured a generous amount of body wash into her palm and worked quickly to rub Sydney's hair and body down. She didn't want to risk making her fever worse by having the water too hot or by having Sydney shiver. After a thorough rinse, Dina shut the tap off and grabbed a towel from the hook. She enveloped her daughter in the towel and then into her arms, grateful for the faint scent of gardenias that now filled the room.

Dina's legs shook as she carried Sydney upstairs. Her foot fumbled on the second last step, and Dina pitched forward. She shot herself vertical again to avoid crashing onto the landing, but her back wrenched from the correction and the weight of carrying Sydney. Dina stood at the top of the stairs, a steady throb in her back, her breath a shrill whistle. When she'd reoriented herself, she walked by her bedroom and willed her baby girl to stay asleep. This time, she could see Sarah fidgeting in her crib.

She looked at the alarm clock on Sydney's end table. 9:07pm. James should have been home by now. She pulled the first nightgown she could find from the dresser and quickly slipped it over her daughter's head. She set her back into her bed, placed the thermometer in Sydney's ear, and waited for the beep. 102.5°.

"Is she okay?" It was Austin again, peeking his head through the doorway.

"Yes, she'll be fine. I'm just going to give her some medicine," Dina said. "Back to bed. You need to go to sleep now." There was an edge to her voice. Austin turned back to his room.

They kept the medication in their ensuite bathroom to keep it away from the kids' curious hands. Dina tiptoed through her bedroom, her eyes on Sarah's tossing figure. She flicked on the light, bristled from the harsh-

ness of it, and let her eyes adjust. She opened the childproof lock of the cabinet as quietly as she could and fished out the children's liquid Tylenol. Again, she crossed the room as carefully as she could.

Dina went downstairs to the utensil drawer to find the little syringe they used to dispense medication. She knew Sydney preferred the little cup that came in the box, but she hoped her daughter wouldn't notice. Using the syringe would allow Dina to squirt the medicine in the side of Sydney's mouth without completely waking her. The loud clanks of metal as she searched for the syringe set her nerves further on edge.

She spotted the syringe and grabbed it. She had to grip the handrail as she climbed back up the stairs. Sweat prickled her temples and armpits. A wave of dizziness set her off balance, and her hand flew to her forehead. Was she developing a fever too?

Dina pre-measured the medicine into the syringe and lined it up with Sydney's lips.

"Here's some medicine to make you feel better," Dina whispered. She pressed the edge of the syringe and was grateful that Sydney started sucking on the medicine as it entered her mouth. When the last of it was dispensed, she pressed her lips to her daughter's cheek. Just as she crossed the threshold of Sydney's room, there was a cry.

Dina let out her breath. Sarah was awake. Dina bounded to the crib and replaced Sarah's soother. With any luck, she'd fall right back asleep. Sarah's eyes were still closed, and she sucked vigorously for about thirty seconds before spitting it out. She let out a wail.

"Shhh!" Dina said, hoping to soothe her and limit the noise so that the other two children wouldn't wake. Sarah's eyes flew open, and she cried harder.

Dina picked Sarah up. The baby could smell Dina's milk-stained bra and immediately tried to suckle through the fabric. When Dina tried rocking the baby instead, she wailed back. She had just fed her before she'd put her down, but Sarah was demanding to be fed again. Dina gave in, took root in the rocking chair in the corner of the room and unhooked her bra.

Sarah suckled madly, and the two of them sat in the dark to the sound of her gulping and swallowing. Dina could feel the steady rhythm of her breathing against her, and she found herself counting to it. *One, two, three.* This rhythm grounded her to the moment of her baby content in her arms.

Dina wiped her brow and felt sweat trickling under her breasts and onto

her abdomen from the warmth of Sarah's body. Her head throbbed along with her back now. The darkness of the room made her eyelids droop, but she did not want to fall asleep in the chair and risk dropping the baby, so she pinched her forearm to keep from dozing. When Sarah's suckling slowed, Dina held her upright to burp her. She cupped Sarah's chin in her hand and patted her back gently, but nothing came. She changed positions and placed her over her shoulder, but there was no burp there either. Sarah grew fussy with Dina's movements or from discomfort, Dina couldn't tell, so Dina tried to rock her back to sleep. Sarah's fussing turned into a full-blown cry.

"What, baby?!" Dina pleaded. Sarah's cry intensified, and Dina set her down on the bed. She looked for anything that might be poking the baby but could find nothing. She checked her diaper, but it was only lightly soiled with pee. She changed her anyway, and Sarah screamed through the whole thing.

"Mommy?" It was Austin again. "Is Sarah okay?"

Dina blinked. "She is *fine*. Go to bed!"

Austin ran back to his room, and Dina immediately regretted her words. He was just looking out for his sisters. She'd go back, apologize, and kiss him goodnight when she had Sarah settled again.

She thought back to when Austin was a baby and how easy he was to take care of. He'd slept through the night by the time he was six weeks old, and after he woke he'd waited patiently for Dina to collect him with his chubby feet in his hands, smiling. She'd adored sitting in the glider with him for long stretches. Life had moved slower then, and she'd had time to soak up the gifts of motherhood. She'd felt like it had given her far more than it had taken from her.

Dina bounced Sarah on her thighs, made laps around the room with her laid across her arm, and placed her on the bed and made bicycle movements with her legs in case she had a stomachache. Any position she tried seemed to have no effect on her daughter's screaming. She felt for a temperature but realized how futile that was without the thermometer. Sarah had made herself flushed and sweaty with her displeasure.

She centred Sarah on her bed and rushed into Sydney's room, remembering that she'd taken Sydney's temperature from her bed. She placed the thermometer in Sarah's ear, but her temperature was normal. Dina was thankful.

She grabbed a receiving blanket and held Sarah to her shoulder to go

back down to the main floor. There, they could pace until James returned home, and hopefully Sarah wouldn't wake the other two. Just as they reached the bottom of the stairs, the smell of Sydney's vomit permeated the air. She'd forgotten about the mess.

Dina winced and veered to the kitchen. Sarah continued to cry. Dina unsnapped the baby's sleeper to cool her off. Their sweaty skins stuck to one another as Dina circled the kitchen island over and over. She had to pee but tried not to think about it.

Dina's phone lit up from the kitchen counter. She dove for it, eager for any kind of distraction from the crying. She hoped it was James, saying he was on his way home.

Just having a drink with Lonny. Be home soon. 10:42pm.

Of course he was. Drinks with the founder of the firm were never turned down. Getting in with Lonny meant that you might be somebody there someday. Dina chucked the phone down, and it clattered onto the granite counter. She debated telling him she needed him to come home right now but knew he wouldn't.

Five years ago, at James' presentation to the bar, she'd clapped louder than anyone in the room when his name was announced. They'd both imagined how their lives might change after law school and then the year of articling. It had been a long haul. Slater and Sommers Law Firm hiring him had felt like the real start of their lives together. Just weeks later, they'd found this house and closed on it quickly. On their possession day, James had placed sticky notes on the other bedroom doors besides the master that read "Future Baby Johnson," and Dina's belly had fluttered as if it were that easy to label something and make it so.

Dina would show James how angry she was when he got home. She imagined he'd tell her later, "What was I supposed to do? Leave my boss sitting there all alone?"

"You could tell him there was a family emergency," she'd say.

"It wasn't an emergency," he'd say. But it felt like one. Even though she could see nothing physically wrong with Sarah, she could not get her to stop crying. Tears darted out from the edges of her eyes. Sarah's fists were balled up, and her body was rigid. Dina could feel her breasts working overtime, continuous taps leaking through her bra at her baby's cries. She tried letting her suckle again, but Sarah batted at her breasts with her tiny fists.

Finally, Dina placed her in the motorized baby swing and turned it on.

Sarah twisted in the seat, her fists swinging at the air. Dina ran to the bathroom to finally pee and found the distance from the crying a relief of its own. She washed her hands and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Dark circles made her eyes look hollow. Her hair was greasy and half pulled from its ponytail. Her bra was yellowed and soaked. The mixture of sweat and milk dribbled down her stomach and wet the elastic band of her pants. She was surprised to see that she'd been crying. Her nipples felt as if they'd been shredded through a cheese grater. She splashed cold water on her face, kicked Sydney's vomit-covered nightgown down the hall, and returned to Sarah's screams.

Leaving her in the swing had angered the baby even more. Her face took on a purple tinge that alarmed Dina. She held the baby close and then placed her onto the island to examine her again. Sarah flailed at the cold granite on her sweaty skin. Dina couldn't find anything wrong. She ran her fingers across Sarah's gums to check for any teeth that might be trying to find their way through, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Dina retrieved her phone, which was next to the toaster, and typed James a message: *You need to come home. Kids are sick.* 11:04pm.

Would he even take a moment from his conversation with Lonny to check his phone, or would that jeopardize his career? Dina's jaw clamped. She knew her own exhaustion was a factor in her iciness to James. Aside from nursing, he'd been an equal participant tending to their children at night. He'd shuffle through the house fulfilling needs—a sippy cup, a fallen stuffed animal, nightmares about monsters, or a sore throat—as bleary-eyed as she was. But for the past couple of months she consistently found herself staring at their bedroom ceiling while James and the rest of the family slumbered peacefully around her. She knew how even a bit more sleep could make all the difference in someone.

Dina remembered gripe water as a remedy that had sometimes worked to settle her other children as babies, so she carried Sarah back upstairs to her bedroom, placed her back on the bed, and rummaged through the bathroom cabinet. Her eyes burned as she scanned the label for the appropriate dose.

She remembered that the syringe was back in Sydney's room, so she retrieved it from Sydney's dresser, but the thought of walking back down to the kitchen made her light-headed. Instead, she washed the syringe in the bathroom sink with hand soap while Sarah howled.

When she placed the syringe to Sarah's lips, she batted it away. It fell out of Dina's grip and landed on Sarah's chest.

Dina picked it back up and held Sarah's arms down. Her cries grew an octave higher at being restrained. She pressed the syringe into the corner of the baby's mouth and watched as Sarah swallowed some of the liquid while some of it dribbled down her chin and under the folds of her neck. Dina spread out the receiving blanket and swaddled the baby tightly. She gathered her in her arms and set to rocking her again. She put the soother in the baby's mouth and held it there, giving Sarah no choice but to suck. She kept trying to fight it, but Dina held firm. Sarah's little mouth made moaning sounds as she sucked. Dina watched as the baby's eyes started to flutter. She'd tired herself out.

Dina stared at the ceiling and started counting. She wasn't sure what she was counting for this time or how high she might go, but the steady rhythm of the numbers worked again to distract her as her arms ached and trembled underneath the baby's body. *Ten, eleven, twelve.* The baby sighed. Her eyes were closed, and her mouth relaxed. *Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two.* The soother hung from the corner of her mouth. *Thirty-three, thirty-four, thirty-five.* Dina felt her shoulders lower with each number. It reminded her of the time Austin was teething and she'd rocked him for hours as he screamed. James had come through the door from work and found them both crying. As soon as he took the baby from her arms, Austin had stopped crying. Dina had cried harder.

"You may have gotten too tense," James had said. "The baby senses that."

She thought of James, how he still wasn't home. Would Sarah stop crying as soon as he held her? She pictured him at a pub, his tie loosened, his suit jacket carefully draped over his chair. She could hear his throaty laugh, see the flash of his white teeth through his open mouth. Perhaps he'd tipped the pretty young waitress extra. She stood in her yellowed nursing bra, her skin sticky and foul-smelling. She felt like she'd been wrung out. She wasn't sure what she'd do when James got home.

"Moommmmyyy!" A call for help before the familiar retch. Sydney had thrown up again. Dina stood over the baby's crib and held her breath. She set Sarah down gingerly, careful not to jostle her any more than necessary. As soon as her head touched the flannel, her eyes flew open. She wailed instantly. Dina fumbled for the soother that had fallen into the crook of her

arm and pushed it inside the baby's mouth, but Sarah kicked and flailed until she was free from the blanket that bound her.

Dina dropped to the floor. She sat, numb, as she listened to her children cry around her. She looked along the hallway at the family photo on the wall and blinked. She thought about putting on her coat and shoes and walking out the door. Perhaps she'd walk right out of the city. Maybe find a farmer's field, canola perhaps—she'd always liked the colour of canola fields—and settle herself within the cover of the stalks. She pictured curling up like a baby herself, the fruit flies, the mice, the crows, and perhaps finally the coyotes feasting on morsels of her bit by bit until she was hollowed. All that would remain was her bones—the only solid thing left of her.

Dina could not muster the energy to get back on her feet, and she wasn't sure her back would let her anyhow, so she crawled over to Sydney's room. Her darling girl was sitting in her bed, her nightgown and lovely bedding soiled.

"Mommy, why are you crawling?" Sydney asked, puzzled.

Dina couldn't answer. She saw the mess around Sydney and wept. It started as a whimper but grew to a wail, and Sydney started crying again too. Her small lips trembled as she watched her mother rock herself back and forth instead of coming to her.

Austin entered the room and observed the scene. He stepped around Dina and got a clean nightgown from Sydney's dresser. She put her arms up for him, and he lifted the wet nightgown off her and replaced it. He tried to peel back her covers, a game of tug-of-war for his small frame. He settled on dragging the top comforter, now soiled with vomit, onto the carpet. He got a clean blanket from the linen closet in the hallway and draped it over his sister. She gripped the edge of the blanket and settled back into her bed, her eyes wide.

Dina could see it all happening, but she could not respond. Instead, she crawled back toward her bedroom. She pulled herself up on shaky legs just enough to allow her into bed. Her back wrenched with the effort. Sarah's cries were piercing. Dina's body tensed with each rhythmic wail. She tried to focus on the ceiling again. She started to count.

One, two, three . . . fourteen, fifteen, sixteen . . . thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two . . . This time, the counting took her further from herself. Dina sat up and looked at Sarah's writhing figure through the bars of the crib. She went over everything she could think to do to soothe her baby and realized that

there was nothing left to try.

She stood, walked over to the crib, and stared down at the baby, her face contorted and crimson. Dina wrapped her fingers around the baby's upper arms and torso and yanked her up until they were face to face. The baby screamed louder at having her arms pinned to her sides.

"WHAT IS IT?!" She shrieked. "WHAT IS WRONG?!" Adrenaline coursed through her body and made her tremble. Her arms felt like lightning rods. Her fingers curled around the baby's frame like vise grips. Sarah remained suspended in the air. She let out a shrill wail, an octave higher than before. Dina's head throbbed. Her grip intensified.

There was nothing left to say, nothing left to do. Dina squeezed her eyes shut. If she could just make the crying stop.

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO HELP YOU!"

"Mommy?!" First, Austin's voice, then a cool touch on her hip. His hand on her.

Dina blinked and loosened her grip. She was unsteady, dizzy. Slowly, the room came back into focus. Sarah looked back at her, wide-eyed. Dina set the baby down and placed the receiving blanket over her. Sarah let out a series of small whimpers, but finally she had stopped crying.

"It's okay, Mommy," Austin said. He rubbed her back with his hand, but Dina could see the pool of tears about to spill from his eyes. What was she doing?

Dina stepped back and sat on the edge of her bed. Her arms vibrated. She stared at the ceiling again and found herself counting out loud. *One, two, three . . . twelve, thirteen, fourteen . . . forty-one, forty-two, forty-three . . .*

"Daddy!" She heard Austin say. Then James stood over her, apologizing for having been late. Something about Lonny ordering another round so they could discuss an account he was working on. James' words sounded garbled to her, like he was talking underwater. He bent down to kiss her, and she started to weep. She wanted to pull him down onto her so she could feel the comfort of his chest against hers. She knew he'd walk around, see the carnage of the night, and clean up the mess she'd left behind. He always did. He was good like that.

She listened as he herded Austin back to bed and opened the linen closet, likely for clean bedding for Sydney. All the crying had stopped.

When James came back through the doorway to their room, her eyes

followed him. He stopped at the crib to check on the baby.

“She’s asleep.”

Dina felt her stomach drop. She thought about how she’d held Sarah, how she’d almost done the unthinkable, how Austin had borne witness to it. Terror crawled up from the soles of her feet to the top of her head until she felt swallowed by it. She could feel her limbs shake, and she swallowed the bile that shot up her throat. The room was circling around her. James tossed her a nightgown, and she flinched when it hit her.

“Dina, are you listening?” She felt his fingertips curled around her biceps, but it was gentle. She gasped and let out a feral cry—the cry of a mother broken. Tears erupted down her cheeks.

James stared at her, his eyes searching her face. “What happened?” His lips trembled as he tried to read her. “Dina?!”

Dina blinked. How could she say? The room was circling around her. She found herself counting through it. It was the only thing her brain would allow.

One, two, three . . .