

DANA SNELL

## PAUSE

THE BOY IN THE PLAYGROUND HAD TO BE A PAUSE. He had the small, chubby body and big head of a three-year-old, but he didn't move like one. There were none of those teetering, headlong rushes, no goofy gleeful laughter. Instead, he zipped up the stairs of the play structure, dodged around some kids twice his height, hopped down to a lower platform and spun a steering wheel until it was a rattling blur, all with an expression of utmost gravity on his little face. A three-year-old Pause was pretty unusual. Kay looked around for his parents and decided that the woman on the bench next to hers was his mother.

She was beautiful, the woman on the bench. Much younger than Kay, most likely in her late thirties. Kay took in her casually cool outfit with envy. She wore a loose T-shirt with the sleeves rolled up the perfect length to set off her long tanned arms. Her shirt was tucked into a long black skirt that went all the way down to her ankles, ending at short black boots. Kay was sure this outfit would look hopelessly frumpy on her, but on this woman it looked effortlessly sexy.

The woman sipped from a thermos, her gaze fixed on the boy. As Kay watched him rocket down the slide, she remembered Cynthia at that age, and her chest and arms tingled with the phantom-limb sensation of a tiny body curled up neatly against hers, the weight of a small head pressing against her breastbone. The dear little upturned face, perfect as a buttercup. She still had recordings on her phone of baby Cynthia's funny, squeaky, lisping voice (all gone now). Kay sighed. It was only natural to be a little sad.

Kay felt her eyes stinging with what might turn into tears, so she quickly looked down at the booklet she'd brought to the playground to read. Despite her glum mood, she couldn't help but smirk at the slogan on the faded cover: *They Grow Up So Fast? Not So Fast!* She still found it clever. She flipped to the section titled *Pressing Play*. She'd read it several times over the years, of course, but it had been a while. And since this was the last time, she figured

she should be as prepared as possible.

She took a deep breath and tried to read slowly, but her eyes kept skimming over the text, so she forced them back up to the top of the page: “Though emotional and cognitive progression is minimal during Pause, a period of adjustment is still to be expected once you press play. The child may be slightly more mature than their peers who haven’t undergone the process.” Kay sighed again and let the book close. Not right now. She was too tired. She and Dave had been up late last night, talking and crying into the wee hours. And now the sun was shining, the birds were singing, and she had somehow convinced her little girl to go to the playground for old time’s sake, even though they hadn’t been there in ages.

After all, Kay reflected, she had so much to be grateful for. Not everyone could afford to stop time like her family had. A corner of her mouth twitched up as she thought of the years when they had Cynthia Paused at thirteen months. She was a chubby, blue-eyed doll that Kay could dress up and take wherever she liked, though it was a little off-putting when she started speaking in full sentences. Then there was a good long stretch Paused at five, which was such a fun age. And now eight, which was by far Kay’s favourite—maybe because it was the last one. The technology only worked until puberty, at least for now, and she couldn’t afford to let any more time grow between her and Cynthia—not to mention Dave, who was almost seventy.

The stinging in her eyes came back, and she distracted herself by focusing on the little boy. Three years old, huh? She couldn’t recall anyone she knew Pausing at three. Even during the sweetest moments of Cynthia at that age, Kay had never been tempted. For every “I wuv you Mama” there would be ten NO’s screamed into her face. Cynthia was more demon than doll in those days, struggling in Kay’s arms, running away from her into traffic. And all those mortifying public tantrums. Kay had taken to saying, “Is there a fast-forward option?” to get a rueful laugh from gawkers and diffuse the awkwardness. But this woman, this beautiful woman, had experienced all that and said to herself, “let’s keep this going for a while.”

Kay decided to risk prying. She couldn’t help herself.

“So cute.” She put some syrup in her voice. “Yours?”

The woman smiled, her eyes on her son. “Yes, that’s my son, Jason.”

“How old?” She left the question open-ended.

“He’s been Paused at three for the last five years.”

Five years at three! Kay was careful to keep her smile affixed. “How

precious! That's my little girl over there." Kay pointed to a corner of the playground, where a girl with long brown hair was leaning against the fence talking to an older boy with orange hair. He said something to her, and she laughed. "Cynthia. She's been Paused at eight for . . . a while." Kay cleared her throat, willed her voice to stay steady. "We've decided to press play."

The woman looked at her with a twist of her mouth that seemed to Kay to be commiseration. She took this as encouragement to go on.

"You don't see many three-year-olds."

She left off the "Pauses," figuring the woman would know what she meant. But the woman just smiled and turned her head away, looking back at her son.

"I'm Kay."

"Lia," the woman said, taking a sip from her thermos. "Your daughter is gorgeous."

"Thank you," Kay smiled. "She starts high school next year. We had to move her up again. She said if she had to repeat grade six one more time she was going to burn the house down!" Actually, Cynthia had said that she would kill herself, but of course Kay wasn't about to repeat that.

The woman nodded absently.

This was going nowhere. Kay tried the direct approach. "So, three, huh? That can be a . . . challenging age. You're a better man than me!"

She laughed companionably to let Lia know she was on her side, but this time Lia didn't even acknowledge that she'd spoken.

Kay, panicking, blurted out, "Though of course he looks like he's just a little angel. They're so cute at that age. I wish we could just Pause them forever! And after all, you're still young . . ." Kay realized with alarm that she was babbling. But instead of doing the decent thing and trying to save her, Lia just kept staring straight ahead at her son, sipping from her thermos, as if no one was talking to her. Kay's mouth snapped shut, and she looked away. Jesus Christ.

Kay took out her phone and tried to busy herself with it, but she couldn't focus. She wanted to talk to someone but couldn't for the life of her think who to call. Dave, as always, was working. Should she try and resurrect the conversation, maybe with a safer topic? Some mutual eye-rolling over the astronomical costs of the process was usually pretty fertile ground.

Before Kay could make an attempt, Lia suddenly broke the silence, calling out, "Jason! Too high!" Kay saw him then, poised at the monkey bars.

“Jason!” Lia called again, warning in her voice, but he ignored her. He made a valiant effort, leaping off the platform with confidence, but the underdeveloped muscles of his three-year-old body were nowhere near strong enough. The fingertips of his chubby upstretched hands only brushed the metal bars before he fell to the ground.

For a moment, everything was quiet. Then the boy let out a long wail of impotent frustration so loud that everyone in the playground looked over. Lia ran to him and dropped to her knees, trying to console him, but he screamed even higher and louder. “No! No! No!” He kicked his feet into the dirt. Lia was grabbing at his flailing hands, saying in an even voice, “Jason. Jason. Sweetie.” Jason’s hands found a hunk of golden hair and started pulling. Lia was trying to pry his hands off, her calm voice getting brittle. “Jason. Baby. That hurts. Let go.”

Kay looked away, searching for Cynthia. Oh well. How much could she really have in common with someone who chose to keep her kid three years old? The woman was probably disturbed.

She shouldered her purse and looked around for Cynthia, but she was nowhere to be found. Kay walked away from the playground with the still-screaming boy, scanning the surrounding park for her daughter. She saw movement in the bushes and headed there. “Cynthia?” she called. No answer, but she could see a bit of orange through the green. She picked up her pace and heard giggling. She shoved the branches aside just in time to see the two children pull apart, staring up at her with wide eyes. “Cynthia! What on earth are you doing?” Kay grabbed her daughter’s arm and hauled her to her feet, dragging her out of the bushes. Cynthia tore her arm out of Kay’s grasp, squeaking, “Get your fucking hands off me!”

For a disorienting moment, Kay didn’t recognize her daughter. She stared open-mouthed at the stranger in front of her with its adult eyes spraying hatred and contempt out of a child’s contorted face. Before Kay could speak, Cynthia was off, tearing away across the field.

Kay found her voice. “Cynthia!” she yelled. But the girl was halfway across the field already, and there was no way Kay could catch up. Suddenly she felt powerfully tired, like she was pushing a hundred rather than sixty. She found another bench and flopped down onto it. Cynthia would come back. After all, where else could she go?

The screaming had stopped. Kay looked over to see Lia and Jason still on the ground beneath the monkey bars, folded into each other in a tight, silent hug. Kay stopped fighting the tears and let them come.