

Little Breaks

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Published in Calyx Journal, Vol 30:1, Summer/Fall 2017

Carol Ann had just thrown the shards of the broken ashtray into the trash when the smell of lilacs hit her. She knew where to look—the window near Richard’s chair in the breakfast nook. Together they had planted that lilac bush underneath the window when they first bought the house, and the bush had grown wildly, faster and more vigorously than anything else in the yard. Something about the angle of the sun and the protection from the wind that the house provided. The year she was pregnant, the blooms were so profuse that Carol Ann could smell them in the kitchen even when the window was closed. Richard had cut the plant back several times in the years since then, but that only seemed to encourage it. Now she could see the cones of lavender flowers banging their heads against the screen, buffeted by the warm May breeze. A few leaves pressed up against the screen, each a perfect gentle heart.

She felt the tickle of a drop of blood moving slowly down her temple. She hadn’t realized that she’d been hit by a piece of the ashtray, hadn’t felt it at all. She wrapped her index finger in her apron edge, careful to use a piece of the fabric with a cherry printed on it, and dabbed at the blood. Just a few drops, it would stop quickly and she wouldn’t even have to change her apron.

She heard Henry in the den, moaning his low moan, so she knew she had some time before she had to go back in there. Maybe even time for a cup of coffee. But when she saw her trembling hands reach for the percolator, she thought better of it. She dabbed at her temple one last time and looked at the stain on the apron, now just seeping outside the boundary of the cherry. It made her think of her period, done for the month just yesterday. So she could count on

Richard traversing the four feet between their beds tonight. They never talked about her period, so it was a mystery how he knew, unerringly, when she was done. Was he monitoring the trash? Looking for her belt in the vanity drawer? What she did know was that he would come to her for one or two nights right after her period, and that was it. This started when Henry was almost two, right after everything started to go wrong, and it took her a while to figure out that this was Richard's belt-and-suspenders way of making sure they didn't have another child. Even though she had a diaphragm, which, since Henry was born, she had always inserted any time she thought it was possible that Richard might walk over to her bed.

It had taken her longer to get pregnant than she had expected. She and Richard both assumed—once they were married and she proudly offered her virginity to him on their wedding night—that they would be celebrating their one year anniversary with an infant in the crook of her arm. In reality, it took almost a year for her to conceive, but once the doctor confirmed it, Richard talked nonstop about his plans for his son. Nothing Carol Ann could say would convince him that it might be a girl. They would sit in the living room after he came home from work, he with a Scotch and soda clinking in his left hand and a Lucky Strike burning in his right, she knitting with her feet elevated on a needlepoint footstool, and he would go on about Little League and the Soap Box Derby and fishing trips. She would smile, hesitantly, and feed more blue yarn to her needles clicking above the globe of her belly. When she came out of the anesthesia after Henry was finally born and saw a boy with ten fingers and ten toes, she let go of a breath she had been holding for months. Now, she thought, everything will be fine.

The moaning from the den became a little higher in pitch and was now accompanied by a soft, rhythmic pounding. She should go in there. Now was the time to try to distract Henry from banging his head against the paneling before it escalated. She could do it. She'd done it many times, had many tricks up her sleeve—the red plastic measuring spoons on a ring, the LP

of polka music on the record player, the crinkly wrapping paper. But she stood there in the kitchen, smoothing down her apron over and over, smelling the lilacs, pretending, just for a moment, not to hear.

After all, wasn't that what Richard did all the time? Pretend not to hear, not to see? How many dinners had they had, the three of them, where Richard would talk over Henry's moaning, discussing the promotion of a coworker as silverware clattered on the linoleum, telling Carol Ann about taking the Bel Air in for an oil change this weekend as mashed potatoes flew across the table? No matter what happened during the meal, at its conclusion Richard would primly wipe his mouth with the napkin that Carol Ann had ironed earlier in the week, fold it into a perfect square and place it beside his plate, then retreat into the den to watch *The Huntley-Brinkley Report*.

The truth was she envied Richard's going off to work every day. She hadn't felt this way when Henry was first born. When they brought Henry home from the hospital, she thought she was the luckiest gal in the world. She would gaze into his beautiful hazel eyes staring right back at her as she gave him his bottles of formula, tickle his belly with her nose after she pinned on a new diaper just to hear him giggle, gingerly wash between the rolls of fat on his legs with a washcloth during his late afternoon baths. She and Richard talked about a brother or sister for Henry, but it was Carol Ann who kept putting it off—she wanted Henry all to herself, and she didn't see how she could love another child with this intensity. It scared her a little—the idea of having another child that she couldn't love quite as much as the first.

But before Henry reached his second birthday, she knew something was wrong. Even if she had been on a desert island with Henry, she would have noticed the change in him—the way he looked at her less and less, how he started rocking back and forth for long periods of time—but it was even more obvious when she got together with other mothers in the neighborhood.

Over coffee and sponge cake, the women would gossip and share recipes while the children played on the floor, but Carol Ann often had trouble concentrating. Her eye was always drawn to Henry, always on his own, often toddling into other rooms while the other children were having a tug-of-war over a toy or sticking their fingers in each other's mouths. She would scan the jumble of children to find another child sitting alone, stacking blocks or banging the floor with a wooden spoon, and her relief would last until that child would pair up with another, leaving Henry as the only solo child again.

Once there was a girl who liked to play with Henry at these get-togethers. Well, to be honest, Patty really did all the playing, but she would seek Henry out, happy to do all the talking. A motherly type, a year or so older than Henry. She would put his sock back on when it came off his chubby foot, offer him some of her pretend peanut butter sandwich. Carol Ann wanted to take her home, paint the third bedroom pink and get a canopy bed and whatever else it would take to make Patty a permanent playmate for Henry. But one afternoon Henry started rocking suddenly as Patty bent down to show him her baby doll, and his head bloodied Patty's lip. Mishaps like this were common, and the mothers fretted calmly over Patty, one getting ice from the freezer, Patty's mother gathering Patty into her lap. And then one by one the mothers stopped talking and stared at Henry, it seemed to Carol Ann, as if seeing him there on the floor for the first time, oblivious to what he had done, now rocking energetically back and forth, humming a single note that was ultimately the only sound in the room.

Carol Ann was tepidly invited to one more gathering, which she declined, and then the invitations ceased.

She heard a pile of magazines slide onto the den floor. Nothing she couldn't easily put to rights once she went in there. And she would go in there. Of course she would. She just needed a little break, just a little more time here in the kitchen where it smelled like lilacs. Really, the

problem today was that she was tired. So tired. Henry had been up at 5 AM, and Carol Ann had to pull out all the stops to try to keep Henry from waking Richard until seven. Usually the half hour she got to dress and put on her makeup while Richard watched him was restorative, but today she had longed for more, would have given her right arm to lie down on her bed and sleep until noon. She wanted to explain to Richard how she was having trouble sleeping at night, how she would fall asleep when her head hit the pillow but then wake after midnight, her thoughts racing, and it could be hours before she fell back asleep. But the discussion would be pointless—it wasn't like Richard could stay home from work so she could catch up on her beauty sleep.

She took a deep breath, washed her hands at the kitchen sink although they were already clean, and strode into the den. Before she even looked at Henry, she stacked the fallen magazines back on the coffee table. Now. Now she could deal with Henry. There he was, hugging his knees, gently jerking his head back against the den wall. Not so bad. Not a bad day, not yet.

“Henry, don't do that to your poor head. You don't want to hurt yourself now.” But did he? She didn't actually know. She had no idea what went on in that head. “Come away from the wall and let's play with your blocks.” He continued to bang his head as if she were not in the room. She knew she could not touch him when he was like this, it would set him off. She started to think back to his first year, when she was touched so much, even sometimes too much between carrying Henry around and Richard's embraces—so happy to finally have his boy—and how no one reached out for her anymore, but she pushed that thought away.

She started stacking his blocks nearby, to give him the idea, not too high because when they toppled that sometimes upset him. “Henry, do you want to help me?” Although help was really the wrong word. Henry would only stack blocks by himself, so she moved away from what she had built, and that's when she saw the blood running down his wrist. The ashtray—she must have missed one of the pieces. Please, please, she sent up a little prayer, not bad enough for

stitches. By some miracle she had never been to the emergency room with Henry, but the regular doctor's office visits had become a nightmare. Last time Henry knocked over a tray of instruments and hit the doctor. What would he do if they came at him with a needle and thread? "Henry, I need to see your hand." Henry's balled fists were covering his ears as he rocked, and he showed no sign of having heard her.

Carol Ann felt perspiration pop out in beads on her forehead. Ice, she would get some ice and wrap it in a dishcloth and have Henry hold it. She fled to the kitchen, braced herself on the counter, taking in deep breaths of lilac. Already she was feeling calmer. She took the ice cube tray out of the freezer. So lovely and cold against her hands. She placed it on the counter and realized she would have to think of a way to open Henry's injured hand and get him to hold the ice. That was assuming there wasn't a piece of the ashtray still lodged in his palm. All at once she was so tired that she barely made it to the kitchen table to sit down. Her head slumped back, leaning against the kitchen wall behind her. The telephone cord dangled near her face.

She reached up and dialed her mother's phone number. Her parents came to visit once a year since they moved to Ft. Lauderdale, but they had missed last year due to her father's surgery, so they had not seen Henry in a while. She had tried to tell her mother recently about Henry, about what the doctors said, but her mother had not understood, or perhaps didn't believe Carol Ann.

Her mother picked up. "How's the weather up north there?"

"Umm..." Carol Ann had to look out the window to recall what it was like out. The sun beat down on the lilacs waving crazily in the wind. "Nice."

"You wouldn't believe the humidity down here. Sure, it's warm and that's great, but the humidity, people don't realize." Her mother went on about the humidity, its corrosive effects,

how difficult it was to keep the piano in tune. There was a buzzing in Carol Ann's head that made it hard for her to follow the conversation.

"Mom," she said when her mother paused to take a breath, "I'm having some problems with Henry." She twisted the phone cord tighter and tighter around her index finger.

"You and every other mother of a two year old. They don't call them the terrible twos for nothing. I remember when your brother was two, he was a holy terror. I could never get him to sit still."

"Henry just turned four, Mom."

"What's the difference? Little boys are a pill. Your brother made you look like an angel. If I had him first, I might not have tried for a second!"

"It's been almost two years since you've seen him. He's different now. He doesn't look at me. He doesn't want me to touch him." But she couldn't put into words what Henry was really like. If her mother could just see him, just spend an hour with him, Carol Ann wouldn't have to say a word.

"All I saw of your brother at that age was the back of his head as he was running off somewhere. I just about wore out my hand spanking him. Sometimes I didn't have the strength and I waited for your father to get home with his belt."

Carol Ann looked at the tip of her index finger poking out from the twisted cord. It was purple and tingled with pins and needles. "Can you come and visit earlier than you planned?"

"Now you know we always come in July. We just bought our Pan Am tickets and there is a hefty fee if we change them now. You'll be fine, dear. Every mother has her dark days; we all went through it. Talk with other mothers, you'll see. It will pass."

“Okay, Mom.” A minute later she looked up at the phone in the cradle. She didn’t remember hanging it up. Had she said goodbye? Her mind drifted away from the thought. What was she doing before she called her mother?

She rolled her gaze over to the counter and saw the ice cube tray. Henry’s hand! How could she have called her mother before taking care of Henry? She lurched toward the tray and saw that the cubes had begun to melt. How long ago had she taken it out of the freezer?

She wrenched the handle to release the cubes and dumped them onto a clean dishcloth. Half the cubes skittered off the counter as she grabbed the bundle of ice and ran into the den. For one awful moment, all Carol Ann could see was that Henry was not there, not where she left him banging his head, but in the next heartbeat she saw he was indeed still in the den. He had climbed up onto the couch, bloody smears on the fabric testifying to the path he took, and was now pressing himself up against the picture window, making red prints on the glass with his hand. He had also taken off his pants, and Carol Ann could see her neighbor Dot staring through her own picture window at Henry, Dot’s mouth in the shape of a little red O, although whether in reaction to the bloody handprints or her son’s private parts was hard to say.

Without thinking, Carol Ann grabbed Henry and pulled the curtains closed in one motion. Henry began to thrash like a fish on a hook and scream his high-pitched scream. She wondered if Dot could hear it inside her house and the thought made her face burn. Henry’s feet were kicking her in just the same place he had kicked her several days ago, where the bruises were just starting to go yellow and green on her leg. She laid him down on the rug, took the pillows and cushions off the couch and placed them all around him, and turned on the polka record. Henry raged and arched as if he were lying on a bed of coals, screaming too loud to hear the music. Carol Ann turned up the volume and stumbled back into the kitchen. She made it through the swinging door

before a tear in each eye crested and ran down her cheeks, carving straight lines through her foundation.

Why did it have to be Dot who saw Henry like that? President of the garden club, two perfect girls in fourth and fifth grade, connected to every mother in town. For more than a year Carol Ann had taken pains to hide any of Henry's behaviors from Dot on the off chance that the gossip from the playgroup had not reached her ears. Carol Ann had probably been deluding herself, but now her stomach cramped as she thought of how quickly Dot's description of what she had seen would be disseminated—on the phone, at the supermarket, at the hairdressers. How they would all cluck sympathetically while silently forming and cementing their opinion that Henry was a savage, a lunatic, and that she was worse than that—incompetent.

From the den she could hear the next song start on the record. Perry Como's Hoop-De-Doo. Henry's favorite. His screaming died down. Two more tears, these of relief, tumbled down the channels on Carol Ann's cheeks.

Hoop-De-Doo
Hoop-De-Doo
I hear a polka and my troubles are through...

She leaned up against the wall to support her wobbly knees. Her mind darted down alleys like a rat in a maze, hitting dead ends over and over. They would move to another neighborhood and start over. (But there would just be another Dot there, and besides Richard would never agree to move.) She would call someone she could talk to, someone who would understand. (Her best friend Susan called long distance last week and Carol Ann ended up lying about a cake burning in the oven just to end the conversation when it veered toward their children.) She would have a drink, just to get through today. (Alcohol made her sick, even in small quantities.) She would find a new doctor who would tell her how to handle Henry. (But what doctor would have any advice that was different from that of Dr. Wells?)

Dr. Wells. She almost laughed out loud. She had needed to plead with Richard just to go see Dr. Wells, Richard who claimed Henry was going through a phase, who suggested she go buy a pretty new dress when he arrived home one evening to find her curled up on the couch, sobbing. She had tingled with hope as she and Richard sat down across the desk from Dr. Wells. Here was a professional, highly regarded in his field, who would acknowledge that she wasn't crazy, that Henry was different and tell them how they could fix him.

Dr. Wells offered them a cigarette that they declined before he lit one and began speaking, elbows planted on his desk. After five minutes Carol Ann reached over and took a cigarette from the box and lit it with a shaking hand. The good news was that Carol Ann wasn't imagining that Henry was different. The other news was the science had proved that it was Carol Ann who had caused Henry to be this way. Because she had been too cold and distant with him. Because she withheld her affection from him as a baby, "probably unintentionally" as Dr. Wells put it. She was so furious it took everything she had to stay in her seat. This man, this charlatan, he knew nothing about her and Henry, and he was as wrong as wrong could be.

But about a week after the appointment, she began to wonder. There were days when she had let Henry cry in his playpen until he fell asleep for his nap. Her mother assured her it was the right thing to do. And then there was the weekend they left Henry with a sitter to go to the Catskills. Other mothers did these things, and much more, but maybe there was something about Henry that made these gaps in her attention harmful to him. After all, how could all those scientists be wrong?

The worst part about having gone to see Dr. Wells was that Carol Ann couldn't unhear what he had said. She would go for a stretch of days, maybe even a week, where she wouldn't think about it, and then suddenly out of the blue it would hit her like freight train. *I caused this. Henry is this way because of me. I am a Refrigerator Mother*, as Dr. Wells so helpfully described

it. And if this were the case, should she even be caring for him now? In all her efforts to keep him safe and happy, was she making him worse?

She flinched as fingers rapped on the glass panes of the kitchen door. She slid her back down the wall and crouched on the linoleum, her heart pounding. Dot. It had to be Dot. Dot would say she wanted to know if there was anything she could do to help, but really she would be looking for more information to add to what she'd seen. The dishes in the sink, the ice cubes puddling on the floor, the cut on Carol Ann's face from the ashtray. It would all be part of the chatter at the Cut and Curl this afternoon. Carol Ann began to tremble and hugged her knees to make it stop.

After a while, the rapping went away. Some amount of time later Carol Ann realized with horror that she was rocking back and forth. Like Henry. Was this something she passed on to him, like eye color? Was she at fault in that way, too?

The melting ice cube near her foot jolted her back. Good Lord, she had not put the ice on Henry's hand. She scrambled into the den while at the same time realizing that she heard no sounds, had not heard any sound coming from the den for a while. He was not on the floor where she left him in the corral of pillows, and between that heartbeat and the next a little thought appeared in her head, calm and fully formed, which was that Henry was gone and that this was in all likelihood a good thing for all parties, that everyone did the best they could but ultimately things didn't work out, and that now the situation was finally resolved. With the next heartbeat she recognized this as completely crazy, and she spun around the room looking for him, finally finding him sitting behind the Lazy Boy.

She knelt in front of him. "Henry, Mommy has to look at your hand." She had no idea if he understood her. She pointed to her own hand to demonstrate, idiotically since he was not

looking at her. He was gazing up at the ceiling and laughing to himself. *Is God funny?* she thought. She wished it were so, and that she would get the joke soon.

Music, that would help. She went to the hi-fi and started Henry's favorite song again, scratching the song right before it with her shaking hand. How much coffee had she had this morning? Nevertheless, she wanted another cup, just an excuse to sit down at the kitchen table with her hands wrapped around the warm china mug, to light a cigarette and stare out the window at the lilacs in the sun, dancing in the wind, and to think about nothing.

She grabbed the soggy dishcloth full of melting ice cubes that she spied beneath the TV stand, and a dust bunny came with it, attached to the bundle like a barnacle. Not clean anymore, she knew as she plucked off the ball of dust, but she would do this, she would put this ice on Henry's hand because that was the next step in her day and that was how she got through yesterday and the days before that, moving from one task to the other, from one disaster to the next until the time when Henry fell asleep for the night and she could lay her head down on her pillow and disappear.

As she knelt down behind the Lazy Boy, the smell hit her, but she pushed the thought aside. The hand, she would deal with the hand as if the hand were the only problem, and then she would deal with the feces that were now being ground into her wall-to-wall carpet. "Henry, I'm going to open your hand and give you this ice to hold." She pried his fist open with surprisingly little resistance. The cut was still bleeding but smaller than she had feared. She peered closer to see if there were any shards of ashtray in there, all the while in disbelief that this was going so well, that he was letting her examine the wound, that it wasn't as bad as she thought. A tiny flower of hope bloomed in her chest.

With all his strength, Henry flung his other hand upward and hit her on the side of the head, grabbed a small patch of hair and yanked it out.

Carol Ann stopped breathing for a moment, just for as long as it took the pain to register. It hit her with a wave of nausea, and she had to put all her effort into trying not to vomit. When she was sure she wouldn't be sick, she stood to go into the kitchen, and the last thing she saw before she left the den was Henry happily stringing her hair between his fingers as if he were playing Cat's Cradle.

In the powder room right off the kitchen, she looked into the mirror and discovered that the hand that ripped out a quarter-sized patch of hair near the front of her head had also evidently been smeared with shit.

Sobbing, she took a brush from the vanity drawer and tried her best to brush the feces out of her hair. But when she was done, she didn't recognize anything in the mirror. There was a wild woman looking out at her, covered in blood and snot, with red-rimmed eyes and half a coiffed permanent wave.

She had to smash the brush a half dozen times against the mirror before it would finally break.

She looked at her image in the broken mirror, one eye tilted and higher than the other, and a wave of calm washed over her. She snapped off the light in the powder room and went to get her purse and keys. A drive, that would be just the ticket. The open highway, the wind blowing in her hair. It had always worked before—a little break, a change of scenery. The first time, she had just gone into the backyard to clip flowers from the garden. When she came back into the house twenty minutes later, Henry had tipped over the coffee table but nothing else was amiss. Richard commented that evening on the beautiful bouquet adorning the dining room table.

After that, she started going out with the car.

Every time when she returned, she eventually found Henry safe and sound somewhere in the house, a few things damaged, quickly put in the trash can in the garage and covered over. At first the trips were practical, errands really—buying pork chops at the butcher or picking up Richard's suit at the dry cleaners, then driving straight back. But more recently, she had taken to wandering through expensive stores, touching silk scarves and silver tea sets, burying her face in mink coats. She lost track of time.

Today, however, she really wasn't in the mood for shopping. She had a full tank of gas and she hadn't spent most of the cash Richard had given her for the week. These little respites are so important, she thought to herself as she opened the door to the garage. And then she wouldn't have to break so many things, ashtrays and plates, so easily blamed on... but her mind veered away. She thought of the diner a half hour up the highway that served all those types of pie in the glass case that went round and round, with the cozy looking motor lodge right next door. How the bell above the diner door would ring as she walked in, how she would sit in a booth by the window and the waitress would keep filling her coffee cup. She would be able to see the motor lodge from the window, all those tidy little rooms with soft beds where a person could get a really good night's sleep.

As she reached for the car door handle, a tiny corner of her brain thought it odd that the windows were rolled down, and then that thought was pushed out of the way by the unexpected smell of fresh cigarette smoke. But those little puzzles were solved when she sat down in the driver's seat and saw Dot sitting next to her, tapping ash into the ashtray.

"Good morning, Carol Ann," Dot said evenly. "Smoke?" She offered Carol Ann a pack of Chesterfields, as if they did this all the time. When Carol Ann just stared straight ahead and gripped the steering wheel at ten and two, Dot put the pack and matchbook on the seat between them.

"Where ya off to?" Dot asked as she blew smoke out the window in the direction of Richard's wrenches and hammers, arranged as neat as a pin on the pegboard. Carol Ann felt her insides collapsing like a sand castle built too high. "Carol Ann," said Dot in a way that compelled Carol Ann to turn her head and look into Dot's face. She noticed, abstractly, that Dot had the coloring of Snow White—jet black hair, pale skin and scarlet lips, lips that were now asking, "Where's your boy?"

Carol Ann turned her head further and looked in the back seat, as if Henry might be there.

"Napping?" offered Dot. Carol Ann looked back at Dot. Henry hadn't napped since he'd learned to crawl, despite Carol Ann's patient attempts. But here, Dot was offering her an out. Yes, napping! She could justify running out for a gallon of milk if Henry were napping. All she had to do was say yes. But the word was caught in her throat, choking her. She trembled with the effort.

Dot blew smoke through her nose, dragon-like. "Me, I'm always running errands. It got a lot easier once the girls were in school, but still some days I can barely get everything done before they come off the school bus." She tapped some ash into the ashtray. "I see you running errands some days, too. Sometimes I don't even know you're gone. Until I hear your boy."

One of Carol Ann's hands flew off the steering wheel and covered her mouth without warning. She could feel her fingers smearing her lipstick.

"That picture window of yours. Today wasn't the first time he discovered how much he likes that glass. Although the pants down thing was a first."

Carol Ann could feel the blood rushing to her face.

"Truth is, you'd have to look far and wide to find a mother that hasn't nipped down to the A&P for a carton of eggs while her little one was conked out. But it seems like your errands are

taking a little longer these days." She took another drag, and Carol Ann was mesmerized by the dark red stain on the filter as Dot pulled it from her mouth.

"Am I going to do all the talking?" asked Dot, although not unkindly. And Carol Ann thought, yes, that's exactly the question.

"Dot." Carol Ann rasped, her mouth paper dry. "You know everyone."

"But I don't talk to everyone about everything." Carol Ann waited for a promise that Dot would not repeat anything to anyone, but Dot stubbed out her cigarette in the tray and then leaned back in her seat, one hand holding the other in her lap, with a neutral, unreadable gaze.

Carol Ann's scalp tingled and she felt dizzy, her breath coming in shallow puffs. The oily smell of the garage started to seep into the car as the smoke dissipated. Through the windshield she could see a red container of gas for the lawnmower, lighter fluid for the grill, bug spray and bleach and rat poison. She didn't have to say a word, she knew that. She could open the car door without a word and go in the house, click the lock behind her. But another thought in her mind had sharp elbows, was pushing its way to the front of her brain. Wasn't this just what she had been looking for? Her mother, Susan, Richard—she tried to talk to them, but they didn't really want to hear it. The women from the playgroup would smile wanly when she passed them at the supermarket but never say a word. And here was a woman, a neighbor, a mother, who was asking, pushing Carol Ann to tell her what was going on. Dot might tell the playgroup mothers, might tell the whole town. Or she might not.

"I broke an ashtray today." Carol Ann paused, just to feel the delicious release, like the cold rush of anesthesia in her veins before Henry was born. She took a deep breath, and a high-pitched wail from the house bled through the wall of the garage.