

# Mia

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Mia's house is surrounded by a hardscrabble<sup>1</sup> yard that's littered with sun-bleached Fisher-Price toys: a plastic slide lying on its side, a push popper<sup>2</sup> abandoned next to the yard's only tree, and the ubiquitous<sup>3</sup> ring stacker, blue and orange rings missing. Concrete steps lead to a concrete slab porch. There's no hand-railing, and I balance on the sides of my jelly sandals<sup>4</sup> in order to avoid green army men, a dirty hairbrush, and an empty juice burst<sup>5</sup>. I hesitate, my hand an inch from the door. I wonder if my mom would believe me if I told her no one was home. But Mia's mom arranged this. Her job at the grocery store has her working overtime. Mia's brothers and sisters go to a school program<sup>6</sup> at their elementary<sup>7</sup> on the weekends. Our middle school doesn't have weekend programs. Mia's mom is paying my mom in grocery store coupons<sup>8</sup> to watch Mia every Saturday.

Mom will ask too many questions if I try to lie, so I knock. Mia throws open the door, a big smile on her face. I try not to look past her at the opened package of Pampers<sup>9</sup> spilling out onto the floor, or the dirty plates of half-eaten food covering the coffee table.

She slams the door behind her, not inviting me in. I stick my hands in my short pockets, relieved. [...]

"So hot today," Mia says, pushing her bangs off her forehead.

I nod, taking in the stringiness of her dark brown hair. *Is it dirty, or did she use too much hair gel?* Her hair is chopped short like a boy's, and often styled crazy. Punk, Mia calls it.

Mia slams the front yard's metal gate behind us. She leads the way across the alfalfa<sup>10</sup> fields that separate the subdivision<sup>11</sup> I live in with the rows of weathered stucco<sup>12</sup> houses that populate her neighborhood. [...]

"Think there'll be pizza for lunch?" Mia asks, dragging her tennis shoes through the dirt [...]

Mia is always wanting pizza. Or hamburgers. [...] Whenever she comes over my mom feeds her leftover meatloaf, pot roast, soup — whatever we had for dinner the previous night. If there's any left, she sends Mia home with a paper plate wrapped in aluminum foil for her brothers and sisters. She tried Tupperware at first, but Mia never brought the plastic containers back.

When we walk through the front door, my mom is pulling the cushions off the couch, handheld Hoover at the ready. [...]

Mia kicks off her shoes near the door. "Hey, Mrs. R!" [...]

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<sup>1</sup> ludfattig

<sup>2</sup> *push popper*: plastiklegetøj til små børn

<sup>3</sup> allestedsnærværende

<sup>4</sup> *jelly sandals*: plastiksandal

<sup>5</sup> (her) plastikflaske

<sup>6</sup> *school program*: (her) pasningsordning

<sup>7</sup> grundskole fra 1.-3. klasse

<sup>8</sup> rabatmærker

<sup>9</sup> bleer

<sup>10</sup> ærteblomster til dyrefoder

<sup>11</sup> (her) boligområde

<sup>12</sup> *weathered stucco*: slidte, pudsede facader

30 The ceiling fan in the kitchen is going full blast; Mom won't turn the air conditioning on until the highs<sup>13</sup> are well into the 90s<sup>14</sup>. She reminds me of the rolling blackouts<sup>15</sup> and how everyone has to do their part, but I know the real reason is she doesn't want to spend the money. How much can it possibly cost to turn it on, even for an hour? [...]

I push my empty cup to the middle of the kitchen table, next to a mound of clipped coupons. The big Sunday issue of the last week's newspaper is stuffed in the recycling bin. Sunday mornings Mom goes through the grocery store advertisements, clipping 50 cents off Raisin Bran<sup>16</sup>, 75 cents off Charmin<sup>17</sup>. She says it's her church. God saves souls, she makes sure we're regular and can wipe our butts.

40 Mia is already out the screen door, pulling out a jump rope from the outdoor storage bin. I follow her into the backyard and watch as she ties one end of the rope to the pole of our covered patio. She twists the other end in her hand and motions for me to join her. [...]

I jump in. The sweaty soles of my feet leave a faint print on the gray cement. Mia grins, bobbing her head to the motion of the rope. It's embarrassing how long it took me to learn how to jump in like this. [...]. Mia taught me last fall. We spent every recess up to winter break practicing. She said it was her Christmas present to me. She never got annoyed all the times I jumped in, my feet landing on the rope, whipping it out of her hand. [...]

"Girls," my mom calls from the screen door, "Lunchtime!"

Mia drops the rope even though I'm mid-jump and races toward the door. She's already sitting at the table when I walk in.

50 Two plates of spaghetti and a jar of Kraft parmesan wait on the table. Mia shakes the parmesan over her pasta until the red sauce is completely covered. I watch her shovel forkful after forkful into her mouth. I'm barely halfway through my plate when Mia is digging into seconds. [...]

When she's done, Mia lets out a loud burp, a look of contentment upon her face. I immediately look toward my mom, who pretends not to notice. I frown, watching her load the dishwasher. I'm not allowed to burp at the table, or anywhere else for that matter. Mom is constantly telling me to "act like a lady." Don't burp, fart, pick your teeth, or slouch. Mia's immunity to censure baffles me.

But before I can point this out to Mom, the front door opens. Dad is home. He stops on the doormat to kick off his steel-toed boots. They're dusty, as is his sweat-soaked T-shirt that peeks from underneath a faded button-down<sup>18</sup>. He drops a five-gallon bucket filled with his tool belt, thermos, and hard hat next to the door. [...]

60 Mom, paisley apron<sup>19</sup> flapping around her thighs, helps him unbutton his work shirt. "Did they..." she begins.

Dad nods. "Said they didn't need as many to frame the place<sup>20</sup> now that the foundation is laid and all the plumbing is done."

"I thought Carlos said he'd vouch for<sup>21</sup> you?"

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<sup>13</sup> (her) temperatures

<sup>14</sup> mere end 30 grader celsius

<sup>15</sup> *rolling blackouts*: planlagte strømafbrydelser

<sup>16</sup> *Raisin Bran*: morgenmadsprodukt

<sup>17</sup> toiletpapir

<sup>18</sup> skjorte

<sup>19</sup> *paisley apron*: mønstret forklæde

<sup>20</sup> *to frame the place*: bygge træskelettet til huset

<sup>21</sup> *vouch for*: sige god for

65 Dad tosses his shirt in the bucket. "He is. I'll be helping later with the plaster."  
Mom's hands drop into the pockets of her apron. "And when will that be?"  
Dad shrugs. "A month, maybe two. [...]"  
Mom stands by the door twisting the hem of the apron. She picks up the bucket and hauls it to  
the garage while Dad rummages in the refrigerator. He emerges with a light beer that he pops the  
70 top off with the magnetic bottle opener that sticks to the refrigerator door. [...]"  
"You girls have any plans for today?" he asks, scooting his chair back so he can stretch his legs.  
I roll my eyes. We're eleven. What plans could we possibly have? No license<sup>22</sup>, no money, and it's  
90 degrees outside. Not to mention we live on the south side of town where parks, shopping, and  
libraries are few and far between. [...]"  
75 "Think you girls could help me organize the garage since I'm home early? Who knows, there might  
be an ice cream in it for you."  
Mia nods so eagerly that her lanky<sup>23</sup> brown hair flies around her face. That coppery oniony smell  
drifts across the table before she launches out of her chair and follows Dad down the hall toward the  
garage. Mom pulls my chair out for me and jerks her head after them, so I drag myself down the  
80 hallway. As I approach the back door, I hear Mia's rippling laughter. [...]"  
We spend the rest of the afternoon organizing and sorting. [...]"  
Dad reaches for the push broom while trying to kick a coil of garden hose away from the wall. [...]"  
Mia rushes to help and prevents him tripping over the coil of garden hose by placing her hands on his  
back.  
85 "Thanks, Mia," he says, freeing his feet from the hose. "I must be dehydrated, got a little woozy  
there." He checks his wristwatch. "Two hours! I'd say that's enough for a Saturday and in this heat.  
Katie, why don't you ask your mom if she and Cynthia want to go with us to get ice cream?" [...]"  
We all pile into my parents' '85 Impala<sup>24</sup>. The afternoon heat rises in waves from the gray velour  
seats. We pass around a tattered dish towel so everyone can buckle up without burning their hands  
90 on the hot metal buckles. Dad makes us leave one of the back doors open until the car starts and we  
can roll all the windows down. [...]"  
Dad pulls into the parking lot of the Foster's Freeze. Its blue awning<sup>25</sup> and wide windows  
tantalize<sup>26</sup> everyone in the car with the promise of air conditioning (cold seats, table, bathroom the  
temperature of a meat locker). [...]"  
95 We line up along the rail in front of the register. Dad squints at the menu, as if he's not going to  
order the same thing he always does: a chocolate milkshake. Mia looks shyly at my mom and dad.  
She's probably wondering if she's allowed to order whatever she wants. Mom orders Cynthia a  
child's size cup of rainbow sherbet<sup>27</sup> that looks comical in Cynthia's pudgy hands. I get my usual. Mia  
orders a large sundae with fudge, nuts, extra whipped cream – the works. I feel my hands tighten  
100 into fists as Dad pulls sweaty dollar bills from his wallet and hands them over to the greasy-haired  
high school student working the register.

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<sup>22</sup> kørekort

<sup>23</sup> lange

<sup>24</sup> '85 Impala: bilmærke

<sup>25</sup> markise

<sup>26</sup> lokker

<sup>27</sup> sorbet

At our table, Cynthia looks at the sundae sitting in front of Mia. Her eyes well up in tears, but she surprises me. She drags her arm across her face and hunches over her half-melted sherbet. [...] A knot forms in my stomach, and I make a half-hearted attempt to finish the hardened chocolate covering on my ice cream cone. [...]

The car ride home is conducted in silence. [...] The mood has shifted since Mia slid into that Foster Freeze booth, sundae in hand. No one said anything as we waited for her to finish, at one point sticking her finger into the cup to dredge up the last bits of fudge — something I would never get away with, or probably even think to do. The only tangible piece of evidence, the only way I know I'm not imagining tension where there is none, is what Mom did before we left. She handed Mia a wad of napkins, pointing to the corners of her own lips which were clean. Mia's were covered in fudge. [...]

When Mom asks me to walk Mia back to her house, I'm only too happy. I set a brisk pace toward the end of our street that opens onto undeveloped land, a shortcut to the alfalfa fields. [...]

When Mia massages her middle, complaining of a stomachache, I reluctantly wait for her to catch up.

"Do you think that ice cream was off?" she asks, little beads of sweat forming on her forehead.

I shrug. This is what happens when you stuff yourself with pasta and ice cream, I want to say. Anyone would feel sick after that. Plus, the rest of us had the same ice cream. [...]

A car I've never seen before is parked outside Mia's house. I can see her tense as we open the front gate and she kicks a Cabbage Patch doll<sup>28</sup> off the sidewalk. Through the screen door, I can just make out the outline of a man sitting at the kitchen table. Mia's mother's voice filters through the screen. She's speaking rapid Spanish. Dinero ... trabajo ... niños<sup>29</sup>. Mia hesitates on the doorstep, hand on the black plastic handle. I spot a frayed jump rope lying by the gnarled oak tree. [...]

"Wanna play jump rope before I go home?" I ask.

We jump, taking turns holding the rope we've tied around the tree trunk. Mia never misses a beat. Not when the man stumbles out of her house. Not when he frowns at us from the sidewalk. Not even when he peels away from the curb leaving tire marks. She just keeps telling me to go faster and faster until my arm burns from the effort.

(2021)

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<sup>28</sup> *Cabbage Patch doll*: k lhoveddukke

<sup>29</sup> (spansk) *Dinero ... trabajo ... ni os*: Money... work... children