

Steppie

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Malcolm's two daughters slept over on Wednesday nights and every other weekend. That was the schedule, but more than not, Saturday mornings, before he went to get them, their mother called. He always took calls from Cindy in the other room, too far away for Simone to hear what he was saying.



She didn't need to hear. No matter of how sweetly she had made their beds and placed flowers on their fireplace mantle and chocolates on their pillows, the call meant the girls weren't coming. Simone's welcoming touches became bits of shame she quietly pretended never happened. The cupcakes went into a tin for the kitchen area at her job. The fabric she purchased to sew aprons, a cheery print of frying pans, egg beaters, and wooden spoons, one yard with a yellow background and one with red, went into the hall closet. The snacks in bowls on the dining room table with the Monopoly box, went back in their bags for Malcolm to unroll and stick his hand into on a late-night survey of the pantry. Simone moved the flowers to her own bedside table, ate the chocolates, brushed her teeth, and life went back to the way it was when it was just them.

Malcolm never let on anything about Cindy, except that she was white, something that came up on Simone's first night with him. She had asked if he had ever been

with a white woman, because it was new for her to be with a Black man. Looking back, it was a ridiculous question, because Malcolm had been with so many women in his past, that just probability alone put him with all shades.

"My girls are half-white," he had answered.

"Your girls?"

"Yes, I have two girls, one six and one seven."

"Oh! Daughters."

"Yes daughters. What? You think I have girls lying around?"

"No. I didn't think that. Daughters. Got it."

"I don't seem like a father to you?"

"No, you seem like a father. It's just that I don't have kids, so I don't think other people have kids. But of course, they do."

"What would you say if you saw me walking down the street with my two children?"
He was beaming.

Simone imagined the scene. It was summer. Malcolm was in the square with two little girls. Little girls like him, with his hair, but long and curly, or maybe in beaded braids, their little, strong bodies in brightly colored sundresses, slapping the sidewalk in pink or white sandal shoes, coming toward her. "I would cry," she said and put her face in his chest.

It didn't take long after that first night for their differences to feel familiar. Malcolm had a way that she associated with him navigating slights all his life, but his being Black came up mostly when they were around other people. They had been together over a year, and he moved in last spring. His being a father was the bigger difference.

Only the weekends were at risk, because on Wednesdays, Cindy played Bingo at her mother's church. Wednesday nights were great, but of course, those visits were clipped. Simone couldn't bring out the projects. Everyone was at the house by the time she got home from work. Malcolm had started dinner, following the instructions Simone left on the counter. When his children sliced potatoes into

French fries, he kept watch, making sure they pushed with the attachment to the mandolin. They formed hamburgers around a chunk of cheese and patted them flat. He lit the grill when Simone called to say she was twenty minutes away. On other Wednesdays, both girls stretched pizza dough into a circle, doubled-up the edges, then spooned on sauce, buffalo mozzarella, and prosciutto, a little different than what they knew, but they came to like it.

"It's homemade," Simone told them. "That's why it's so good."

"It's so good," Malcolm said, "because it's made with love." He pulled Jane and Jacqueline together and kissed their heads, looking at Simone, then pulled back to look at them. "And talent. And beauty. The money combination!"

After dinner they played hearts. Malcolm taught the girls how to get under the boss, the opposite of what they were used to. "This one's not Go Fish," he said. "This one's go big or go home." They were used to feeling the win of capturing the trick and calling for the next. "Keep your head down and your eyes open. When it's your time, you'll be ready."

"Who wants popcorn?" Simone asked, getting up and going into the kitchen.

"Can I do it?" Jacqueline said running behind her.

"No, me," Jane said.

Simone's sister, the mother of her nephews, advised her to do projects. "That's how you make memories, by putting your hands on things together." When Simone and her sister were Jane and Jacqueline's age, they sewed aprons with their aunt. The enterprise took all weekend, beginning with learning to thread the machine on Saturday morning, and ending with topstitching rickrack to the opening of the pocket in the front of the finished product. Late Sunday night, she and her sister were wild and punchy and her aunt was tired. "No more talking!" Auntie announced, and mowed the last pieces in silence, but leaning too close to see, her sister's hair got stuck in the hand wheel and pulled her head in more and more. When the needle jammed, Simone and her aunt looked up, and there was her sister, acting like nothing was wrong, with her head pushed against the sewing machine. Everyone still laughs at the memory of her sister stuck like that, honoring her vow to stop talking. Simone wanted to share the wins and catastrophes of childhood with Malcolm's children, family stories that staked memories of their time together, but all the stories between them ended with Cindy.

On Wednesdays after everyone was tucked in, and they were doing books, Simone reading and Malcolm interrupting with questions for his children, Cindy called to say goodnight on her drive home from Bingo. Malcolm passed his girls the phone, and no matter how happy they had been moments before, the girls would cry to go home. "You're having fun here," he said. "Turn over. I'll rub your back," he said. "You're getting so good at hearts, pretty soon you're gonna be ready for Pinochle."

After he called Cindy to pick them up on her way home, he told Simone, "They were just going to be sleeping anyway."

"What do you think she says that makes them so upset?"

"I know exactly what she says." Malcolm handed her the tortilla chips he had shaken into a bowl when he was downstairs. "She says she misses them. She asks them if they miss her, if they want to come home. She makes sure they know where their home is."

Weekend nights were better, because calls from Cindy were rare. After books, the girls stayed up talking to each other and giggling in their queen-size bed. "Go to sleep!" Malcolm roared at intervals from their room down the hall. "I don't want to hear another word."

"What if you say, 'If I hear another word, I'm taking you to your mother's?' That way they associate leaving as a punishment," Simone suggested one night.

"If I hear another word, I'm taking you to your mother's," he hollered, and the house went quiet. He raised his brow, and took in the silence.

They were still enjoying the wisdom of their parenting when Jane called out, "Okay Daddy. We want to go to Mommy's."

Weekend cancellations came with an offer to push back that weekend to the next, but Simone said no, a set schedule was critical to the girls' development. She couldn't leave herself open to Cindy on off-weekends as well as on-weekends. Two missed weekends knocked out the whole month. Simone wanted to win the battle on her terms. She looked forward to the day when the girls would cry to go to her and Malcolm's house. Cindy never declined invitations to christenings, or birthday parties, or graduations, or sleepovers at their cousins' up north. Malcolm's girls were always available for events at Cindy's family, and he was someone who couldn't say much about it in a three-minute phone call. They had no custody

agreement settled in a divorce, because they had never been married. Twice a month he passed Cindy an overstuffed envelope of twenties. Everything was between them.

Fine. When it came to his children, he was powerless, and Simone was powerless by proxy. Cindy had all the power and that was fair. Malcolm didn't step up to do the hard job of the day after day, pushing and pulling them from place to place. He did jump in to help when Cindy called him to drive them somewhere or to hunt them down after they ran out of the house. Cindy was fine with summoning him, and didn't pay credit for all those times he dropped what he was doing for his children.

The late cancellations messed with Simone, but the phone calls that yanked him away for hours were worse. At least he wasn't pulled on cancelled weekends when the girls drove to Cindy's family, and then, even that was not so.

"I thought they were driving to Cow Hampshire," Simone said when Cindy summoned him on their cancelled weekend. He called New Hampshire that to his girls.

"They haven't left yet."

"They haven't left yet and it's Saturday night? Yeah right. Bitch wants to cock-block me." Simone threw him her furious look, then added a pout to try to bend it toward cute. "Say we're out."

"We're not out." They were home watching preseason football.

"I made Nachos, motherfucker."

"I know! They're excellent!"

"If we were at the game, would you leave? Or is it only when you're just home with me that you're free to go?"

"Hmm. Would there be nachos?"

"That's not the point."

"What quarter would it be?"

"The point is she tells you to jump and you say how high," Simone said. "The point is screw me."

"I'll screw you when I get back," he said and kissed her. "Do you need anything?"

"I need you. Here. Now. Sit your perfect ass back down."

"I need you too," he said and left.

It was useless to try to stop him like that. She had to find another way.

Of course, the girls referenced their mother all the time, but they never revealed any information Simone could work with. Their mother said. . . Their mother did. . . Their mother thinks. . . Their mother doesn't do it like that, she does it like this. Simone hoped she didn't have a tell. When they looked at her for a reaction, she acted the same as when they told her about their teachers, or Jessica, a notoriously misbehaved girl at their school, or about a cat they fed in their neighborhood.

Simone never asked them about their mother. She knew enough about kids, not to put them in the middle. She imagined Cindy sitting at her sister's house with the other adults while the children played in the yard. When people told her how adorable her girls were, she imagined Cindy saying "Do you want them? You can have them if you want them. No, please take them," and that she said that in front of those sweet faces, and the girls just stood there, Jacqueline, with her fists on her hips stance, and Jane, softer, pushing her hopeful smile. Simone wasn't going to turn the girls against their mother by laying down nasty thoughts for them to pick up. She didn't want them thinking about Cindy, period. She answered information about their mother with "Wow" and "I see" and "Huh, I never thought of that." She didn't twist a phrase, or raise an octave, or challenge. When Jane said "My mom has brown hair like you," Simone was surprised. She assumed their mother was blonde. Blonde was the hair color she associated with the name Cindy. "Oh, she does?" Simone answered. "That's great. Would you like some juice?"

So, Cindy was white and had brown hair. Simone herself was white and had brown hair. It made her feel like she was like Cindy. She wished Cindy wasn't white. Sometimes she wondered if Malcolm was into white women more than he was into her for herself. On the other hand, it worked out that Cindy was white. It made it easier to be their mother. Because they were girls, they were like her. Because they were mixed, they looked Black, so they were like him. When the four of them were out, people thought they were a family.

It also worked out that Cindy was white, because Simone didn't stand up to Black women. When she was out with Malcolm and Black women threw her a look, or threw her a look by throwing him a look, Simone always took the side of herself being wrong. When a Black woman went right over Simone, to him, she went along with the idea of not being there, especially if they were at a Black event. She went to the bar for a wine, or started a conversation with someone else. Even when they were wrong, Black women were always right. At the African American film festival, during the question-and-answer period with the director, Simone had questions, but she didn't raise her hand.

She fought the fight. She believed in the day when the girls wanted to be with their father and her so much, they would scream-cry to come over, and Cindy would have to give in. Simone knew those scream-cries. They filled the house after telephone calls from their mother.

One night when everyone was asleep, and Malcolm's phone rang, Simone thought there was an emergency.

"They're asleep. I was asleep," Malcolm said and hung up.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. Just Cindy. Cindy's wrong."

"That's not going to be the end of it," Simone said, and it wasn't. "Just don't answer."

"I can't not answer."

"Yes you can. Say your phone was off."

Malcolm switched his phone to vibrate. "I can't not answer. She'll call the police, and send them here."

"What?"

"You don't think she does that?"

"You're their father."

"Yes, but I'll have to hand them over. It's easier on everybody."

"That's not right. I'll explain that it's our night."

"I don't want you to explain." His phone buzzed. Malcolm sat up.

"Can you just stop getting in and out of bed please? It's making it worse." Simone said.

"Alright, but it's not gonna be pretty."

Even with Malcom next to her, Simone only heard his side of the call. "I'll get it tomorrow. They're in bed," he said. "Too bad, I'm not waking them up," he said. "Don't you have to get up early to not do anything tomorrow?" He cut the call and got up to take the girls home.

Simone cranked the projects. She used the drawers in the extra huntboard in her dining room to store watercolors and oils, paint brushes, fibrous paper, stretched canvases, and packages of clay. She bought tickets for *Wicked*. She researched exhibits at the Children's Museum and the zoo and previewed animations on the premium kids' channel.

"They don't watch movies like that," Malcolm told her. "They think they're boring."

"Oh okay. How about movies about teenagers? Girls their age look up to teenagers."

"Kids now are not like they were when you were a kid. They watch R-rated movies."

"What?"

"Don't look at me. If I had my way, all they'd watch are talking animals."

"Cindy." Simone didn't like the word, but she said it anyway.

It was on her to help his children find their innocence. She had to think of something, something wild, but also wholesome. Topstitching rickrack wasn't cutting it.

The next Sunday, she was ready. While the girls made pancakes with their father, Simone packed the car with beach chairs, a cooler of drinks and sandwiches, sun screen, towels, nerf balls, and plastic molds for sand. After breakfast, they left for the beach, her beach, a natural wonder, surrounded by protected wetlands. From

the parking lot, they walked the wooden bridge over long grasses sticking out from untouched dunes, and found a spot on a sand bar between a tide pool and the ocean for the girls to have their pick of swimming or wading. Malcolm jumped soft rolling waves with Jacqueline, while Simone watched Jane plop out a line of sand turtles moistening each with drips from her bucket, then kick around in the shallow water. "It's so warm in here," Jane said.

"Is it like bathwater?" Simone asked.

"It's like bathwater in here." Jane sang over and over.

Later they all waded deeper into the ocean and played Keep Away, the girls in up to their chests, so they couldn't run fast, Malcolm lifting and throwing them away from the nerf ball before they could grab it, and Simone working against him, getting close enough to put a pass into their small hands.

On the ride back, everyone was scrubbed by sand and salt and sun. As bathing suits dried, sand fell onto the seats. Jacqueline told Simone they couldn't just fluff their hair to get the sand out like Simone did. "We have to put baby powder in. Comb it with that. That's how you get the sand out."

"I don't have any baby powder," Simone said. "Can we use flour? You'll smell like bread!"

"Yeah! Let's use flour!"

"And sugar!"

Simone turned around to see them wiggling in their seats. "Let's just do flour this time."

When they got home, Malcolm dropped everyone off and went to the carwash to vacuum the upholstery and shake out the mats. Simone took the girls to the bathroom, stood them in the tub and dusted flour from the sack into their dry hair.

"More. You gotta use more than that," Jacqueline said.

"Use a lot," Jane said.

"Okay you asked for it," Simone said and dumped on two cups each, enough for a dozen cupcakes.

They screamed, delighted.

"I'm going to add an egg so we can make pasta in there," Simone joked and they squealed. Their little naked bodies shivered and stamped.

She massaged the flour into their scalps, one sweet, round head, then the other, and back again, working out the sand. She started slow, ready to back up for a flinch, but there wasn't a flinch. They allowed her touch, comfortable in her presence, more than comfortable. Naked and cold, they handed their whole selves over, expecting her care. Their innocence, their trust, startled her.

"Go upside down and shake," she told them. She drizzled on shampoo, and sent them to the back of the tub to wait for the shower to get warm. "Mix it up," she said after the drain clogged.

"It's like bathwater in here," Jane said, kicking the puddle to swirl away.

Simone wrapped each girl, sand-scoured and squeaky, in a towel. "Isn't it nice to feel clean after a day at the beach?" she said. Then, one at a time, she used her fingers to separate first, spritzing conditioner diluted with water.

Simone had seen Malcolm brush their hair in the mornings, and upon arrival when their mother sent them over unruly. He didn't pull straight from the scalp, but he was firm. He grabbed a clump at a time and hacked at it; he yanked their heads back. They complained but they were okay. Simone, though, was gentle. She worked through knots with a wide-tooth comb, Jane first, and then Jacqueline, telling them how beautiful they were and how clever and strong. She called up their achievements and their kindnesses, their resilience and generosity. She recalled their time together, down to their exact words. That night she sent them to Cindy's house in glorious shape, their hair cascading in soft curls over their shoulders, without a grain of sand, and framing their faces, flushed from exercise, but cool, without a burn.

After the beach, the cancellations escalated. Three missed weekends took out a month and a half. Malcolm stopped by their neighborhood, and hunted them down, but it had been over seven weeks since they slept over. To manage her disappointment, Simone stopped thinking about how to spend their time together. She filled-in with other activities. She joined a yoga studio and went to the four o'clock class on Saturdays and Sundays. Even when his children visited, she was out of the house for hours. She was like the mothers at her studio who take breaks to

do something for themselves. She was taking breaks from nothing. When fall came, she was getting fully into postures. She had worked to stretch her forehead to the ground, inching closer, the imprinted swirl on her mat blurring out of focus, until one day she banged her head on the floor. That's how things happen, she thought: gradually, gradually, then too much.

"You don't want to hug me. I'm sweaty," Simone said, coming into the house at six-thirty like a celebrity in her yoga top and pants. The girls hugged her anyway moistening their cheeks on her damp clothes. They tattled on each other and their father and bragged on themselves. They asked her to settle disputes. Yes, tomatoes are a fruit even though they taste like a vegetable. No, she didn't think there was ever such a thing as too much cheese. The peppercorns for the empty mill were in the spice box. How could anyone not know that? She popped into the kitchen to make a plate from what everyone had prepared, took it upstairs to run her bath, and ate by the tub while she waited for it to fill.

On the evening Jacqueline shot the moon, both girls ran to the door to let out the story in bursts.

"In the beginning I only took hearts."

"Oh my goodness, that's amazing." Simone said.

"I thought she was messing up."

"I wasn't messing up."

"Wow."

"I was doing it on purpose."

"Amazing."

Malcolm stood back, at the end of the hallway, looking in through the dining room.

"And then she took the queen."

"I didn't want it, but I had to."

"And even Daddy said he couldn't stop her."

"Amazing. What a smart girl you are."

"And that was the end. The only thing left were diamonds."

"She's good," Malcolm said passing Simone a plate of baked chicken cutlet and carrots.

"They both are. I've got to get in the tub," Simone said and went upstairs.

It was working. That night in bed, she let Malcolm tell her so.

"Did you see that?"

"See what?"

"How excited they both were for Jacqueline?"

"They're so sweet to each other."

"And they love you," he said.

"They're good girls."

It was around then that Malcolm's daughters started calling Simone, Steppie. On Sunday morning she came down to the kitchen. He was making pancakes, and the girls were doing their part, Jane getting the jar of powdered sugar and putting it on the table with the sifter, and Jacqueline adding a blob of butter and cinnamon and nutmeg to the syrup warming on the stove. "Can you put a bowl under that to catch the dust, Sweetie?" she asked Jane.

"Okay Steppie," Jane said and smiled.

"Yeah Steppie," Jacqueline said.

That was a great Sunday. In the afternoon, they played Monopoly and everyone ganged up on Malcolm. "Pay me!" Jacqueline said to him counting ahead as he approached her property.

She and the girls swapped VIP access for rent, an option Simone proposed months ago when Jane landed on Pennsylvania Avenue with three houses. "Here's what we can do, Sweetie," she said. "You can pay me with VIP access. If I land on any of your

yellows, even when they have hotels, I'm a VIP, and I don't have to pay. I'm a movie star and you want me there to drum up business. Deal?"

"Yeah, deal."

They sailed through each other's neighborhoods, unscathed by the mortgaged assets of Malcolm's dwindling ownership.

"Pay me!" Simone said when Malcolm landed on her Park Place with two houses.

"Yeah, pay her," Jane said.

"I'd like to cash in a political favor," Malcolm said.

"It's not called that. It's VIP," Jane said.

"Sorry Daddy. It's just for girls," Jacqueline said.

"I'm going broke." He picked up his stack and counted out what he owed. "One hundred, two hundred, two hundred fifty, two hundred sixty, two hundred sixty-five." When he was out of cash, Jacqueline passed him her stack, and without breaking rhythm, he transferred her bills to his empty hand and kept counting, "Three hundred sixty-five, four hundred sixty-five, four hundred seventy-five—"

"You can't just take her money!" Simone said.

"—four hundred eighty, five hundred."

"I don't want Daddy to go broke," Jacqueline said.

"Are you going to do this when she's older?"

"That's the plan," Malcolm said and smiled.

"Don't worry, Steppie, we'll give you our money too," Jane said.

"No. You keep your money, girls."

That night in bed, Malcolm said, "That was nice that they came up with Steppie wasn't it?"

"They're so sweet."

"It's like stepmother, but not mean sounding. They must have discussed it beforehand."

"How could you take their money? Do not get them in the habit of taking care of you."

"It was a game."

"Are you going to do that when they have real money?"

"I don't like losing."

"Did you have them so they would take care of you when you're old?"

"No, I had them because I fucked Cindy a lot back then."

"Oh God, don't remind me."

On cue, his phone buzzed. "See that? Called her up," he said and went into the hall. Soon after, Simone could hear the girls crying, and then Malcolm's comforting tones followed by louder crying.

"I'm going to take them home," he said coming back into the bedroom and picking up his shoes.

"How is this still going on?" Simone was furious. "It's after eleven. They have school tomorrow and you have to get up in six hours."

"It's okay. I'll be back."

"I'll take them," she said.

"No. I'll go." Malcolm shoved his foot into his shoe and worked his heel in.

"You're the one who's always leaving. It's my turn."

"Okay. Are you sure you wanna do this?"

"It's past my turn. What's the address?"

"Okay. I need my sleep."

"So don't we all."

Malcolm told Simone the address and specified landmarks nearby. That neighborhood was more upscale than she was expecting. "My car keys are by the door."

"I'm taking my car."

"How are they going to fit? Take—"

"They'll fit."

"Come on girls," she said, and helped them collect their things.

Simone reached the seatbelt around both children, side-by-side in the passenger seat. She put the top down, and the heater on. They drove. There weren't many cars on the road at that hour. She picked up speed between lights and everyone raised their hands like they were on a roller coaster. The all-night drugstore shined like a beacon. "I've got to make a stop." She zipped into a parking space and told the girls to climb out through the top.

They strolled the candy aisle, everyone in coats over pajamas. "You can pick three each, just three," Simone said. They strolled the toy aisle. "You can pick one each." She grabbed two netted bags of beach buckets, shovels, and colorful castle molds. Jacqueline selected a paddle ball, and Jane took a hula hoop. They paid and left, and everyone climbed back in the car. Seat belts stretched and clicked, Simone said, "You gotta see the beach at night," and turned the key.

Neither girl said anything speeding north on I-95. The wind came in strong from both sides of the car, whipping everyone's hair so it intermingled. "The beach at night is better than in the day," Simone shouted over the noise. "The moon shines down, commanding its power over the tide. It's the moon that makes the water deep." The wind yanked Jane's hoop from her hand. It hit the back of the car, bounced on the highway, whirled a low cyclone, and settled flat. "Don't cry. Of course, we won't go in the deep," she hollered, racing to the ocean, hoping for stirred bathwater, shallow and warm.

[Mary Clark's site.](#)

Mary Clark grew up in Baltimore and after many years of living in Massachusetts, returned to her roots to write novels. She earned an MFA in Poetry from The

University of Iowa. Her poems and stories have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Fiction*, *The Iowa Review*, *New England Review*, and will appear in *Journal: New Writing on Justice*. She pulled almost all of the story, "Steppie" from a chapter in her recent novel manuscript. She is honored to win the Crazyhorse Fiction Prize, selected by Rumaan Alam, a writer who goes toward the difficult.