

I sit with Jordan and Danielle as they swap stories about their idiot husbands and the flowers they bought for them after forgetting to do some insignificant chore like washing the dishes or taking out the trash. I stir my lemonade, watching the glass condensate, laughing along when I'm supposed to, throwing in a "No he did not!" when appropriate, struggling to keep my eyes open after my ninth 10-hour shift in a row. They never ask me for my stories, they know I have nothing to tell – it's just me and the kid, after all.

"They're being awfully quiet, aren't they?" I say, trying to change the subject onto the one common ground the three of us share: our children.

Dani goes to the window at the back of the kitchen (the one with that beautiful flower box that her husband built for her last Mother's Day) to see what they're up to. She stands there for a minute watching them, and then she yells for us and runs out the back sliding door, Jordan quickly on her heels and me a step behind.

There they are, Joey and Mags with stained hands and smears of red on their mouths, smiling up at us and graciously offering to share some of the berries they gathered. Their moms scream, and I do too, mimicking them just like I do when they're laughing. Maybe it's the lack of sleep, but I don't understand why they're so hysterical... they're just berries. I used to eat these same ones when I was a kid with my brothers. But they're freaking out, so I follow suit, copying them like always as I scoop my kid up and run to the bathroom while she pleads with me to believe her that she didn't eat them. And when Dani passes me the purple foul-smelling medicine, I copy them, forcing some into Violet's mouth even though I know she doesn't have red on her like Joey and Mags do. Even though I know that Vi doesn't lie and that these berries won't make her sick even if she did eat them. I know the moms think I'm an idiot and a bad mother – trying to explain that these berries are safe is futile. So what am I supposed to do here? Refuse to give Vi the medicine and give Dani and Jordan another reason to think me a terrible mother? Another reason to ostracize my kid because she committed the crime of being born to a stupid, unmarried, never-present mother?

Before she's even done throwing up, I'm already walking away, forcing my best poker face so I don't look weak. I start to shake as I light a cigarette that I know I'm going to be judged for, inhaling deeply to burn the shame that's creeping up my throat. Vi looks at me with tears in her eyes and my stomach flips. I lie to myself that she'll understand me when she herself becomes a

mother, like I always do whenever I fail her in some new way, and force myself to speak: “This will teach you anyway.”

I should’ve told them the berries were safe.