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### The Little Ones

My mom has always wanted me to keep a journal and, over the years, I have made various attempts to keep a written record of my life. Re-reading those entries now helps jog my memory and gives me a glimpse of my younger self. But, I've never been a habitual person and my journals have always suffered as a result. All the diary entries become sporadic, tapering off halfway through the year, and leaving the final pages of the journal blank. However, one set of journal entries seems to stick out in my mind. They are recorded on tiny pieces of florescent pink paper, half the size of an ordinary sticky note and taped into a hardcover daybook. Each paper, though small, doesn't quite fit onto the appropriate dateline and insists on spilling over the edge of one day into the next. It's as if all the days simply become one long, extended day. I guess I did it that way because I didn't want to lug my journal with me to Ottawa that summer. Or, it could just possibly be because I was nine and wanted to find a use for the miniscule notepad I'd been given. Whatever the case, I decorated each entry with a sticker or two and wrote in pencil to make sure I could make corrections easily.

The summer of 1996, my mom's entire family converged on Ottawa to celebrate my grandparents' 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and to meet the newest member of our family, baby Elliott Khalil. I remember the four of us making that 20 hour drive in "the van." I can still see the burgundy velvet reclining seats inside and the strange sun-bleached curtains of the same material that hung in the windows behind the oak valence. They always seemed to come unsnapped and fall off.

And, the velcro on the little tiebacks would come loose and crumple to the floor, getting lost somewhere between the seats and the side of the van. My dad was perpetually snapping those things back into place and asking us what happened to the tie for this curtain or that one. ✓

101 Strangely enough, I don't remember the drive to Ottawa itself. Over the years, most of the road trips of my childhood have melded into one long, tedious journey. I think that the strain of those endless drives has wreaked havoc on my mom's driving skills. She loathes being in a vehicle now, and often speeds in an attempt to shorten the duration of the trip.

We were the first to arrive at our ex-great-aunt's house. She's the aunt that my grandma says our great-uncle divorced, not us. She lent us her house while she was visiting her family in Winnipeg. I recall the lay out of the three floors and the wall of mirrors behind the couch in the living room. I seem to remember there was a skylight over the staircase leading to the top floor, which let in a lot of light, just like the sliding doors that opened onto the backyard from the living room. I thought it was so cool that Graham and I would be sleeping on air mattresses in the basement with our older cousins, Jay and Sean. It seems to me we slept in the laundry room, but I can't say for certain. It was probably just the downstairs foyer. My parents unpacked the coolers of food my mom brought with us. I don't remember what was in those coolers.

Definitely homemade blueberry or Saskatoon pie. Probably lasagna. Maybe sausages for my dad to barbeque. I know we must have eaten well because we always do, but I was too young to care much about those kinds of details. I was more interested in getting to Montreal to pick up my auntie Danielle and uncle Kikim and their baby. And so, there we were again, in the van, on our way to Montreal.

I envision climbing some stairs to get to the apartment my aunt and uncle were staying at. Some friends of theirs had put them up and I really want them to be artsy and bohemian. But

that could just be me seeing them like I see all Montrealers, the people who call the Jazz capital of Canada their home. Whatever the case may be, I'm missing what came between the stairs and the bedroom we went into where three-month-old Elliott lay sleeping on the double bed. When we entered the room and my mom picked my cousin up, she started to cry. I was so confused. I couldn't figure out why you would cry when you've only just met someone and such a little someone at that. How could he bring you to tears when he hadn't done anything except maybe yawn or drool? What was so upsetting about picking up your sister's first child? It was all beyond me.

Suddenly, I see myself in a park, on a seesaw with my brother and my dad and uncle there. I don't remember why we were there. Maybe it's interference from another memory, from the time we were in Montreal with Kikim and Danielle, a couple years later. But I don't think so. The seesaw was a really long one that made you go so high, you actually got butterflies in your stomach on the way down. I don't remember Elliott being around that afternoon and I don't remember thinking too much about him at the time. Maybe I needed to settle into the idea that we had a new life in our family. There was something surreal about seeing someone who had been born across the ocean three months earlier and up until that point, had only lived in my life on a videotape or in pictures, and not in the flesh.

But somehow, between that first meeting and the day we left for home, I fell in love. I don't think it happened at a particular moment. I was excited, yes, but I don't think I'd planned on being so overwhelmed by emotion like I was. I remember I gave up going to some museum or something to go shopping with my auntie and uncle just to be close to them and Elliott. What a sacrifice for a kid! I assigned myself the role of helper, changer, playmate. When it came to the baby, you named it and I was there to fill the need. Despite the fact that he was the most

placid and content of babies, I prided myself on being able to get Elliott to sleep on my own by rubbing his tummy gently while he lay in my arms. It was a culmination of those moments that lead to my nine-year-old epiphany: I was an expert with babies. After that, I jealously coveted my time with Elliott. I held him as much as I could since I was sure I knew how to do it best and that he wanted me to tend to him out of all the people present. It was after spending all those days together that I realized the toll that distance takes on relationships. I was finally aware that this little life would go home and grow up without me there by his side. In my panic, I tried to get in all the time I could with him while he was around, which probably made our imminent separation more painful since I loved him that much more with every second spent in his company.

To this day, I still tell people that Elliott was officially the first baby I ever loved. To me, he embodied what it means to love another human being. He was someone I wanted to love, almost chose to. Elliott hadn't always been in my life like my parents or other family members, whose love I took for granted would always be there. He was new and little and mine. It was the joy in possessing something that needed to be cared for, that need to rely on someone else for protection. And I, at nine, thought I was big enough to fill that need, big enough to carry the emotional weight of such responsibility. So, needless to say, when we dropped auntie, uncle and the baby off at the airport, I cried for days. Leaving him shook me to my tiny nine-year-old core. I wanted to be close to whoever would be willing to hold my hand and comfort me. I wanted the security of someone else's voice and arms to know that I wasn't alone, that someone still wanted me around. I needed someone to take care of me because, after all, I was still just somebody's baby.

Great exploration of a particular experience  
 I love. So, where's Elliott now?