

FAMILY  
GAME  
NIGHT

AND OTHER CATASTROPHES

Mary E. Lambert

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Seventh-grader Annabelle's mother is a hoarder, and their whole house is full of canned goods, broken toys, fabric, and old newspapers—but when a pile of newspapers (organized by weather reports) falls on Annabelle's younger sister Leslie and their mother is more concerned about the newspapers, it sets off a chain of events that brings their fix-it-all grandmother in and Annabelle realizes that if there is any hope for change she can not isolate herself and keep her family's problems secret.

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*The newspapers fell* on my sister at breakfast this morning.

And I didn't do anything to stop it.

Sometimes I have this feeling that I'm completely disconnected from my body, like I'm watching my life on TV or in a dream, and it doesn't occur to me until ten minutes or two weeks later that, hey, I could've done something. I don't have to sit in the audience and watch things fall apart.

But that's exactly what I did at breakfast. I just sat there, waiting to see if today would be the day the newspapers finally fell. It was the "highs in the mid to upper 70s" pile that came crashing down. The newspapers are organized by weather report, and since it's almost June, Mom has been

adding to the “highs in the mid to upper 70s” pile every day. Lately she’s had to stand on her tiptoes in order to reach the top, and this morning—before she could even add to it—it was already swaying from side to side, back and forth. It looked like a Jenga tower right before someone loses, and today Leslie was the loser.

I’ve known for weeks now that they were bound to come crashing down. It’s why I haven’t sat at the head of the table since spring break. The head of the table is the best seat in the house—it’s closest to the fridge and, therefore, the fewest steps to the milk. Yes, I am that lazy. And, apparently, so is my sister, because as soon as I switched seats, she nabbed my old one. I should have warned her not to sit there, told her why I’d changed seats. But, honestly, it never occurred to me.

I thought about how the newspapers would probably fall on her head, and in cold, fatalistic silence, I consumed my cereal, morning after morning, waiting and watching.

I was on my last spoonful of Cocoa Krispies when it happened. The milk had just turned that perfect shade of brownish purple. Leslie was polishing off her Cheerios. Dad was eating his whole-wheat toast. And Mom was in bed or in the shower or on the sofa, doing whatever it is she does after making Dad’s toast. Mom does leave the house every now and then, usually for trips to the grocery store when there’s no one else to do it. But most of the time, she prefers to stay right where she is, thank you very much. And my brother, who never eats

breakfast—at least not at home with us—had just raced out the door.

“Take me with you,” I shouted at Chad as he breezed past, keys in hand.

“Denied,” he said with a smile. Chad is never mean when he says no. He’s never mean, period. He just isn’t nice. I bet Chad doesn’t even know my favorite color.

His is red.

“But it’s the last day,” I said. “I can be ready in two seconds. Please, please, let me come with you. I don’t want to take the—”

Chad slammed the door before I could say “bus.”

I don’t know if he was upset about something or running late to pick up a friend or, maybe, he just couldn’t wait to get out of the house. I can relate. Whatever his reason, when I say Chad slammed the door, I mean he slammed it. A real window-rattling, earthquake-imitating, neighbor-waking slam.

“That’s okay, Annabelle,” Leslie said to me, her back to the wobbling Jenga tower. “I like riding with you on the—”

The newspapers fell before Leslie could say “bus.”

*Crash.*

*Thud.*

A hundred dusty, mildewy newspapers landed in Leslie’s bowl of Cheerios and sent her spoon flying.

*Flhwump.*

More newspapers clobbered her on the back of the neck.