

# The Simplest Question

Meredith Hall

“Meredith,” Aliana says, “you talk about your sons all the time. I think you must be a wonderful mother. I think you should let me come live with you.”

Aliana knows that she has just a few short weeks left at the girls’ emergency shelter before the State has to move her to another bed somewhere else in the system. I have known her for only a month, but I am already feeling some of the same panic and sense of helplessness that she is. I have made the big mistake of becoming attached to this eleven year old. I worry about her. I feel outraged at what has happened to her, before and after she was taken from her mother and stepfather three years ago. Her request—her dignified begging—stuns me. But I have just finished raising my children, and everything in me backpedals from the idea of becoming mother to a traumatized and troubled girl.

I smile vaguely, hating my slipperiness, my failure to respond directly to what has to be the hardest thing a girl has ever had to ask. “Oh, Aliana,” I say, “it isn’t as easy as it sounds. It’s very complicated.”

She watches me silently. I can see her instantaneous retreat. “Oh, I know, Meredith,” she says. “I was just joking.”

The Beacon is a shelter in one of Maine’s coastal cities, a place for girls ages eleven to eighteen. I knew when I started a volunteer writing program there that the kids would break my heart. They do. But the girls are so broken by the failures of parenting that I am not tempted to

rescue them. Tough, angry, carefully deceitful, remote and entirely self-concerned, they have learned to manage, to get by with as little risk of further harm as possible. The big shabby rooms of the shelter echo their fights, their defiant and casual obscenities, the slammed doors, their raucous or careful laughter. I have met over one hundred girls in the shelter in the year I have done this writing program. I have not considered bringing a single girl home, although I lie awake at night thinking about them, dreading what is coming and not coming to them. Lost forever, they will go on to make babies themselves. Full of dreams of love, of being loved, of rectifying the terrible harm done to them by their mothers and their fathers and their stepfathers and their mothers' boyfriends, they are doomed. Their babies will be them in fifteen years. They do break my heart. But I understand clearly the improbability of undoing the effects of the damage done to them, and I recognize my unwillingness to try.

The problem is, Aliana catches my heart. She is a magical girl. Will I take her home, she asks? My youngest son will graduate from high school this year and head to college. I have committed myself to my mothering gratefully and fully, but I am tired. I want to have time to rediscover myself, to recreate my life for the coming decades, a selfish desire. "It is complicated," I say to this child daring to beg for safety, maybe even love; I turn my back as I get busy stuffing the girls' poems into my bag. But already, against my will, a thread is weaving us to each other.

Everything is a secret when a child is in State custody. My friend, Lisa, is a teacher at the shelter. Lisa has known her for two years. Whatever she knows about Aliana from her thick file is confidential. In fact, Lisa showed me Aliana's poems long before I ever met her, from one of the many circuits Aliana has made through the shelter as the State keeps her in a bed somewhere, anywhere. I still have a copy Lisa gave me of "*Helplessness*," a poem Aliana wrote when she was ten years old:

*My heart is aching and my soul is seeming to fade.  
The light is gone and I see only darkness.  
My body is lost to wind and rain.  
Hope cannot seep into my heavy heart.  
I am alone.*

Lisa loves Aliana. “She is a wise child, “ she says. “Aliana is an old woman. I don’t know how she learned all that she knows.” When I tell Lisa that Aliana has asked me to take her home, she is excited. “Oh, Meredith! That would be so wonderful for Aliana. She’d finally have a chance.” But a chance for what? Her past is a dark tunnel, a warning to me to stay clear.

The State has one single-minded plan for the children they take into protective custody: return them to their parents. There must be a rationale for this drive to reintegrate broken families, but it is widely seen as a deeply flawed strategy. While the bureaucracy grinds its way over the course of a few years to reunification, absolutely no responsibility is placed on the parents to prove that things have changed, that they have been frightened or threatened into better parenting. They do not show up for family counseling, for parenting classes, for substance abuse treatment, for domestic violence programs. Mothers do not kick out the husband or boyfriend who has harmed the child. Chances are very good that things will not go well after reunification, that the child, beaten or abandoned or raped, will be removed again by a police officer and placed in a bed somewhere in the system, the start of the next cycle. By the time the State finally declares that the children are truly not safe at home, they will bide their time in a long series of foster homes, which themselves are often investigated for abuse or neglect. The State is determined to return Aliana to her mother and stepfather. It may take them a few slow, bungling, relentless years to get to it, but that is their determined strategy. She will be moved from bed to bed to bed while the system makes its way back to the beginning of the story.

The first day I meet Aliana, the sun pours in through the high, dirty transom windows. It is a windy autumn day. I never know who will be here; the girls cycle through in an endless stream. They stay for one night, or a few days, or a few weeks. There are just five girls today. Dreya is confined to her room for stripping in front of her window last night for the men across the street at the Captain's Bar and Grill. She's mad. "Fuck you, Shelley!" she screams down the hall at the director. "I can do whatever I fucking want. If I want to stick bananas in my pussy in front of those guys it's my business. You can't tell me what to fucking do." No one listens. Incredibly, she stays in her room. There is an edge here always, a waiting for revolt. The girls' rage fills the place. But so does their fear. Most of them have been in jail or at the Youth Detention Center. It's the adults' best card, the threat to send them back.

Tanya and Brianna shout from the kitchen over Dreya. "Shelley! Shelley! Hey Shelley! Can we have a popsicle? Are there any popsicles left? Shelley?" They are best friends. They met each other yesterday. Brianna is short and thick, with small vacant eyes and a sharp, high voice. Tanya is older, maybe sixteen. She is thin, with yellow skin and hennaed hair. She holds Brianna's hand as they come back into the dining room.

Katelyn has been here for a month. She is already sitting at the table. She is mentally handicapped, has fetal alcohol syndrome and knows it. She writes painful and tangled poems about wanting to be smart. She dreams of going to college and has asked Lisa to help her fill out the court forms to emancipate herself from her mother.

Aliana drifts into and around this room. Although it is the first time we have met, I know her instantly. She is ethereal, just a suggestion of embodiment, a wisp of intelligence and longing. She is beautiful, a truly beautiful child. African American and Hispanic, she is graceful, elegant. She wears a torn blue scarf wound tightly around her head and knotted at the nape of her neck. She slips

into a chair next to me at the scarred old table and smiles. She is as radiant and compelling as Lisa says.

I am a middle-aged white woman, a writer, a college teacher. I am full of good intentions. I believe that I have a special empathy for these girls, an innate understanding. I created this volunteer program because I am drawn to them, feel somehow, oddly, to be like them. But the fact is, I am a little afraid of these girls. Not of being hurt by them, but of being dismissed, mocked, brushed aside. Every Thursday morning as I wait for the girls to gather, I worry that this will be the week they simply refuse to attend. Yet week after week, month after month, they have come. Week after week, as we have sat around the big old table, they have written poems and memories and dreams and plays. They have read their words to the rest of us, often apologizing again and again as they read. Often crying. Sometimes ripping up their paper and swearing at someone, unknown, as they run off to their rooms. Sometimes smiling widely with pride, waiting for praise. Their writing is unschooled, naïve, and powerful. Beaten up and forgotten, they are childlike and innocent in their terrible longings. What they write about, always, is love: *my mother really loves me, she just can't handle my father; my mother really loves me, she just uses drugs to feel better; my mother really loves me, and she is going to come back and get me; my grandfather really loves me, he's very sorry and it will never happen again; my mother's boyfriend loves me and is very sorry it happened again; my boyfriend will love me always, no matter what; I love my mother and she needs me to take care of her; I love my mother and need to get out of here and find her so I can take care of her; I love my mother and want to be exactly like her.*

As Dreya bangs her walls and screams obscenities, I think that today might be the day of dissolution. It's not. The girls sit down at the table and lift their eyes to me. I introduce myself, saying that I believe we must write and share our stories. My voice is quiet in the big empty room.

We spend the morning writing, reading aloud, writing again. When I ask Aliana to read the poem she has written, she is eager. "A Child," she says earnestly:

*All by myself and independent  
Yearning for love somewhere in the world  
Wasting away in the dark  
With no one to guide me anywhere  
Loneliness has become me.*

The next week, after the morning session is over, Aliana and I sit outside in the sun on the brick steps as people walk by. We have spent just a few hours together since we met. But she holds my arm against her thick jacket and leans against me. All her clothes come from neighborhood churches. She is free to rummage through the black trash bags that are piled in the hallway near the shelter office. Nothing fits. Everything is cheap and flimsy—pilled polyester sweaters and sweatpants, blue jeans with red zippers down the legs or looping green stitches along the seams or see-through webbing on the hips, jackets like this that are heavy and have no warmth and feel dirty no matter how often they are washed. Shoes broken in by other feet. Aliana has lived in other people's clothes for as long as she can remember. Today she happily shows me the black lacy blouse she has found in this week's loot. Her child body is lost in the sagging cloth. I imagine taking her shopping, buying her clothes that fit, that are appropriate for an eleven year old, that keep her warm.

I pull a soft, orange Indian scarf out of my pocket. "I thought you might like this, Aliana," I say. "I've had it since I was eighteen. That's a long time!" I joke. "I want you to have it."

She grabs it and smiles happily. "Oh, Meredith! Why are you giving this to me?" She is already unwinding the fraying blue scarf on her head. "Hold this!" Her hair is shiny black, very short and curly. She lays the new scarf tight across her forehead and pulls the corners into a tight knot at the back. She looks regal, noble, not part of the dirty hustle of the street. "I've never had anything so nice." She doesn't thank me. I know that a lot of people have done small kind things for Aliana. But she is always helpless, under strangers' control. She can't afford gratitude.

During the morning writing session the next week, Aliana shares a new poem:

*My heart beats strongly though my soul is frail.  
My mind is full of curiosity and imaginative stories.  
My body is full of agility and reassurance.  
But when I put myself together, I have a broken mirror.*

She calls to the world hungrily, passionately, knowing a despair she should not know at eleven years old. I have been thinking of Aliana many times a day, a heavy and haunted concern. It is made up mostly of guilt. I am a mother. I want to fix her life. But I also want to move back out of the reach of her words, back before this crushing sense of obligation, of the necessity of doing the right thing.

When the writing session is over, we walk to Olsen Park. Aliana holds my hand and leans into me as we walk under the old, arching trees. Her hands are very fine, her fingers long and expressive. It is a cold, still, grey day. The leaves are in full color, brilliant red and orange and scarlet. I can feel Aliana's relief to be out, free from the steamy confines and tight rules of the shelter. Time is ticking for her. She knows she will be moved somewhere soon.

"I'm reading a book I found on the shelves," she says. I know that she likes to read. Still, I am baffled by Aliana's speech, her quiet and smooth articulation, her startling vocabulary, the range of topics she wants to discuss. Her hunger for information, knowledge. Her testing of ideas. She has been in and out of a dozen schools, and in none since she was taken by the State, having to make do with in-house lessons. She is far behind other children her age. Yet she speaks like a child of privilege. Lisa says, "I'm telling you. She has lived ten lives." I think she is smart, very, very smart.

"Yeah. It's called Jane Eyre." She pronounces it *Ire*.

"Oh, Aliana!" I say. "That was the first real book I ever read. It's always been really important to me. Are you liking it?"

"It's really good, Meredith. Jane is an orphan. There's this really mean aunt who doesn't love her. But the servant is really nice to her. Her name is Bessie. She reminds me of you. She

understands Jane. I think Bessie is there to tell us that Jane is going to escape all her unhappiness. Like a door that she keeps her foot in for Jane so it doesn't close."

Aliana is very smart. She is in big trouble, has always been in big trouble. Suddenly, out of thin air, she has sensed a possible lifeline floating past her. She is acute, savvy. Instinctively, she has darted into the current and grabbed the line. Slowly, delicately, she pulls herself to me, pulls me to her. I am scared, overwhelmed. Love is for life. I fight my instinct to reach back, to haul this child close to me and swim with her to shore.

Secrets. Whispers among the staff at the shelter of terrible things that happened to this perfect child. The things that have happened to all these girls, things so bad that finally a reluctant and inept system stepped in and rescued them from further harm, a rescuing that has its own terrible costs.

Aliana tells me certain things. She has a mother, Danielle, whom she loves beyond all reason. Danielle is twenty-six. She is a very big part of the secret. Danielle's mother, Aliana's grandmother, is Therese. She is forty. And *her* mother, Aliana's great-grandmother, Thelma, is fifty-five, about my age. Four generations of women under fifty-five. Aliana has two younger brothers she loves fiercely, protectively, who are floating separately somewhere in the State system, with no one trying to hold them together or in touch with each other: Anthony, whose father was white, leaving him to fend against Danielle's angry prejudice; and Diondré, whose father is in jail somewhere for armed robbery. And Aliana has a stepfather, Dyce. He seems to be the biggest secret, a secret Aliana circles, questions, recalls, doubts.

Aliana tells me cheerfully about playing with her mother's breast tassels while Danielle slept after work. "She's fat now, but she still dances. I don't know why a man would want to watch my mother strip. Yeah, I loved to prance around in my mother's high heels and swing her tassels. The



boys would do it, too. But whoa, if my mother woke up, you knew you were in trouble.” She is shocked that I have never hit or spanked my children. “How can you discipline them if you don’t smack them?” she asks incredulously. “I’ve never heard of anyone not smacking their kids.” She shows me scars on her face and arms and legs. She nonchalantly takes off her new scarf and tells me to find the scars she knows are in her hair, each with its own story.

“I can take care of my brothers,” she tells me defiantly. “My mother left us once for two weeks when I was six. That was pretty scary. She had just met Dyce at the club and they took off. We didn’t have no food or nothin’. I did good, Meredith. I did really good. Me and my brothers watched tv, and I took them to the park. Yeah, I can take care of my brothers.” I am learning that Aliana has two languages: the language of her facts, and the language of her longings. She slips between them fluidly, a bilingual girl: *Here is my past*, she says in her street dialect. *Here is what I believe I am*, she says in her beautiful language that came from some mysterious and unknowable place. In the voice of her past, she is tough, resistant, and separate. In the voice of her present, she is hungry, vital, and vulnerable. There is no future, no language she has ever heard that can speak the fear that her past will be her only story.

When she talks of Dyce, she is quieter, as if she is listening to someone talking to her from inside. “Dyce is the only one who will hold my mother off from me,” she says. But the sentence doesn’t feel finished. “He’s a really big guy, you know,” she tells me quietly.

She sits with her knees pressed against mine, playing with the skin on the backs of my hands. “I was never a little girl,” she says. “I’ve been a woman since I was six.” She listens to the past. Then, “You poor white women! You have the ugliest skin! It’s like chicken skin!” She is eleven, a child, a girl child with a map inside that she rustles open and folds up fast, rustles open and lays aside. We do not know each other. She sits with this stranger and tries to stay only in this moment. But her stories seep out, secrets, memories like water pooling slowly into the lake she will become.

I recognize Aliana, and do not yet understand why. I was not a beaten child, was not left alone for two weeks, do not carry dark secrets like hers. But I am shocked to realize that I identify powerfully with this girl. I know her fear, her isolation, her fierce and helpless struggle to maintain control of what is coming. I know loss. I know her proud and desperate hunger to be loved.

Like Aliana, I was a good girl, a girl wanting to be loved, a sensitive and smart girl. But everything else is different. Mine is a simpler narrative: I was not poor. I had a mother who loved me, who took good care of me, who brushed my hair and taught me to sew, who planted hollyhock seeds with me under the kitchen window. And, although my parents were divorced, my father loved me. I trusted each of them, my good mother and father. These things are different—critical differences in our stories.

But then the shadowy narrative: when I was sixteen, I got pregnant. I was frightened into absolute silence. After five months, when she discovered this terrible shame, my mother kicked me out. I was expelled from school. My little town shunned me. I learned about abandonment of a child by a mother. I stayed at my father's house, hidden out of sight. I gave my child into a secret adoption, walking away from him on the third floor of the hospital when he was just days old. I learned about abandoning a child. Two years later, my stepmother exiled me from my father's life. Although my sister and brother and their families belong together in a family with my father, I have seen him only a few times in these thirty-five years.

I meet Aliana and come face to face with me. I know something about grief, and self-protection. I know about isolation and fear. I know about living beyond the past, out of its reach. I know about silenced shames. I know about the longings of a child to be loved, to be held, safe, in the dangerous world. *Loneliness has become me*, Aliana says.

This is a tumultuous meeting, the middle-aged woman turning back to a history I have denied, and discovering in Aliana shadows of the girl I was. I don't want to have to face the sorrows of my own past. I don't want to love Aliana. Yet here I am, feeling powerfully protective of her, offering tenderness and emotional shelter to her and, in doing that, to myself, that girl who was so alone so long ago. The ragged edges of our stories are weaving themselves together, thread over thread, as if an invisible hand is binding us to each other. I resist.

I lie awake night after night, justifying to myself why I cannot let an eleven-year-old child with no home move into one of the two empty bedrooms in my house, why I cannot be a mother for a few more years, why I cannot put aside my dreams of writing and traveling for a while, why I cannot afford to love this girl. She understands that I am dodging, and that the dodge means no.

The State finally finds a bed for her. A good girl, a pleaser, a child who follows rules and wants to be loved, she will be moved to Fresh Start, a therapeutic program for violent and high-risk kids. Instead of bringing her home with me to live, when I hear of the State's plans, I go into action as an advocate. This feels purposeful and necessary; I tell myself that I am taking care, in my way, of this child who has asked me for a lot more than this. I make two dozen frantic and passionate phone calls, protesting the choice for her next placement, arguing that she is brilliant and good and earnest. I tell anyone who picks up the phone that the system is failing this child, that I don't care about budgets and policies and psychological evaluations by men who have never even met with Aliana. I talk with many people, mostly over-worked and under-educated, some caring and many not. I finally gain access to her case worker at the Department of Human Services. Brian likes Aliana. He agrees that this is a terrible placement, but it is the best he can do. He is Aliana's fifth case worker in three years. He sounds very tired. The best I can get from him is a promise that she is at the top of his list to be moved fast to a more appropriate bed. And, after long arguments, an agreement that I may visit her every Saturday morning wherever she ends up.

“I will come to see you next weekend,” I tell her at our last writing-morning meeting. I know that she hoped she would be in my car today traveling home. She nods disinterestedly. “I promise,” I hear myself say. I am filled with dread, regretting instantly this clear commitment. I could have said goodbye, carrying guilt for a while and then forgetting this child. Lots and lots of good people have said good-bye to Aliana and managed their guilt.

On the afternoon she is being moved, I drive to the shelter and find her in her room, sitting on the bed picking at her fingernails. The room is absolutely bare.

“Hi, Aliana. How are you doing?”

“Oh, I’m fine, Meredith.”

“Need any help packing?”

She snorts. “Not a lot to pack. If you mean, did I put the clothes they gave me into the garbage bag they gave me, yes, I did. I’m all done packing.”

“That’s all there is?”

“That’s all there ever is. That’s it.”

“You doing okay?”

“I always do okay,” she says flatly.

“Brian says this is only going to be for three weeks at the most. You can do this for three weeks.”

“Meredith, you are so naïve.”

She’s right. I’m another busy do-gooder in Aliana’s life, letting her slip on down the line.

“Maybe. But the girls at this place are the toughest in the system, Aliana. It’s going to take a lot of grit to stay clear of trouble.”

“Don’t you worry your little white head off, Meredith. You don’t know me. If you really knew me, you wouldn’t even talk to me. I can take care of myself.”

When Brian comes, Aliana picks up her garbage bag and follows him down the stairs silently. He looks embarrassed, apologetic, as if he knows that what he is doing is very, very wrong. I wave to Aliana as they drive out. I know I must have the same look of embarrassment, of knowing that I am complicit, a coward. “I’ll come see you on Saturday! We’ll go do something fun!” I call after her. Her orange scarf is the last thing I see as they drive up Middle Street to her next bed.

I do not want to love Aliana, with all the complications of any love, and all the complications of this girl’s life, and all the complications of the life of the girl I once was finding form in the woman I am now. I know this abandoned girl. I know this good girl who has a few more chances and that’s it. I know my lost child, who is becoming this lost child. This is an intersection of lives, a reckoning I struggle against. Aliana has appeared like a mirror, asking me what I have learned about love, about the protection adults must provide, about what might have been in my own young life if a kind woman had appeared and held the ground steady.

The next Saturday, and the next, and the next, I drive two hours north to spend the morning with Aliana at Fresh Start. Fresh Start is in the potato farming and lumbering center of northern Maine, downwind of a paper mill. It is a program for girls who have done very bad things, who cannot be placed in the elusive foster home system. They have set houses on fire. Assaulted other girls on the streets. Run away from every building the State has housed them in. Tried to kill themselves. They need to be straightened out, brought into line, conditioned to behave themselves. Whatever brought them to such anger cannot be fixed. But the theory here is that a minimally educated and unenlightened staff of young, poorly trained local girls can, with a complex system of coercion and punishment, bully these girls into socially acceptable behavior.

Six girls live with four staff members in this single story, pre-fab house. The windows and doors are kept locked, and everyone, staff and residents, must stay together in the main room within sight at all times. There is a large blackboard on the wall blocked off into columns. The staff erases and marks, erases and marks all day, creating a visual painting of the moment-to-moment behaviors of the girls. Some measures are pretty clear: swearing, hitting, throwing things, saying no, stealing from the other girls all merit bad marks. But others are less obvious: crying, being withdrawn, uninvolved, ill-humored, quiet, all earn checks in the bad columns. Desiring solitude is frowned upon and is Aliana's trouble spot. These girls are tough, angry, disconnected, aggressive, and here against their will. Sitting with them for entire days and evenings, playing board games, doing workbook school exercises—every girl's the same—watching hours of television and stringing bead necklaces wears Aliana down. If she asks to be allowed to go to her room to read or write, she receives a “bad” check.

The girls have to earn their way back into the good columns. They learn to smile mechanically, say yes please, and sit docilely. But they can't sustain this façade, and they erupt, expressing the grief and rage they feel from their short lives of despair. If they are very adept, they fake it enough to be released. The program is considered a model in behavior modification. For Aliana, it is a bed in a nightmare.

When I arrive, the girls turn to me at the door and stare jealously. Aliana jumps up to hug me but Bethany says, “Aliana, did you ask to get out of your chair?” Bethany graduated from the community college last year. She grew up in town and has secured a great job at Fresh Start.

Aliana slips back into her chair and asks flatly for permission.

“Aliana,” Bethany says sternly, “eye contact. Aliana! Eye contact! Eye contact, Aliana!”

Aliana turns her face dully to Bethany and stares at her.

“Now what did you want to ask me?” Bethany says.

Aliana keeps her eyes on Bethany, eyes that have become masked and hard. “May I get out of my chair to say hello to Meredith?”

“First, little miss black beauty, I need an apology from you.”

Aliana stiffens. “I’m sorry I did not make eye contact, Bethany,” she says mechanically.

“Did you put your attainment worksheet back in the folder?”

“Yes, Bethany.”

“Okay, you may get up.”

Aliana comes to me and I hug her as Bethany places a check under Aliana’s name in the bad “impulsive” column and another in the “defiant” column and another in the “no eye contact” column.

“Will you get me out of this crazy place, Meredith?” Aliana whispers as she grabs my hand. “They’re going to make me go nuts here.”

It is a sunny, cold November day. We are headed to the dairy barns up the road to visit the cows. Jen catches me at the door and reminds me to sign out on Aliana’s medications. We must carry with us her asthma inhaler, and Welbutrin and Neurontin, psychotropic drugs all the girls are put on. Everything has been packed in a Zip-Loc bag with Aliana’s social security number written on it in round, girlish letters. I stuff the bag in my pocket, agree to return in four hours, and we step out the door into the fresh air. Aliana pulls at me to get going.

“I’m not taking any more pills,” she says the second we get outside. “Meredith, they’re trying to turn me into a robot here! I spit them out every time. I’m not taking them!” I am relieved, and silently full of admiration. I have been arguing with Fresh Start since Aliana got here to remove her from the medications. They make her groggy and listless and very depressed. But the drugs are a matter of course in the program. The psychiatrist prescribed them for Aliana without meeting her. He has not done a follow-up in the six weeks she has been here.

“What about being moved? Any news?”

“Brian won’t answer my calls, Meredith. He promised me he’d get me out of this hellhole three weeks ago. He doesn’t want to talk to me.” Her voice rises in a desperate wail. “You need to make him, Meredith. Anywhere is better than this.”

She is right. She cries every time I visit. She receives more and more “bad” checks for her silence and withdrawal. My letters and phone calls to Brian have no effect at all.

Aliana somehow manages to stay sane at Fresh Start for eight months. Finally, Brian finds a new bed, seven and a half months after he promised he would get her out of Fresh Start: she is headed back to the emergency shelter for another round while he searches for a better placement.

I know that Aliana will not ask me again if she may come to live with me. But when she tells me this news, we are both done. I pull her to me and say, “Okay, my loved girl. Okay. I’ll see what I can do. You can come live with me. Okay. Enough. Enough, my girl.” We love each other. I know that. Inside her life, such a mystery of harm and pain, I know this girl. I hold her, and am swept by an ancient and undeniable longing to be held by my own mother.

When I attend my first foster-care class, we are told all the reasons why this may well not work: damaged kids, caught too late—depression, violence, drug and alcohol problems, truancy, disappearing, jail, suicide. When Aliana comes to my house for her first weekend visit, she is tougher, sadder, and darker. I fight with the State, arguing that Aliana be allowed to come live with me. But they want to stick to the plan they have followed for more than three years: return Aliana to her mother and Dyce. She is moved from the shelter to a group home and then to another group home. I work to convince them I am a better plan. She spends more and more weekends with me.

Six months later the State suddenly and inexplicably relinquishes custody and Aliana is returned to her mother and Dyce. She calls me crying every night. When her mother beats her



bloody and the courts give me legal guardianship, Aliana finds the courage to be the child of a middle-class white woman, a chameleon act that comes at a cost I cannot guess.

Aliana has a room of her own now. She tends to her small things with tenderness, artifacts of a new history she is building day by day: A red dragon bought on her first trip to Boston. A large basket holding her journals and poems and stories. An origami flying crane from a girl she liked at Fresh Start. My mother's silver bracelet. New clothes that fit. Books on the shelves in the corner. A mirror she stands in front of, the same mirror I stared back from when I was a girl. "You do not know me, Meredith," Aliana says. She is wrong.

She is thirteen now. She writes a poem called "Glamour:"

*Glamour is like a tangle of lace  
la ironia del mundo, bella.  
A vision of light filters past torn curtains,  
over the wooden bookshelves covered with the grit of cheap paint.  
The crickets sing as the rain falls, celebrating their own  
short time, before the mirror breaks  
and they are swept away by the silent floods.  
I can feel the warmth of the water enfolding me,  
seeping through my skin.  
I wonder if my little black book is safe beneath my pillow.  
"Mamita," I cry, "forgive me."  
Glamour is a broken law, sanctified as it is unjust.*

*Where have you been?  
A city of lights, smoldering beyond the sight  
of ancient pedestals; a seeming place to bleed innocence.*

Aliana and I together, girl and woman, are writing a new language that encompasses pain and hope, fear and great hunger, loss and shelter, grief and love, substitution and accommodation. There may be more terrible sadness coming to this child. I am very afraid there is. She will at least have a witness to her arduous and brave and tenuous voyage.

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