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JADED

Maja Holmquist

THE first time Ruby met the green monster she was little more than a baby, toddling along at three years old. Until then, Ruby had enjoyed more dotting from her parents than one would think a frame so small could handle. But that was before Jade.

Ruby's aunt took her to the hospital that day, explaining to her that she had a sister, "a tiny baby sister with tiny baby hands and a tiny baby nose." Ruby learned that her sister would wear baby shoes and make tiny baby noises, cuddle in baby blankies and make not-so-tiny baby messes.

Ruby listened pleasantly enough, her little legs working hard as her body was wrenched along by that aunt-like excitement to see those "tiny baby fingers." But she couldn't understand it, the excitement. Ruby had lots of baby dolls back at home. What was the difference between baby dolls and baby sisters? Her dolls had almost everything her aunt had just been listing off: hands, noses, shoes, blankies, fingers.

It must be the noises and messes, Ruby decided, as they walked into the mom and baby unit. Yes, none of her dolls had those. They must be extra fun if her mommy and daddy had stayed away from her so long just to get a baby sister who had noises and messes.

Ruby's mom cried when they walked through the door. Her aunt rushed over to the hospital bed with a box of tissues. Ruby's dad picked her up. She wrapped her arms around his neck. He pulled them gently but firmly away and placed her on the hospital bed. She looked up at him, scrunching her face. But then her mom was there, whispering in Ruby's ear and pointing at a bundled-up blanket.

"Look at this, Ruby. This is Jade. Your baby sister."

Ruby looked at the blanket, searching its folds for her baby sister.

"You two are going to be best friends." Mom winked a wet eye at Ruby's aunt. "That's the way it goes with sisters."

Ruby still hadn't found this elusive sister. She'd never seen one before, but she was pretty certain it would look less like a scrunched-up blanket and more like her dolls. Unless her parents were renaming things again. Ruby hated when they did that. Just last week she had been about to eat

some frosting off her finger, before they wiped it off, telling her it was “butter.” And before that they called bubbles “soap.”

Finally, she gave up looking for the sister and tried to slide to the ground. She got stuck between the bed rails. Ruby squirmed and kicked and wailed to be let out. And that’s when she heard something coming from the wadded, pink blanket. She looked up as her mom, dad, and aunt bent over the blanket and made cooing sounds, forgetting Ruby altogether.

She wailed louder.

Ruby quickly found that her instinct was correct. She didn’t like those baby noises her aunt had talked about. Or the noses or fingers or blankies. Or the sister itself. She couldn’t see how her parents could like any of it either, but they seemed especially partial not only to the noises but also to the not-so-tiny messes. Every time the baby made either, they both rushed over, leaving Ruby by herself to play with her princess dolls or eat her Mickey Mouse chicken nuggets or to find a steak knife, a mouse trap, an outlet.

It only got worse when the baby started crawling. The baby wanted everything Ruby had. Ruby wanted everything the baby had. They squabbled and screeched and their parents scolded and soothed.

“Ruby! Did you take that from her? Well, give it back. It’s not nice to take things from your sister.”

“Ruby! You are three and a half. That’s plenty old enough to love your sister and to share with her. She’s just a baby.”

“Here, I’ll get another one of those, one for each of you, and then everything will be all better, all right?”

At five years old, Ruby was perhaps even more excited than most kids to go to kindergarten. Her mom had promised Ruby that she would make tons of friends and get to drink chocolate milk every day at lunch.

“Will Jade get chocolate milk every day here at home?” Ruby interrogated her mother as they waited for the bus on the first day.

“If Jade wants it, sure, I guess she will.”

“Then I’m not going!” Ruby threw herself down on the lawn. Her mom watched in dismay as Ruby ground her new dress into the grass and dirt.

“Why not, Ruby? Please don’t do that. Don’t you want to look extra pretty for your first day?”

“No!” Ruby huffed, folding her arms tightly across her chest. “I don’t want to go.”

“Ruby, that’s ridiculous. You were so excited a minute ago. Why don’t you want to go now?”

“I don’t want Jade to get chocolate milk every day. I want to have chocolate milk every day, but I don’t want Jade to. I want to!”

On Jade’s first day of kindergarten, she hummed happily to herself as she sat on the front steps with her sister.

“Will I really get to ride the same bus as you? Every day? The big yellow one? Ruby? Will I? Can I sit by you?” Jade bounced on the back of her hands as she sat on the bottom step, looking up at her sister with wide eyes.

“Third graders can’t sit by kindergarteners,” Ruby said, looking down the street. “Everybody knows that.”

“Oh.” Jade stopped bouncing and looked at her feet. “I didn’t know that.”

Ruby kicked at a pile of rocks, still squinting, in search of the bus. “Yeah, well. You don’t know anything.”

“But that’s why I’m going to school! Right? Right, Ruby?”

The school bus rolled into view, and Ruby bounded toward it, leaving her little sister lurching off the step on her own.

Ruby and Jade rode the same yellow bus for five years. But, of course, fourth graders couldn’t sit with first graders, fifth graders never sat with second graders. Sixth with third was as out of the question as a seventh with a fourth. And what eighth grader would ever leave the back of the bus to share a seat with a fifth grader? Especially if that fifth grader was a little brown-haired sister who jabbered on and on about how much she loved school and her teacher and how she wanted to be a teacher someday, and how she wanted to have ten or eleven kids and own a zoo and live in Wichita because that’s where her aunt lived and she really loved her aunt and her uncle and all her cousins. And their dog.

Nobody sat with fifth graders like that. Not even other fifth graders.

Ruby was a sophomore, driving her own car, the first time she saw Jade cry after school.

Jade climbed into the passenger’s seat and tried to mask her sniffing with the sound the seat belt made as she dragged it across her body. Ruby looked over at her sister, noticed Jade’s red-rimmed eyes and wet, clumpy lashes and jumped out of the car. Without a word, Ruby circled the car, jabbed the front passenger window with her finger once, and made

her way through the small crowd of snickering junior high kids on the sidewalk, pointing at each adolescent in turn and looking at Jade.

Jade watched wide-eyed. She shook her head at the first four inquiries. The first six. She hesitated on the girl in three-inch wedges before, again, shaking her head. Ruby reached the last few, seething as Jade shook her head each time.

Finally, Ruby turned to wedges girl and punched her square in the jaw. Not too hard. Just enough to tip the balance on the girl's already wobbly ankles. Ruby was in the car before the girl could catch her stolen breath and start yelling from her spot on the ground. Ruby didn't look away from the road, didn't say a word the whole way home, her hands white on the steering wheel. As always, she stalked out of the car and into the house, slamming the door shut before even checking to see if Jade was anywhere near.

Usually Jade was near, hot on Ruby's heels and hoping for an open door. But this time she sat in the car. Her tears had stopped while Ruby rounded on that group of kids, but the back of Jade's eyes still burned.

She fiddled with the radio. One heavy, hot tear ran down her cheek. She didn't bother wiping it off. Soon more silent tears joined the first, dripping from her chin as she stared without blinking at the door her sister always closed on her.

Jade walked into the house a couple of songs later, clear-faced and smiling widely.

The first time Jade brought a boy home, Ruby was there for the summer of her junior year of college. Neither of them lived with their parents anymore. It was a miracle they were both visiting at the same time. Had she known Jade was bringing a boy, Ruby might have tried harder to find one of her own. As it was, she glowered at him from across the dinner table. He was too young, his dirty blond hair too shaggy.

Ruby cleared her throat, interrupting her mom's conversation with the boy. "What's your name again?"

The boy jumped. His lips moved. Ruby watched her sister as Jade smiled at him with her entire face.

He started talking to their mom again. Jade swirled her fork around on her plate, still looking at him. She missed her mouth, a piece of linguini with white sauce slid off her fork and onto her lap. She didn't notice.

During dessert, Ruby fixed her eyes on the boy and smiled, close-lipped and sweet. "How many girlfriends did you say you've had?"

If the boy replied, Ruby didn't hear it. She watched the corners of

Jade's eyes as the skin smoothed, the smile falling from them to reinforce upturned lips.

They lasted through the rest of the summer, but when fall hit, the boy took off to Brazil with a girl he used to know.

After college, Ruby found herself with her own baby: a boy. Then a girl and another boy. Jade cooed, in that aunt-like excitement, over thirty little fingers, each set of ten in their turn, and felt her gut wrench, wishing the feeling was simply her own set of baby fingers twisting her insides.

Forty tiny baby fingers. Fifty.

Ruby spent her days breaking up fights and drying tears: laughing, learning, loving. She sat up late at night on the phone telling baby stories to her mother, wanting to share them with her only sister as well.

"Wait," Ruby's mom interrupted that last thought almost before it came out. "Did you just say that you want to share with your sister? With Jade? With the poor little girl you used to call the monster under your mattress?"

Ruby's dad's faint voice piped up from the background. "I told you the bunk bed was a bad idea."

Ruby nodded absently, forgetting that her mom couldn't see her through the phone.

Ruby sent each of her five children, one at a time, to stay with their Aunt Jade for the summers. During the three months with her last niece, Jade started wearing looser clothes and stayed in bed in the mornings.

Ruby knocked on Jade's door at the end of August. When it opened, she found herself looking level-eyed at her youngest daughter. "Mom! You'll never guess! You're gonna be an aunt, and I'm the first one to know about it."

Ruby squealed.

The next four months found Ruby making the three-hundred mile trip to her sister's house and hospital frequently. After each appointment, Ruby listened the way she had learned a mother would—as her own mother would have listened—to Jade alternately crying from joy and sobbing out of fear. With each tear, Ruby saw the girl in the three-inch heels before she'd had the wind knocked out of her. And the boy with the sandy hair. And the red-faced teacher. The sneering cheerleader. After four months, Ruby had seen them all, until their faces blurred.

Those four months enlarged the bags underneath Ruby's eyes until they were noticeably larger than even the purple spots under her pregnant sister's.

Ruby left her three still-dependent kids with their dad and his parents during Jade's eighth and ninth months, moving in with Jade and her husband. Ruby, at forty-six, sat next to her forty-three-year-old sister every day for four weeks watching chick flicks and choking down pickle and pineapple preserve sandwiches while the father-to-be worked. Four weeks of unfamiliar complacency disrupted only by bad food combinations and, eventually, contractions.

Peripartum cardiomyopathy.

The words lingered in Ruby's head. She'd never heard them before. Or maybe she had.

She sat in a hard hospital rocking chair, looking down at the twins: her niece and nephew. Two pink, squalling faces. Healthy. Normal. Skinnier than each of Ruby's own children had been at three weeks old. But each of Ruby's children were born after their due date. Not four weeks early. And they had come one at a time.

Peripartum cardiomyopathy. Resulting in sudden cardiac death.

The words grew louder in Ruby's head, reverberating until they drowned out the frail wailing of the NICU babies. She gripped the edge of her seat to keep from falling. She stared at the two babies, allowed to sleep in the same crib now that they were off the ventilators and stabilizing.

Normal. Healthy. Skinny. Stable.

Ruby had never seen a single newborn that she thought was cute. Not even her own children. Beautiful, yes. But not *cute*.

Jade's two babies weren't cute either. Not even after three weeks. They were beautiful. Angelic, even.

Sudden cardiac death.

Jade had been fine. After spending a week and a half with her babies in the hospital, the doctor had sent her home. She was fine between home and the hospital with her husband, fine when Ruby, driven by that aunt-like excitement, went to fetch her own children to see their new cousins with their little fingers.

She had been fine. A little short of breath, but what new mother wasn't?

Out of the long list of possibilities the doctor had them preparing for—the high rate of birth defects and Down Syndrome, the likely C-section, the probability of twins or triplets, the odds of miscarriage, stillbirth—all of those, and he'd never mentioned this. A heart condition with rates no higher in births and pregnancies involving older mothers.

He'd never mentioned its non-inclusive symptoms.

Or maybe he had.

Ruby still stared at the twins. At their tiny baby fingers, their tiny noses. She stared until their faces blurred. Angry, fat tears swelled in her eyes, and she watched as they filtered through faces Ruby had revisited in the months before. The girl. The boy. The teacher. The cheerleader. The coaches, the doctors, the employers, the in-laws. A few others. The salty water boiled in Ruby's eyes until it spilled over, steaming as the drops rolled down her bloodless cheeks.

As her tears subsided to simmering, Ruby saw only two familiar faces. One bright, overeager, and almost too-loving throughout its existence: Jade. The other hard and unyielding in its younger stages: Ruby's own abhorrent and entirely childish face.

The babies quieted. Her tears ran out. She let her head sink down onto the edge of the crib, more tired than she'd ever been.