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## Branson

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## BRANSON

I'm a caring mother. My children are grateful for me, so grateful they ran off to Afghanistan. They thought I'd be mad but I just threw my head back and laughed, drove down and had a wild time in Branson. I remember my brother, how we used to conspire together under the stairs, giggle about our parents and how against them we were. Now he's fifty-two. Married a girl with a loose hinge and his kids hate his guts.

My children like pickles and I wonder if there are pickles in Afghanistan. If only they'd call me I could send them a jar. They're pretty salty, the pickles. I'm sure they'd keep.

I read a parenting book once. It advised spanking for those defiant times so I spanked and now—Oh, Lord—what a villain I was when I told my daughter she ought to give that devil-toddler a good swat just below the diaper line. Nothing painful, just a quick tap to let the kid know, “Hey, the world's a dangerous place. I can be dangerous, too.”

How do they handle all that dust? I bet it smears their clothes, coats their eyelids and changes the color. It always looks so red on TV. I wonder if my children will come home with red eyelids.

My neighbor Beth has good kids. They all stuck around within a half-hour's drive. One son's a deacon and a state trooper. But their house took a heap of damage in that tornado last year, so how good could they be?

I'm seeing a counselor since my kids left. There's this thing inside me, like a new person frowning just under my skin. I'm not sure who I am. My counselor told me to talk to her—the frowner—get to know her a little. My counselor told me not to go to Branson.

My husband's name is Perry, which isn't much of a name for a man. He's not a great husband. It's all wrapped up in love languages. He brings me little gifts, mostly flowers. It was nice the first time. I smiled and said “But what on earth do you *do* with these?” I told him not to but he keeps bringing me flowers. I don't know where he gets them but I'm worried they're cheap.

Perry's been so selfish since the kids left for Afghanistan. He paces the house saying, “I'm their father. I'm their father.” And I sit there knitting

and think “What am I, a turd?” He wants them all to himself. He was never that affectionate before they left. Now he talks about hugging my children like they’re dying. The counselor called this “a reversal.” I thought that sounded too fancy for what it was.

You ask anybody around town if I love my kids. And they always loved me back. As kids they were cuddlers, burrowed their noses right up to my cheek. Now they stand across the room and stare me down with those acid eyes. Blame me for petty nothings I said years ago. It really changes your perspective on things. My counselor asked me to elaborate on that, but I didn’t know what to say.

My kids will be all right. They’ll return to me. They’re in the midst of chaos, but God has plans for them. Ever since I bounced them on my weak knees, I *knew* they were destined for greatness. God was going to walk through them and leave a little bit of himself behind.

Those plane people don’t let you send pickles in the jar. They don’t like the glass. I wonder if that’s a terrorist thing. Imagine some A-rab digging out a jar of pickles, slamming it against the luggage—you’d never get that juice out—and rampaging through the cabin with the shards. Could you slit someone’s throat with a broken pickle jar? My counselor wouldn’t want me thinking about that.

I don’t know what they’re doing over there. They told me—humanitarian something or other. I don’t quite believe them. They can be sneaky like that. My children. They’re just too focused. They get it from me, so really I blame myself.