Child

Sarah Lyall*
Wake up. Turn off the alarm. Climb up the ladder of the bunk bed and nudge your brother; make sure he’s awake — you know he’s hard of hearing, the way he sleeps with a pillow over his head, it’s a wonder he can hear anything at all. Go back down the ladder. Make your bed. You can remember to make your bed, right? You know we have to keep up appearances. It’s simple. Just fold the sheet back over, being careful not to let the loose spring coming out of the corner peek through the duct tape and poke you again. Pick up the clothes I laid out for you last night off of on the dresser and go into the bathroom. Be careful as you walk down the hallway not to step on the creaky floorboards and make too much noise. Your father isn’t feeling well; you know he’s not a morning person. You’re running late as it is. Change into your clothes. I know they’re hand-me-downs but there’s no shame in wearing your brother’s clothes. Remember, Kmart sells the same kind of clothes that you’d find at Abercrombie or the Gap. They’re just as good — you’re just growing up so fast, it’s hard for us to keep up. Brush your teeth. Brush your hair. Make sure to hide the blue and purple marks on your arm from last night. Don’t worry, they’ll fade away soon, just like they have before. Remember, this wouldn’t have happened if you listened to me and left your father alone. You know what happens when he gets upset. If anyone asks about those bruises, say that you got in a fight with your brother, tell them that’s why his glasses are broken — that you kids play too rough. Don’t let them know what really happened, got it? We have to keep up appearances. When you’re done with the bathroom, let your brother have a turn. While you wait for him, sit down and put on your shoes. Remember the rhyme I taught you — Over and under, around and through, meet Mr. Bunny Rabbit and pull it through. Sit next to the door with your backpack. Once your brother is done, he’ll walk with you to school. But what about breakfast? It’s only five blocks to the elementary school. Stay on the sidewalks. Look both ways before you cross the street. Stay within the lines on the blacktop, as if they were a coloring book and you a broken crayon. Don’t talk to strangers. Don’t stop to look at the flowers or to pet the stray cat I told you we can’t keep. Don’t wave at the crossing guard when he helps you cross the street. He’s only doing his job, don’t bother him. Walk to the school grounds.
Your brother will abandon you as soon as the two of you get there so he can go play with his friends. Don’t try to follow him. They’re his friends, not yours. You don’t have any friends, do you? It’s okay. I didn’t have any friends when I was your age, either. I know, it’s hard being different. Remember, God makes us all different for a reason. Things will get better, you’ll make friends eventually. But for now, just stand by the door and wait until the bell rings. Go into the school. Walk to the locker you share with another kid in your class. They’ll want to put their backpack on the higher hook. Let them. It’s not worth the fight. They’ll want to do it because they think they’re better than you, but they’re not. They’re just taller than you. Try not to guess what their mother has packed in their lunch box or look at the pictures of all of their friends on the locker door. Remember, having friends isn’t important. What’s important is that you pay attention in school. Listen to your teacher and remember everything she says as if it were holy gospel and you a lowly sinner. Remember the pledge of allegiance. Remember the alphabet. Remember 10 x 0 is still 0. Remember M-E-S-S-I-P-P-I. Remember the twinge in your stomach will pass. But whatever you do, pay attention to your teacher. Remember it’s mind over matter, and your stomach doesn’t matter. If all else fails, start to cough. Raise your hand. Ask if you can get a drink of water. Go to the drinking fountain and drink until you feel like you could throw up. Go back to class and pretend it made a difference. When it’s time for lunch, make sure to go to back of the line. Let everyone else go first, that way the other kids won’t hear the lunch lady when she tells you that your account is out of money again. Tell her that I get paid in a couple of days, even if it isn’t true. They’ll let you eat. They have to give food to kids. Pick up a lunch tray and take as much food as they’ll give you. Go over to where they keep the condiments and take a handful of ketchup packets. Shove them into your pockets. We’ll make tomato soup later by mixing them with hot water. Sit at one of the tables. Don’t dig into the food like some sort of starving animal. You know we have to keep up appearances. Try to eat as slowly as possible; it’ll make the food last longer. Savor it. Chew every bite of food twenty times so you’ll feel fuller. Get up. Take the lunch tray over to the garbage. Throw away your napkin and nothing else. Drop off your tray with the lunch lady washing dishes. Ask her if they need anyone to help clean off the tables. She’ll probably grumble a bit because you interrupted her, but she’ll give you a spray bottle full of cleaner and a white wash rag. Go around the room from table to table, spraying the surface and wiping in a clockwise motion like I taught you at home. Brush the crumbs into your hand, not just onto the
ground. When you're done cleaning tables, make sure the lunch ladies see you throw away the crumbs into the trashcan—they'll be happy you're not like the other kids who dirty up their floors and they'll remember to give you more food next time. Give them back their spray bottle and rag. Ask if there is anything else you can do. They'll probably say no. You're just a child; they don't expect much from you. Listen for the bell then go back to your classroom. Once you've had your lunch, it'll be easier to focus on your classes. Remember to listen to your teacher. Remember George Washington had wooden teeth, Columbus discovered America, the moon is made of cheese. Remember all these things are lies but we tell them to you because we want you to have a better, happier life. Remember to wait for your brother by the flagpole outside of the school when classes are over. Try not to pay any attention to the other kids coming out of the school. Don't stare at them, dressed head to toe in Abercrombie as they stroll out to meet their parents, the ones who are waiting for them in their nice new cars. When they come up to you with a smug little grin on their face and point at you, don't listen to what they have to say. That you're wearing "boy" clothes. That "Yo' family's so poor when I asked yo' mama what's for dinner, she put her shoe laces in a pot and said spaghetti." That you're ugly; stupid; dirty; poor; worthless. Tell them "No." Tell them that everybody wears jeans, not just boys. Tell 'em that everybody knows your mom's the best fry cook down at the diner on Fifth Street. And tell them God made you perfect just the way you are, so unless they feel like arguing with God, they better leave you alone. Remember to stand there like a statue, stone cold and refusing to bulge. Don't cry. That's what they want you to do. Remember, this is only temporary; years from now it won't matter that they called you poor. Just because they have nice things, that does not mean that they are better than you. Remember when they go home, all their parents let them do is sit in front of a TV screen, eating candy and rotting out their brains. Remember you're better than that. Why, just last month your teacher said that you had the highest math score on the basic skills test. See? You're better than them. They're jealous of you. Remember, their parents don't trust them the way I trust you. You're a big kid now and that I need you to act that way. This year has been hard on us all — your father was laid off and hasn't been able to find any work for months and I have to be at the diner at 5:00 in the morning and Cissy's in the afternoon just so we can make ends meet, so I can't be around as much as I was before. We're all trying our best, just like you need to try your best. Remember to pick up any cans you see and your
brother find on the way home because every bit helps. Make sure to put the cans next to the sink with the ones your father has put there. Remember to stay away from him if there are more empty cans next to the sink than full ones in the fridge. Do your homework and then go outside; do whatever it takes to keep out of his hair until I get there. You know what happens when you bother him. Remember to help me make dinner when I get home from work. I don’t know what we’ll be making. It’s always a fun surprise, isn’t it? Some nights it’s canned spinach with tuna and cranberry sauce, other times it’s chili and leftover donuts from work. Maybe we’ll be lucky tonight and I’ll find a box of macaroni and cheese at the donation box at church. Don’t let your father know that’s where the food is coming from; you know it’d only upset him. Remember to say grace before eating the pasta and tomato soup like it was manna straight from heaven. Remember, it’s important to be grateful for what we do have. When you’re ready for bed, remember to ask me to read your favorite book of fairy tales to you before you go to sleep—not your father. That’s what happened last night, remember? I know you didn’t mean to bother him, but you know he’s not in the mood to hear about happily ever after right now. Try not to listen to him, even when he wakes you up in the middle of the night because he’s arguing with me about anything and everything. Remember that we love you. Remember this isn’t your fault. Remember that bad things happen to good people. Remember things can get better. Remember Cinderella had to walk around in rags and wash a few floors before she became a princess. Remember God gives us only what we can handle. Remember it won’t be this way forever. So, when will it get better? Child, how am I supposed to know? Who do you think I am? God?

Sarah Lyall is a senior English major with an emphasis in creative writing and a minor in Women’s Studies. She is from State Center, Iowa, and transferred from Marshalltown Community College with her associate’s degree. When she’s not up until 3 AM writing and doing homework, she enjoys cats, crochet, and photography. Someday, she hopes to become a published novelist, as well as get a full night of sleep.