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**Happiness**

**BY**[**MARIAN CROTTY**](https://thesunmagazine.org/contributors/marian-crotty)**•**

I moved in with Angela after five months because her roommate was moving to California and because I was sick with love. I was twenty-five, and this had never happened to me. Before Angela, I’d dated only men — and “dated” is kind of an exaggeration. I’d hung out with each guy long enough to prove I *could* have a boyfriend, sometimes had sex with him, and then immediately informed him it was not going to work out. My longest relationship had lasted seven weeks.

This was in Tempe, Arizona, during the spring of 2008, a nearly perfect season of blue skies, sunlight, and long, breezy days when green spaces filled with frisbees and sunbathers and the restaurant patios overflowed with diners. A feeling of possibility hung in the air, and my life finally seemed to be coming together.

“It’s just a sublease,” Angela said. “And just for a few months. If things fall apart, you’ll have a way out.”

I did not want a way out. I wanted to stitch my life to hers, and living together seemed like a good first step. What I said, though, was “Sure. My lease is almost up. Why not?”

We were at my apartment in the shower, a mildewed plastic stall that made a popping sound when you shifted your weight. There was not enough space for us both to be under the showerhead, so we took turns shivering against the wall.

“What a cliché, right?” she said, meaning how quickly we were moving in together.

“Totally,” I said. I had learned the joke only a couple of weeks earlier, when we were watching *The L Word*: What does a lesbian bring to a second date? A U-Haul.

I had graduated from Arizona State with a degree in trumpet performance and hadn’t yet found a reason to leave Tempe. Because I’d gone to college on a music scholarship, I had genuinely thought I’d land a job in a major orchestra after graduation. When this didn’t happen, I found myself working at House of Tricks, the same cozy “new American” restaurant where I’d worked in college, and as a cashier at a used-clothing store called the Buffalo Exchange. I actually loved both jobs, which involved long periods of standing around and gossiping about my coworkers’ sex lives, but my lack of progress toward adulthood shamed me. My friend Serena was about to graduate from Berkeley Law, and my high-school friend Jenny was already married.

The only halfway cool thing about me was that I played trumpet in a band called the Tree Frogs. Our festive mix of mariachi horns and reggae beats was popular at local bars, even though we were not very good. The other band members were mostly guys from the restaurant who’d taught themselves just enough about music to attract women and not so much that our performances were consistently in tune. What people liked about us, I think, was the energy of a half dozen people on stage dancing to a thumping mix of brass, tambourines, and strings. What I liked was how the band transformed me from a quiet, self-conscious person into a woman who stomped around in short dresses and tall boots, swinging the bell of her trumpet like she was in a New Orleans marching band. This alter ego was what made Angela notice me.

“You looked like such as badass up there,” she told me at the bar after a performance. “I loved watching you.”

“That’s why I dress like this,” I told her. “I’m glad to see it worked.”

My whole body tingled in her presence. She was wearing tight jeans and a ribbed tank top that showed off her slender arms and a tattoo of birds taking flight. She had almost-black hair, long eyelashes, and a masculine swagger that made my stomach flutter. This, I realized, was who I’d been waiting to find me.

“This is the third time I’ve meant to talk to you,” she said. “You make me so shy.”

I felt a dizzy, floating sensation as the sweat from the stage cooled on my skin. If I could just keep it together, I thought, my life was about to change.

Angela was only two years older than I was but had already been working as a middle-school math teacher for five years — first in California, where she was from, and then in Tempe, where she had moved to be closer to her brother, Diego, and his family. She had curtains on her windows and a plan to buy a house before she turned thirty. When I moved in, all of my belongings fit into the back of her brother’s pickup truck.

“You travel light,” he said.

Diego’s pale-brown eyes always flickered as if he was about to tell a joke. There wasn’t any judgment in his voice, but I felt myself blushing. Angela said something to him in Spanish that I didn’t understand beyond the pronoun *she*.

“I told him you were a free spirit,” she said, and she squeezed my hand. “Isn’t that right?”

Free was the opposite of what I felt. “Paralyzed” would have been more accurate.

Her place was a two-bedroom stucco house about ten minutes south of the university, in a neighborhood of small beige houses sandwiched between some railroad tracks and a middle school. The area was mostly occupied by students and young, broke families who left plastic toys in their yards, but to me it represented real adulthood. Before that I’d lived in a sprawling apartment complex where someone had once stolen my underwear from the dryer, and before that a dorm room decorated with a giant Miles Davis poster, and before that my childhood bedroom with the glow-in-the-dark plastic stars stuck to the ceiling. Angela’s house had a fenced-in backyard with a lemon tree and a front porch where we drank coffee in the mornings and vodka sodas on the weekends.

Without roommates, we walked around naked and had sex wherever we wanted. Almost as intoxicating, though, was the easy domestic routine — cooking pasta while listening to music, making a grocery list, even mopping the terra-cotta floors. In the mornings she got up first, and I lay in the bed and watched her get dressed, wondering at my good fortune. Was it possible that fixing my life could be this simple?

For weeks I waited for the cracks in our relationship to show, and when they finally did, it was almost a relief. I was at the restaurant, finishing up a lunch shift, when Angela texted to say she’d be home early and her four-year-old nephew, Jaxon, would be with her. He’d gotten sent home from day care with a fever, and his parents were at work and couldn’t get him.

I texted back: *Aren’t YOU working?*

*Yeah, but it’s fine.*

Angela was a more generous person than I was. She picked friends up at the airport at odd hours, had people over for drinks or dinner who never reciprocated. But leaving work early so her brother wouldn’t have to felt like a different level of sacrifice, and it made me anxious. As a teenager I’d allowed my parents’ strict rules to dictate my behavior. Then, in college, I’d swung in the other direction, keeping people at such a distance that their behavior rarely affected me. I didn’t know how to navigate the give-and-take of close relationships without losing my sense of self, and Angela’s attitude of accommodation felt threatening.

*Just being protective of you*, I texted back. *You are a giving person and people can take advantage.*

She didn’t respond right away, and I had to close out my last table — a group of women from the local mosque who’d been drinking tea and poking at a single slice of cake for approximately three hours. When I came back to the host stand, I had a series of messages waiting. *I wasn’t asking for advice* was one. Also: *This is my FAMILY*.

*I overstepped and I’m sorry*, I texted, but she didn’t respond. In the kitchen I wiped down the ketchup bottles and sugar boats and tried to tell myself that everything would be OK. I didn’t want to lose her and have to go back to my old life.

Ryan, the bass player and lead singer in the Tree Frogs, was changing one of the syrups on the soda machine. He was a lanky white guy with floppy hair and an ironic handlebar mustache. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Why does your face look like that?”

“I pissed off Angela.”

“Don’t do that.” He threw the old syrup container across the room into the garbage can. “She’s way too hot, Steph. Don’t fuck this up.”

When I got home, the blinds in the living room were closed and the DVR was playing an episode of *Brothers & Sisters* with the sound muted and the subtitles on. Angela was on the couch with Jaxon sprawled across her, half asleep. His cheeks were flushed, and his eyes looked heavy. Every other time I’d seen him, he was barreling across a playground or jumping on the furniture.

“Is he OK?” I asked. “Do you need me to go to the pharmacy or something?”

She kissed his caramel-colored curls. “He’ll be all right. He just has a low fever.”

“Are *we* OK?”

“Let’s talk later.”

In my past “relationships” I had often been accused of having no emotions. At first some guys saw this as a perk: I didn’t care if he slept over after sex or kept in touch with his exes. But eventually it was said in anger, after I broke up with him.

“This is just an ego trip for you,” one guy told me. “You make men fall in love with you just to bust their balls. There’s something wrong with you.”

His name was Arash, and we’d briefly dated the summer after college graduation. He was a short, well-dressed cello player who was in a music fraternity with many of my friends, and he had seen how I operated long enough to recite a whole list of men I had wronged. He was on the verge of tears, but I didn’t feel sorry for him. As far as I could tell from my female friends, men did this to women all the time.

“Thanks for the insight,” I said. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Now, though, nauseated at the thought of Angela breaking up with me, I finally felt some sympathy for Arash and every other guy I’d dumped. I hadn’t considered that they might have been telling the truth, that heartbreak could cause physical pain.

Angela and I had planned to go to an early movie with some of my friends, but when the time came to go, Diego still hadn’t come to pick up Jaxon.

“Go without me,” she said. “It’s OK.”

I was annoyed but wanted to mend things with her. “They’ll understand,” I said. “I’ll stay and make dinner.”

I made grilled cheese sandwiches and apple slices to appeal to Jaxon, but he didn’t eat. Then the three of us watched *Planet Earth*, the one kid-appropriate DVD we had, while we waited for Diego. He knocked on the door a little before seven o’clock, grateful but not apologetic. Angela told him she was happy to help.

“He’s my little guy,” she said. “You know you can always call me.”

When we were finally alone, I asked if she was still mad.

“This isn’t about being mad. It’s about compatibility. My family is everything to me. I can’t be with somebody who doesn’t understand that.”

“OK.”

“Also I had a free period at the end of the day. I’m not an idiot.”

“I know that,” I said. “I’m sorry. Please don’t break up with me.”

She sighed. “I’m making sure we’re on the same page. If my brother needs me, I don’t want to argue about it.”

I said I understood.

“I come from a big Mexican family. This is who I am.”

I thought, but did not say, that this wasn’t the whole story. Her parents had married young, and her mom, who was white and used drugs, would disappear for months at a time. Once, when Angela was in elementary school, her mom passed out in the bathroom and she and her brother held a mirror under her nose to see if she was still breathing. When she was in middle school, her mom sold a leather jacket Angela had saved up to buy. Most of the time, though, Angela’s mom was gone entirely, and her dad, who supported two kids as a diesel mechanic, was often working or tired. Meanwhile I had grown up under the watchful eye of anxious and orderly Midwesterners who believed that good people shoveled their snow immediately and went to church each Sunday and forbade “slutty” clothing such as leggings and tank tops. I’d felt so scrutinized and controlled growing up that my parents’ opinions still sometimes drowned out my own.

“I *like* who you are,” I said, suddenly choked up. “Actually I love you, Angela.”

It was the first time I’d said this to someone I was dating, and I was immediately afraid she wouldn’t say it back.

“Well, I love you, too, Steph,” she said and then grinned. “Just don’t come between me and my family.”

June in Tempe was hot yet bearable, but by July you could feel your skin and hair burning as soon as you stepped outside. It wasn’t possible to eat or exercise outdoors for most of the day, plastic grocery bags melted in cars, and the air shimmered with heat. The previous two summers I’d spent a couple of weeks at my parents’ house in Missouri, where the heat was only mildly intolerable and I could enjoy their air-conditioning and eat their sloppy-joe sandwiches and green-bean casserole for free. Each visit we would have at least one argument about my bad manners and ingratitude, but while they were at work, I could be alone in an empty house not tainted by my bad moods and loneliness. The summer I lived with Angela, though, I didn’t visit my parents. When I told my mom that I might not be coming home at all before Christmas, she offered to buy me a plane ticket.

“It’s not that,” I said. “I’m just busy with music, and I’m too old to take your money.”

My mom seemed confused. I had never before objected to their paying for things. I hadn’t yet come out to her or mentioned Angela.

“Don’t you at least want to come with us to the lake? Ben is coming.”

Ben was my brother. The lake was a murky, foul-smelling reservoir slick with oil from speedboats. My grandparents owned a musty cabin there the size of a storage shed, which my mom always remembered as large and inviting.

“It sounds nice,” I said. “I wish I weren’t so busy.”

I was not busy. The restaurant was closed for the whole month of July, and the Tree Frogs were on hiatus until our lead singer finished his legal internship in Chicago. I worked about twenty hours a week at the Buffalo Exchange, but with most of the college students out of town for the summer, business was slow, and I often got sent home early — which was fine with me, even though my savings were dwindling. Now that she was on her summer break, Angela was more relaxed, more likely to have a drink during the week, and more often willing to have loud sex in the middle of the day. Also I just liked being in her presence. I had never before reached the stage of dating where I bore witness to someone’s daily life, and everything about her fascinated me. She loved sugar but drank her coffee black. She liked mystery novels and wore eyeliner every day, even if it was just the two of us. She was rarely idle, always working through a list of summer projects, from revising her curriculum to organizing her closets. She also volunteered several days a week to take care of Jaxon, which she genuinely seemed to enjoy.

His parents had taken him out of day care for the summer to save money. Usually his great-grandmother watched him during the day, but she was old and often needed a break. I was surprised to find that I liked having Jaxon around. We made slime from baking soda and school glue, took him to story hour at the library, brought him along with us while we ran errands. I was amazed at how good it felt when he reached for my hand and how friendly the world became when you walked through it with a child. Grizzled old men at Home Depot stopped to wave at him. Women at Safeway told Angela what an adorable little boy she was raising. (Who they thought I was in this scenario wasn’t clear.) Neighbors we’d seen but never spoken to suddenly stepped out of the background to introduce themselves.

One morning, just after Jaxon’s mom had dropped him off, we were on the sidewalk, trying to teach him to ride a bike Angela had found at a garage sale, when a little girl crossed the street to talk to us. She had a bike, too, but was older than Jaxon, maybe nine or ten, with tangled blond hair and a big purple T-shirt with a picture of a unicorn. I got the feeling she’d been waiting around for someone to talk to.

“I’m Kendra,” she said.

“This is Jaxon,” Angela said. “Jaxon, can you say hi?”

He looked up at the older girl as if she were a celebrity, but he didn’t speak.

“I’m not allowed to talk to strangers unless they’re ladies with kids,” she said. “That’s my mom’s rule.”

I gave Angela a look. I was pretty sure that, whatever ladies her mom had in mind, they probably weren’t childless lesbians.

“Jaxon is actually my nephew,” Angela said, “but I like your mom’s idea about finding a family.”

She followed us to the park and hung out while we watched Jaxon on the playground. When it was time for his morning snack, we headed back to our house. It seemed like Kendra wanted to come inside.

“I hope we see you around, Kendra,” Angela said. “Do you live on this street?”

She nodded and pointed to a tiny cinder-block house with a blue door and an empty gravel driveway.

“Weird kid, right?” I said to Angela later. Kendra had seemed too eager for adult attention. Wasn’t it dangerous for a little girl to broadcast such neediness?

“I don’t know,” Angela said. “I just got the feeling she was bored.”

That summer I grew optimistic about my future. I’d learned that someone could fall in love with me, and I could love her back. With this weight lifted, everything else seemed possible. I paid off a parking ticket I’d been ignoring for six months and finally visited Arizona State’s career center, which I’d been meaning to do for five years. I began applying for sound-editing jobs at radio stations and ad agencies as well as entry-level sales and marketing positions that had nothing to do with music. I was going to be a different person now. I would no longer take money from my parents or watch marathons of *Desperate Housewives*. I would make my bed, pay my bills on time, eat three meals a day. From now on, even if Angela broke up with me, I was going to be an adult.

“My life is so much better with you,” I tried to explain one night in bed, her head resting on my shoulder.

“I’m happy, too,” she said and kissed my neck. “It was smart of me to find you.”

But I knew she didn’t understand. From what she’d told me, she had always been steady and capable, especially when her mom had left and her dad had needed her help around the house. Any instability in my own life had been self-inflicted.

During this slow, hot stretch of summer, strange, wide-eyed Kendra began to appear regularly in our lives. Whenever we left our house, she was there, looping around the cul-de-sac on her bike. Once, she rang our doorbell to ask for a glass of milk to make macaroni and cheese. Another time she came by to report that she’d fallen off her bike and scraped her knee. I was home alone, and I brought a folding chair out for her to sit on while I dug through the boxes in our hall closet to find Angela’s first-aid supplies. I knelt beside Kendra, dabbed a cotton ball soaked in hydrogen peroxide on her scraped knee, and covered the wound with ointment and bandages.

“There you go,” I said, feeling as if I’d passed a test, but she just gave me a bland, satisfied look.

Perhaps because she worked with kids, Angela didn’t seem to spend much time thinking about Kendra when she wasn’t there, but I was flattered that the girl had attached herself to us and was eager to provide the kind of adult presence she needed.

During the summer Angela and I replaced the easy pasta or stir-fry dinners of the school year with more-time-consuming empanadas, pulled-pork sandwiches, sourdough-flatbread pizzas, and carne asada. We danced while we cooked and took turns playing DJ. She liked classic rock and country, while I favored singer-songwriters with whispery voices and acoustic guitars. She teased me that this was typical of kids whose older parents had made them listen to Bob Dylan instead of Michael Jackson. In fact, my parents had usually listened to silence, but I liked her theory anyway, because it suggested that my personality was not my fault.

One evening in late July the doorbell rang. It was Kendra.

“I’m locked out,” she said. “Can I stay here until my mom gets home?”

I hesitated. It was a hot night, and she was probably hungry, but I didn’t think we should be bringing someone else’s child into our house, especially since we were gay. Prop 8 was on the ballot in California that fall, and we saw the bumper stickers in Arizona, too: the male+female stick-figure marriage equation; the “family values” slogans suggesting that gay people were harmful to kids.

“Hold on,” I said, trying to sound casual.

When I relayed the situation to Angela in the kitchen, she shrugged and said we should call Kendra’s mom. She ushered Kendra inside and pointed to the couch. “Do you know your mom’s phone number? Does she have a cell phone?”

“She might not answer,” Kendra said. “She’s not allowed to at work.”

I imagined her mom had some low-paying job with long, irregular hours. She was rarely home, even on the weekends. The handful of times I’d seen her ducking in and out of the house, she’d had on jean shorts and a T-shirt, her long blond ponytail looped through a baseball cap. If there was a dad in the picture, I never saw him.

Kendra’s mom didn’t answer, but Angela left a friendly message that included her name, address, and phone number. “It’s fine for her to stay here until you’re home,” she said. “I just wanted you to know where she is.” Then she asked Kendra, “Are you hungry? Do you like Mexican food?”

Kendra nodded and followed us to the kitchen.

We’d just sat down to eat when the phone rang. I heard Angela give a quick string of affirmative answers: *Yes, OK, sure, no problem*.

“Your mom says she’s on her way home,” she told Kendra. “She wants you to wait for her at your house.”

Kendra looked disappointed.

“Do you want to eat something first?”

She shook her head.

“What about a granola bar or something like that?”

“Maybe.”

“Do you need to use our bathroom?”

“Yes.”

While Kendra was in the bathroom, Angela got a granola bar and a package of fruit snacks from the supply she kept for Jaxon. As we walked Kendra to the front door, I felt as disappointed as she looked.

“We’ll be here,” I said, “if something comes up.”

I stayed at the door and watched her walk across the street. Her neighbor’s motion-sensor light clicked on and flooded both lawns with illumination. She sat down on her porch and opened the snacks, looking sad and resigned.

“I don’t think her mom is on her way,” I said.

“No,” Angela said, “probably not.”

That she had suspected this all along felt like a betrayal.

“She’s *nine*,” I reminded her.

“What do you want me to do? Her mom doesn’t know us. We’re strangers.”

“Do you really think a nine-year-old should be home alone every day?”

Angela’s face tensed. “A lot of nine-year-olds are home alone. It’s none of our business.”

This didn’t sound right to me. I didn’t think Kendra was in danger necessarily, but I thought her mom was a bad parent, and I wanted Angela to agree.

“I really think we have to do something.”

Angela shook her head. “What are you going to do? Report her to Child Protective Services?”

It hadn’t occurred to me, but it didn’t sound like a bad idea. When I’d volunteered at a Jumpstart program in high school, we’d been told to share any suspicions we had. If there wasn’t a problem, they assured us, nothing would happen.

“Maybe,” I said. “If there’s nothing wrong, they won’t take her kid.”

Angela gave a dismissive snort. “I hope you’re joking.”

When I didn’t say anything, she asked if I’d ever reported someone.

“No.”

She reminded me that, as a teacher, she was required to report signs of abuse or neglect to the authorities and that she worked with students for whom these signs were not uncommon. Even when children were seriously in danger, she said, it devastated them to be removed from their homes. Risking that outcome just to ease my own conscience was not OK. “You’re being really selfish right now,” she said. “It bothers me that you can’t see that.”

I was surprised by how angry she was, and how certain she was right. What if something happened to Kendra? What if she really was in trouble and just waiting for someone to notice?

“I don’t understand why you’re so upset,” I said. “You’re acting kind of insane.”

A flash of anger passed across her face. She took a breath to say something, then changed her mind.

“Do what you need to do,” she said finally. “But if you call the police on this lady, I can’t promise I’ll forgive you.”

Then she locked herself in our room. After about thirty minutes the door opened, and she tossed my pajamas and pillow into the hallway. I lay awake that night on my old twin mattress in the spare bedroom, watching rectangular shadows float across the ceiling. I had the feeling I was looking at my life from the outside, but I also felt strangely calm. Angela’s reaction had felt so overblown that I knew it must be personal, and I was sure that I would wake up to another story about her mom and an apology.

The next morning, though, she didn’t apologize, and when I asked if Kendra’s mom reminded her of her own parents, she got angry. “This doesn’t have anything to do with me,” she said. “It’s kind of insulting that you think that.”

“I don’t get it then,” I said. “We don’t even know this woman.”

We were on the back porch drinking coffee and eating toast, watching a teal-green hummingbird flit around the hedges. Beyond the fence a riding lawn mower growled around the middle school. I was working the lunch shift at the restaurant, which had just reopened, but I didn’t need to leave for a couple of hours. Angela was wearing sunglasses, and when she finally spoke, she lifted them up so I could see her eyes.

“I’m worried you’re going to take this the wrong way.”

I tensed up. “OK.”

“I think you’ve had a sheltered life,” she said. “I feel like sometimes it makes you naive.”

She was naming my worst secret. I *was* sheltered, and I didn’t want to be that way. My heart was racing, and I could feel a security gate sliding down over my face.

“Let’s pretend nothing’s happening then,” I said. “If I ignore the fact that this kid’s loser mom abandons her every day, does that make me open-minded?”

She made a scoffing sound. “Wow, OK. I’m trying to *talk* to you, Stephanie.”

I understood this was an invitation to deescalate, but I was too scared of what she would say next. I picked up my plate and coffee cup and brought them inside.

“Seriously, Stephanie,” I heard her say. “We have to be able to talk.”

I rinsed my dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Then I got dressed and packed up my trumpet and sheet music and biked over to the practice rooms at Arizona State, which I knew would be unlocked and empty. I chose the room I’d reserved every day in my senior year: a narrow space with a small window and a black upright piano. I started with scales and warm-ups, an easy trumpet solo from a Tree Frogs song. Then I moved on to the Haydn Trumpet Concerto, which I’d memorized for a young-artist competition in high school. Almost as soon as I began, it was obvious I was too rusty. My tone wasn’t clear or consistent, and I could no longer reliably hit the high notes. I knew I could eventually get it back with weeks of serious practice, but I also knew that I wouldn’t put in the time, and this brought a new, adult kind of sadness: the conscious choice to leave something worse than it could be.

The restaurant wasn’t very crowded, and some of my favorite coworkers were back, including a dark-haired hostess named Claire who studied architecture and had a diamond stud in her nose. She’d once told me how she posed naked for art classes to make extra money, which made me view her with awe. When there was a lull, I brought a bag of unfolded table linens to the bench behind the host stand so I could get her advice about Angela.

“She’s going to break up with me,” I said. “I don’t know what I’m going to do.” Just admitting this out loud made me woozy.

“You’re getting to know each other,” Claire said. “Of course you’re going to fight sometimes.”

I shook my head. “She doesn’t like who I am. You can’t recover from that.”

When I came home that afternoon, I apologized for running away and braced myself to listen to all of the bad things Angela had to say about me, but she was gentle. Other people’s situations were different from mine, she said. She just wanted me to see that. She was sorry that she’d overreacted and locked herself in the bedroom.

“I’m sorry, too,” I said, embarrassed that the person she was describing — blind to everyone’s differences — sounded so much like my parents. “You’re right. I’ll work on it.”

Soon after that, Angela went back for teacher workdays, and I started an unpaid internship at the Phoenix public radio station. Kendra all but disappeared, and I assumed that her mom had told her to stay away from us. I wondered if she was OK, if she missed us, if I’d been right not to report her mom. When I checked the mail, I lingered on the porch; when I walked home from work, I slowed passing by her house, hoping she might step outside and show me a new trick she’d learned on her bike. Sometimes I thought about knocking on the door and introducing myself to her mom, but she was rarely home, and what exactly would I say?

The relaxed summer gave way to a busy fall filled with minor disagreements. Every day Angela seemed to retreat a little more, and when she broke up with me in October, I was unsurprised but still shell-shocked. Within a year I’d have an entry-level job at the radio station, and then, a few years later, a better job at a station in Chicago, where I would eventually meet my wife. But I didn’t know this yet, and I was worried that, without Angela, I’d lose my tenuous grip on adulthood. When I asked her to reconsider, she didn’t even seem to think about it.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I just don’t see us together long-term.”

In the last few weeks before I moved out, Angela avoided the house, and I was often home alone at night. I thought a lot about Kendra.

Then one night, a few days before I moved out, I was folding clothes on the couch when I saw a flash of movement at Kendra’s house. It was just past dusk, the sky not totally drained of color, and the blinds were open to their living room. From where I was sitting, it looked like someone was getting chased. I grabbed my cell phone and keys, slid on my shoes, and went outside in a rush of concern and, yes, excitement: I’d been *right*. I ran down the driveway to the sidewalk, and then I heard the music — fast and loud with screaming guitars and steady bass, the kind of thing Angela would like. And I saw that Kendra and her mom were dancing. They reminded me of the way the Tree Frogs flailed around on stage, the unselfconsciousness that drew people to our not-very-good performances. Kendra was laughing, which I’d not seen her do before. She and her mom were pumping their arms and legs and singing. I stood there in the glow of the streetlight with my heart pounding, watching what I realized was joy.