

Child of Schrödinger

By

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Christine had always thought that Noah looked more like his father—the way the thin folds of skin crinkled at the corners of his umber eyes when he cried during the night from unseen terrors, or when he smiled weakly with relief when his mother scooped him into her arms afterwards. His expression of pure distress would morph into hesitant ease within a matter of seconds after burrowing his head into the sanctuary of her embrace. Christine was his foundation, his safe place.

On Sunday afternoons, she swathed Noah's tiny toddler body into a feather-down, blue, Thomas-the-Tank-Engine coat and miniature, rubber galoshes while he stood in the foyer, arms patiently outstretched. She ensured that his home-sewn, navy-blue, fleece cap protected his small ears. An extra packet of tissues was tucked into his chest pocket. Noah would watch her expectedly with almond-shaped eyes.

When he held out his hands, a pair of woolen mittens must clothe them within a minute or two before his little face screwed up into a preamble of tears. Noah needed routine, his sense

of security. He hardly spoke, even at age five. This is perfectly normal, Christine told herself—there are plenty of children who prefer other methods of communication rather than speech. Perhaps it made him smarter, like a real Einstein baby ready to blossom in his own time—the cure to intraventricular hemorrhaging, menstrual pains, and heartache locked somewhere beneath his head of raven locks. Noah had his own ways to convey his needs, wants, and fears. Only time and safety would coax him into verbal dialogue.

Time and safety.

An overcast, February sky threatened to sprinkle the first flakes of mid-afternoon snow as Christine walked Noah down to the community park six blocks from the apartment for his hour of Sunday play. A tiny, gloved index finger hooked about her own, just tight enough for reassurance. She resisted the urge to envelop his hand in her own, to offer more than an extended fragment of herself. He felt distant, as if barely clinging to shore with ominous waves of calamity threatening to tear him away from her lifeline. But likewise, her closeness needed careful moderation, as though her proximity could accidentally push him away. Though primal instincts often threatened to spill over this particular boundary, Christine maintained the void. Better to keep Noah in her sights than to lose him altogether.

Sunset Hills Park was spotted with sparse clusters of dog-walkers and couples, but no children. Noah had the entire playground to himself. He trotted eagerly to the trio of animal spring-riders grounded into a patch of frozen bark chips. He stood beside the one shaped like an orange cat and spread his arms wide. Christine bent down, lifted him by the waist, and sat him into the groove of the cat's back. With a firm push to the shoulders, she gave him the momentum to rock to and fro while the rusty metal springs squealed sharply in protest.

She retreated to a vinyl-covered bench beneath the sparse cover of a skeletal birch. Christine let the squeaking of the grinding metal assure her of Noah's diverted attention while in the depths of her own woolen coat, a crinkled sticky-note toyed anxiously between her fingers. It had long lost its adhesive quality, the familiar, meticulous writing in graphite pencil nearly faded entirely.

Her life in Pasadena had been completely organized through notes, labels, planners,

e-mails, computer folders, and RE-plica lab memos; they reminded her of things both special and mundane, and in doing so, freed her from the burden of recollection. Since then, Christine had vowed to commit everything to memory—from the texture of the crumbling flamingo-pink tile of her apartment kitchenette, to the slight curve of Noah’s forehead which mirrored her own, to the waxy trails of Crayola crayon cutting across the pages of his coloring books. She would never forget anything from now on. She couldn’t allow it.

However, this one sticky-note, and the one who had left it taped to her front door, wanted to remind her, insistently, of that structured life from before.

Footsteps expectedly crunched the frosted grass behind Christine. She braced herself as Levi cautiously settled at the other end of the bench. He fidgeted, leaning forward in an attempt to catch her eye. “Dr. Rossi?”

“Dr. Rao,” she replied shortly. A sharp intake of breath followed.

“Come on, Christine, don’t be like that. I came all the way out here to Queens, for Chrissakes.”

“You’re the one who wanted to talk.” The piece of paper in her pocket rolled into a ball between her finger and thumb, the one covered in his delicate handwriting. “How did you find me?”

Levi threw another nervous glance about their surroundings; the nearest couple played fetch with a Golden Retriever over seventy yards away. “Remember when we were invited to the Nova Scotian symposium at the conference center downtown? You once said that you could settle down here as long as you had your own wood-stove.”

“Really? You figured it out just from that?”

“Trust me, this is by far not the first place I’ve looked.”

In the corner of her vision, his face looked exhausted, but she could see faint traces of triumph. Overall, he appeared the same: bright eyes, long hands defined through precise movements, and mocha-colored skin contrasting the bleakness of their surroundings.

They had met during their first week at the laboratory—he a self-conscious but tenacious new graduate, only certain about his goals as an academic and little else. She had read him as easily as she could read perfect lettering of his freehand, and initially wrote him off because of it.

She had thought him too naïve with all his ironclad morals and his textbook sense of justice. Ironically enough, he had once said that her indifference towards him had been his inspiration to try and change. Christine clenched her arms tighter to her body through her coat. “I still wish I had that wood-stove. This cold makes it too hard to think.” She caught him throwing another weary look over his shoulder. “Relax, Levi. If you’re so afraid of getting caught with me, then you shouldn’t have come looking.”

He cupped his restless hands to his mouth to warm them. “Can’t we go somewhere private? Like back to your place?”

“No. There’s nothing left for me to tell you, so you’ll say whatever you came to say right here.”

“Christine, I didn’t come here to start a war. I’m here to help you.” His eyes drifted to the small figure swaying back and forth on the metallic cat. “You and your son.” He paused, staring transfixed, mouth falling slightly open. “He’s so big now...”

“His name is Noah. And that’s what children do—they grow.”

“I-I didn’t mean...” His voice trailed away and sighed. “I’m working for a new lab now in San Diego. They’re small—privately owned—actually it’s several buddies from MIT. I know them all—really good people. They helped me with all my travel finances.”

“Get to the point, Levi.”

He hesitated. She could see him trying to fight through his words and personality to that exact point. “They’re experts in their field—they basically shut down RE-plica after you left. I told them about Noah—our Noah—and about him.” He gestured to the boy in the bright blue jacket. “They’re all very interested and they just want to help you two.”

Christine bristled, restraining the urge to desert Levi on the park bench. But a part of her couldn’t bring herself to leave him, out of respect for his tireless search. His persistence had been unrivaled in her mind and she had once loved him because of it. “I don’t want their help. Noah and I are doing just fine. And even if I wanted to, I can’t go back to the States. I wouldn’t make it past the border.”

“That’s the thing.” He shifted his body now about to face her, voice strung with building tension. “We’ve hired a legal team.” The corners of his eyes creased as a hopeful smile breached his lips. “I’m going to make sure that you can come home.”

Christine stared long into his expectant face, remembering that same expression he had worn when she had agreed to their second dinner, when he had picked her up on her front steps, and when he had barged into her office, exhilarated, waving the letter of approval for their life’s work: the first complete human genetic replica would be grown under their supervision.

She also vividly recalled her own piece of news, and the pregnancy stick wrapped into paper towels in her purse.

She stood, stretching. “Thanks for the offer, Levi. But we don’t need some fancy team of lawyers or a lab full of geniuses. I’m not going to hand him over just so I can go back to sunny Pasadena with you. I don’t know what made you think that it’s worth it.”

“It’s not worth it?” His stricken face now shadowed with fear. “I didn’t say to hand him over—.”

“But that’s what you meant, right?” Across from them, Noah had slipped off the metal cat’s back and was looking blankly to his mother. “Have a safe trip back. And please, Levi, don’t come back, for Noah’s sake.”

She extended a hand out to the child who took his mother’s meaning and trundled forward with his index finger outstretched. Linked once again, she turned away and gazed out to the open road, the guided path back to the tiny apartment with the flamingo-pink tile.

“Our Noah, Christine, *our* Noah is in California. You won’t even pay your respects for his sake?”

When she looked back, Levi was already setting off across the grass, face obscured and hands buried deep in the pockets of his long coat. He bent to pet the Golden Retriever along the way. Christine’s stomach churned when she realized how much the two were alike.

In the safe confines of her bedroom, Christine laid Noah down for his afternoon nap. He snuggled deep into the thickness of her bed-comforter, and she placed a second knitted blanket on top to guard him from the harsh cold she could not afford to ward away like the power bill.

She lay down beside him, using her own warmth to calm his shivers. He had quickly fallen asleep; moist breath smelling slightly of animal crackers tickled her cheeks. In the dim lighting from the closed window curtains, Christine saw herself looking into the melded complexion of Levi and her own features, but smaller, childish, and innocent. His unblemished, coppery skin was the delicate median between her snowy pigment and Levi's darker shade.

On the day of Noah's birth, Christine had held his tiny premature body between them both, absorbing all the tiny hints and shapes of his being. The precious weight of his black head of hair rested against the crook of her shoulder, and his umber eyes squinted up to catch a better view of his father.

Levi had cried then. Although his emotional sensitivity drove most of his life, she had never seen him shed any tears until the moment when their son nestled beside them for the first time. He was flawless. Absolutely perfect.

Twenty hours and fifty-two minutes later, they discovered the internal bleeding. Too late. All that remained were seven strands of raven hair clinging to her hospital gown to remind her that their son had indeed lived in the world—had breathed its air.

For all the grief that followed, it had not been Levi, but Christine, who had made something out of it. She hadn't given up when he, so entrenched in his war of righteousness, had failed to take her side. In the end, it was his unyielding resolve she had come to admire so much that unraveled the seams of her life. He had made no attempts to deny the reports of her actions to the RE-plica's board of directors whose accusations of theft, misconduct, larceny, and forgery had chased her and the new growing fetus to Canada.

But for all of his introverted qualities, Levi had still never abandoned Christine or the hope of their future together. Yet, even when the power lay in his hands, he had given up on their son, the one physical being which could tie them closer together than all cells, than the quantum fabric of the cosmos. And that felt more like a betrayal as if he had caused Noah's death himself.

That evening, Noah tugged at her sleeve: his sign for hunger. When presented with an open fridge, he had rejected every offered piece of bread, cup of juice, and carrot stick. With a resigned sigh, Christine re-dressed him in his bundle for the cold. A trip to the store seemed unavoidable.

They took the bus. She helped Noah into her lap, using her arms to seatbelt him into place. He pressed his nose against the window, little breaths fogging the glass. Halfway to their stop, an elderly woman crept across the bus aisle with eyes alight with adoration. Christine instinctively raised her defenses, preparing for an attack.

“Why hello there,” the lady crooned, taking up the empty spot beside Christine. “Who is this handsome little fellow?”

She stopped. Reluctantly, she turned Noah to meet the kind eyes of the stranger.

“This is Noah. He’s my son.”

“But of course darling, look, he’s got your little forehead.” Wrinkled fingers brushed past his ear. “Look at how cute you are. Your father must also be quite the exotic gentleman too, just like you.”

Christine felt weak, but forced herself to smile. “Something like that.” The words tumbled out without thought.

“How old are you?”

“He’s five,” she answered instead.

“Almost ready to start school. You’re so grown up.”

Gripped with sudden fear, Christine wondered how long it would take for her to see through to the truth that Noah has been on this Earth for much longer—nearly seven years now with only a month or two missing in between. How much longer before this old lady realized this child had had a different destiny, a different life ruthlessly ripped away from him.

At the next stop, she hugged Noah close to her chest, muttered a quick goodbye, and scrambled off the bus. She walked the next four blocks to the supermarket, keeping Noah in her arms despite his wriggling protests.

Up and down the rows, she wandered, pulling items off shelves, showing them to Noah for his approval—to no response. Mindlessly, she threw the boxes and cans into a shopping basket anyway.

When it became too tiresome for her to hold them both, Christine was forced to set him down to shake the deadened feeling from her arms. Noah glanced about anxiously until he spotted the cups of packaged applesauce several feet away. She turned her back on him for an instant to pick up the full basket to discover a man crouched down beside Noah.

Christine's nerves reached their limit and she groaned. "What are you doing here?"

Levi straightened, a hand resting upon Noah's shoulder. "Christine, I've looked for far too long to just walk away from this." He led the boy to her side. "If you want to chase me away, go ahead and try. But I think that I at least deserve more of your time...and his..." When she did not answer, he took the basket from her grasp and added the carton of applesauce. "I can get this stuff for you."

Christine followed after Levi, sputtering irritably under her breath, barely noting the looks several concerned shoppers. He continued to lead the way to the checkout where he paid for the myriad of goods. "Where to next?" he asked once they stepped outside. "I can give you a ride."

"Just take us home," she said sharply, picking up Noah and pulling him out of Levi's hand. She ignored the hurt expression on his face, but he nodded wordlessly.

At the apartment door, Christine hurriedly let Noah inside and turned about to blockade Levi from bringing in the groceries. "Leave the bags outside the door."

"Can't I come in?"

"No. Just go, Levi."

"Come on, it's been years."

"I don't care. Give me the bags and go before you frighten Noah."

When they had first met, he would've obeyed her simple command without question. Now, she could see that her changes in him would play against her once again.

"No," he said. "I paid for them. And unless you have other plans, I'm the only way he's going to get fed tonight."

On cue, Noah tugged at Christine's sleeve in the entryway. Levi took advantage of her distraction and brushed her aside to enter the apartment with the groceries. "I promise, I won't be long."

She wanted so dearly to lash out at him with a string of profanities, but knew then she would be the one to frighten her child. She busied herself by restocking the barren refrigerator, keeping a cautious eye on Noah as she did so.

Levi sat the boy on one of the folding chairs at the second-hand card-table in the living room. He took a seat next to him, placing his jacket on the table and observing the child with eyes glazed with curiosity and a strange sadness. Christine didn't expect him to know how to interact with Noah—how could he? He met her expectations by awkwardly asking: "So, Noah, would you like chocolate pudding?" Or applesauce?"

Noah blinked. A small finger pointed to the counter where the two boxes were perched.

Dumbly, Levi reached for them both, weighing the contents in either hand. "Which one do you want?"

Two fingers now followed both boxes. "He can have both," Christine called stiffly from the kitchen.

Levi frowned. "Really? Applesauce and pudding are so different—you can't mix them together."

"Says who?"

"Most people." Christine opened her mouth to argue, but one of Noah's fingers returned to his side: he had chosen the applesauce.

As Levi helped him open the plastic lid, he appeared pensive. "Do you like stories, Noah?" He continued on despite the absence of a reaction. "There's a story about a man named Mr. Schrödinger. He wanted to have two things at once too."

Christine froze, recognizing the name from her school textbooks.

"Now, Mr. Schrödinger had a cat. He really loved his cat, but at times it would make a mess in his house and would eat his precious birds. He liked having his cat around, but sometimes he secretly wished it was gone and never came back." Levi offered a spoonful of applesauce. Noah's mouth clamped enthusiastically over the end, swallowing the treat. "So one

day, Mr. Schrödinger had an idea. He would put the cat in a box. This way, the cat would still be with him and it would be gone at the same time. He could have both of his wishes at once.”

Noah stared inquisitively, but then open his mouth for another spoonful. Levi obliged. “Only when Mr. Schrödinger opened the box, would he see if the cat was truly there or not.”

“Levi, that’s enough.” Christine lifted Noah from the chair, turning down the hall. “It’s his bedtime.”

Clad in fleece pajamas and thick socks, Christine tucked Noah into the bed sheets, leaving on a small lamplight to protect him from the dark. “I love you, sweetie,” she whispered into his ear, pressing her lips to the crown of his head. Noah stared at the wall behind her until he closed his brown eyes.

An arm brushed past her shoulder as Levi’s careful hand hovered over the child’s hair. He did not reach to touch. An expression of longing marked his face, but he said nothing. She wanted to capture that look, to remember it for all time. She wanted to believe that for this one moment, they were back in the maternity ward, the world fallen back into place.

But Levi pulled away and turned on his heels and she realized that it would never be so.

Christine shut the bedroom door closed behind them. She found Levi standing silently in the kitchen, hands fiddling the spoon he had used to feed Noah. “So...where do we go from here, Christine?”

“We’re not coming back with you, Levi.”

“I know that.”

“So, why are you still here?”

“Don’t you want some sort of...closure? Anything?”

“I had my closure, Levi. I had it with me.” Christine felt her voice rise. “And then you come back here, wanting to blow things wide open—wanting different answers rather than the ones I’ve learned to live with.”

His face fell. “How can you expect me to let things be? You’re not being fair—”

“Fair? You know what wasn’t fair? It wasn’t fair that you walked away from me, from Noah.”

Levi’s voice trembled. He looked as if he could cry right there. “Christine...Noah

is dead.”

“No. He’s here. He’s right down that hallway. And even now you can’t even say goodnight to your son.” Her nails dug deep into the skin of her palms. “All you really came here for is to bring back a new research experiment for your fucking lab-mates, so don’t leave me fucking notes, or stalk me to the fucking store pretending that you’re here for us.” It wasn’t true, she knew, but the more she spoke, the more she believed.

Levi swayed where he stood. The corners of eyes creased and his lids closed. She could hear his heavy breathing, labored as though she had shot him in the chest. A long moment passed before he looked up, two streams of tears running down the length of his jaw. He looked diminished, as uncertain of himself as he had been on that first day at the laboratory. She had done it. She had cut herself out of his life.

“Okay, Christine. Okay.” He moved past her and picked up his jacket. His hand rested atop the handle to the front door. “You’re right. You’re always the one who’s right.” The open door filled the apartment with a frigid wind. He looked back and she knew it would be for the last time. “Take care, Christine.”

The next morning, Christine awoke to Noah tugging on her nightshirt. In his small fists were his mittens and cap. “Cat,” he bleated hoarsely. “Cat.”

Wiping the sleep from her eyes, Christine sat up. “What do you mean? Cat?”

Noah surprised her by waving his arms back and forth. “Cat,” he repeated. She understood his meaning and with a reassuring smile, patted his head and proceeded to get dressed.

Noah pulled her nearly the entire way down to the park with two fingers instead of one. She noted the unusual behavior, but a part of her relished in his excitement. They crossed the grass to the metal spring animals and stopped at the edge of the patch of bark chips.

The animals were covered in green spray-paint graffiti, keyed marks leaving trails

down the frames like white incision scars. On the frosted grass, the orange cat lay broken off its rusted spring, covered in mud and pieces of bark, discarded and forgotten.