

## MISSILE THREAT INBOUND

By Sarah K Marslender

### Do That Thing

Missy woke when Jonathan came back from the resort's gym. He was disciplined like that. It came up in their premarital counseling as a strength Missy admired. His discipline, she'd written in fat cursive in the premarital workbook she and Jonathan completed. Their pastor asked if that trait ever bothered her. Sometimes, she said, Sometimes I feel lazy because I don't lift weights or eat Paleo. I just don't care about that stuff.

That was three months ago. They were married last Saturday at Jesus Is Lord church in Livingston with a reception held at the old firehouse which booked banquets, holiday parties and family reunions. On Sunday morning they drove to Minneapolis to fly to Hawaii. Their parents surprised them at Christmas with a honeymoon package to Maui. Everytime Missy thought of her parents and in-laws (in-laws!) saving to send her and Jonathan to a resort in Hawaii, she started to cry a little because it was just so sweet, such a blessing, and such a sacrifice, and because it was just perfect to spend the first week of marriage in such a beautiful place.

Missy's mom emailed little notes each day - Snowed 7 inches last night Dad had to plow! Have fun in paradise ;) Don't forget about Beth's baby shower on the 20th - signed with a smiley face. This morning Missy lay cocooned in the bed sheets while Jonathan stripped in her view. She felt herself go wet. They'd decided to wait until marriage and it hadn't been easy. Many times they almost had sex, so close they were panting, twice going so far as taking off pants before surrendering to the will of the Lord, pulling clothes on in a hurry, holding hands in prayer and recommitting their purity to God. They graduated high school, dated through college and would have married in June except Jonathan got an internship starting in May and Missy still had a semester of student teaching ahead. They lived apart those months, met on weekends for counseling, date night, church, family dinner. And, finally, they were married. Finally, they had sex. And the next morning they boarded a plane to Maui where they spent the first three days skipping all planned activities to stay in the room and have sex before heading to breakfast, returning to the room to have more sex before going to the beach, returning to the room to shower and have sex before taking a nap before going to dinner at what the Honeymoon All Inclusive Vacation promised was a trendy restaurant with ocean views, before walking back to the resort to maybe drink a glass of wine at the beach bar before returning to the room to have sex.

This morning they were supposed to sail in a glass bottom boat. Neither Missy nor Jonathan had seen the ocean before this trip. Jonathan went to the bathroom, turned on the shower. Missy laid in the sheets for a few minutes, staring at a ceiling she'd remember for the rest of her life. It was so beautiful here. It was perfect here. The thought of returning to snow and ice - Missy counted how many days they had left in Hawaii. Counting today, three. They would return to one half of a duplex and waking up in the dark, she to wait for sub calls to area school districts, he to commute to Prairie du Chien. When they arrived six days was plenty.

Missy's phone vibrated. She guessed it was her mom. She patted the bedside table, found her phone. She lifted the screen just enough to see all caps. She propped on an elbow.

### **Emergency Alert**

BALLISTIC MISSILE THREAT  
INBOUND TO HAWAII. SEEK  
IMMEDIATE SHELTER. THIS  
IS NOT A DRILL.

Missy sat up. Her mouth went dry, then flooded with bile. She pushed the sheets away, stumbled to the bathroom, threw up in the sink. Babe, honey, Jonathan peeked around the shower curtain, Missy, what's - are you okay? Missy bent over the sink, her body shaking. She turned on the faucet to rinse her vomit. Jonathan asked if it was the steak last night, or maybe the shrimp at the beach bar. Missy looked at her reflection in the mirror and spit, rinsed her mouth. I'm okay, she said, We got a message. It's important. It's an emergency.

Now Jonathan felt his body go funny. Is it Dad? Mom? he asked.

It's Hawaii, Missy said, There's. Wait. She left the bathroom to retrieve her phone, brought it to Jonathan who turned off the shower, stepped on the bathmat and squinted at the phone. You're joking. This is a joke, right?

I'm not joking, Missy said. She followed Jonathan out of the bathroom. He called the front desk, asked about the alert, hung up gently. He turned to her, opened his arms. He was naked and wet, she was warm and dry. They held each other for a moment. He kissed the top of her head. He said, How much time do you think we have? She looked up at him. She started to ask if they should write letters or call their parents. Should we - she said and Jonathan at the same time said, We should do that thing.

Missy wasn't sure how long the thing would take. Jonathan said, If we're going to die. They looked at each other for a moment and then scrambled to their places. Jonathan was sloppy with the lube, an arc of lube on the hotel sheets, and they did the thing. After, they lay still on that giant bed, staring at the ceiling. Missy began to cry and Jonathan propped on an elbow. He was so tender, this husband of hers. He traced a finger along her hairline, down her jaw, dipped his face to hers for a slow kiss. He put a hand on her belly and told her how happy he was to marry her, to have her for the rest of his life. At this Missy cried harder. Jonathan choked up. He kissed her forehead. He whispered, I'm sorry this isn't how we thought it'd be. They spooned and waited. Missy let herself go soft in Jonathan's arms. He nuzzled her hair, nibbled her ear. She laughed a little. I love you, she said. I love you, he said. They waited. Maybe we should email our parents, you know, say goodbye, Missy said. Would that make you feel better? Jonathan asked. Missy nodded. She was crying again and didn't move away from Jonathan's embrace. Instead, he turned away and picked up Missy's phone, handed it to her. She opened email and started typing a short goodbye about her parents being wonderful and not to worry she would be with Jesus and she was so glad to spend this time in Hawaii with Jonathan and all her love goodbye. I don't want them to feel bad about the honeymoon, she said. She passed the phone to Jonathan who wrote

something similar to his parents before returning the phone to the bedside table. They lay together for another minute or five, waiting.

The room was quiet. The corridor was quiet. The balcony overlooking the beach was quiet. The sea was quiet. They waited. Missy rolled over to face Jonathan. They kissed, groped a little. She felt his penis against her thigh and reached to tug at it, sad for the years they wouldn't have to make love or babies, sad for the things they wouldn't do, like move to Prairie du Chien or come back to Hawaii to celebrate their twenty-fifth anniversary or go sailing on a glass bottomed boat. Then they were rolling together again, in the only way they'd ever know.

## **Basketball Camp**

I woke up around six-thirty. I never sleep in. I think the last time I slept in I was sick with the flu. I wake up and have to be really quiet because no one else gets up before eight or nine. I made myself a quietly scrambled egg. What you do is slowly slowly stir the egg and cream over low heat, stirring with a wooden spoon so no one hears cooking sounds. I ate on the front steps. I made a rule for myself a year ago, to spend an hour by myself before the day started because once the day gets going its roommates and a shared ride to Waikiki where we work and then work all day or all night, depending, and then it's the gym or beach before sharing a ride back here where it's quiet but not usually quiet enough to think until everyone is asleep. So this first hour with quietly scrambled egg on the porch, maybe a walk to the beach after, that's a good hour for me.

This morning I woke up around six-thirty. I ate my quietly scrambled egg. Mom was after me to go back to college. I dropped out three years ago. If I'd stayed I'd be graduating now, maybe that's why she's thinking about this again, but she brings it up all the time. Remember in high school you were so good at math. Remember in high school you loved history. Remember in high school you took three APs. She wants me to remember I'm not dumb but I already know that. What did I do? she asked, the last time she talked about college. What did I do to make you think you didn't need a college education. My whole life I worked to save and then you quit. It hurts how I tried. It hurts how you - she made a swishing gesture with her hands. She still has the money in an account accruing measly interest, waiting for when I reapply. That's something that sits between us. She told me she wouldn't touch it and neither would I unless I got a degree, even if she died I won't get it, and she means it because she went to a lawyer to make a will and put a line in there donating the entire account to PETA.

I didn't learn about the money until I was a senior in high school, hesitant to apply to any school because I wasn't sure how Mom could afford to help when I knew she'd insist. Even if I'd gotten a load of scholarships or grants, I knew Mom would give me money she didn't have, for books or a semester abroad. We were called into the counselor's office to talk about options and that's when I learned I had options, when Mom wrote a number on a post-it and handed it to Mr. Benton. Is that enough for state school? Mr. Benton raised his eyebrows and said, Mrs. Hawkins, that is enough for two state schools. Mom puffed up. She looked at me. She said, I've been saving since you were a baby. I couldn't speak. Sometimes when I'm thinking about nothing in particular, that morning in Mr. Benton's office comes

back and I feel my brain open, tilt so all the words fall out. It's the worst feeling in the world to be upset by something good.

Really, I could have made college work fine with a few scholarships and loans, a work study. I could have made it work fine. I grew up thinking we had no money because we had no money. Mom bought me two or three presents at Christmas. We never traveled, because we lived in paradise already, Mom said. We lived in the tiniest apartment and didn't own a car. We borrowed my aunt's car if we wanted to leave Honolulu. I didn't know any of the other islands. Then, suddenly, Mom has money for my college.

This morning I sat on the porch thinking about the secret money. At first I'd been relieved. I didn't need to worry about loans. I didn't need to worry about Mom. Then I was terrified I wasn't prepared for college, like I'd be wasting all that money, terrified I'd go to college and not turn out any better than if I stayed in Honolulu, got a job like I've got now.

Then I got mad. I had this list in my head of all the things Mom and I didn't do or have because she was secreting money. I remember standing in line at the college bookstore with a stack of texts that totalled five hundred some dollars and thinking that's about how much basketball summer camp cost when I was in grade nine, when all my friends were doing basketball summer camp. I played one more year on the JV team, then quit.

Mom put all this money on my student id so I could buy food and smoothies at the campus cafes, pick up notebooks or whatever. She asked for a sweatshirt and I picked one up at Christmas. It cost sixty-five dollars. I don't think Mom ever spent sixty-five dollars on a single piece of clothing, on a pair of shoes. She put the sweatshirt on, said it was so soft, held out her arm for me to feel. Really, that's probably the moment I decided to drop out. I finished the year, skipped fall registration, withdrew by default without telling Mom. I advertised for roommates and found Phil, Dylan and Roose and the four of us have been together since, in a little house none of us could rent on our own. Mom realized what happened in October that year. We didn't speak for nearly a year. Then she started texting, inviting me around again. One afternoon on her day off I asked why I couldn't do basketball camp or have new jeans or go on the senior trip when she had all that money. In my head I had an argument. We were never going to be rich but the everyday could have been easier, a little prettier. She asked me, What did we lack? Tell me what did we lack.

I've been thinking about this for awhile. Being poor isn't always suffering.

I've been trying really hard to think how Mom must have been thinking when she had me wearing clothes that were too small for just one more month because she understood one day she'd give me this really great gift and then I'd understand why we didn't eat at restaurants or have internet. I left college, got a job and live paycheck to paycheck but she didn't do that. This morning I sat on the porch thinking what I'd get rid of to save money to send my kid to school. It feels like I don't have much but I've got a nice bike, some new clothes, a cable bill, a phone.

Behind me the house was still. I went back inside to my room and took my phone and earbuds for a walk along the beach. Mom had a cassette player long after it was practical. You couldn't buy cassettes of anything by the time I was in kindergarten. I walked. I could do it, I decided. It was like letting a bunch of balloons go up in the air.

I was almost home, just across the street, when the message came. I stared at the screen for a minute, music still playing. I took out my earbuds. I looked both ways before crossing. I was walking slowly, or it seemed, but my mind was crazy figuring out what to do, if there was anything to do. Call Mom but say what? Then this idea that I should find my father in the space between now and the end, this sudden, urgent idea I needed to know him even though I hadn't needed to know him yesterday - that need was followed by others: I needed to be graduating in May with a double major of sociology and history, I needed to have kissed Jenna on the lips when we were both sixteen, I needed to have - the list jumbled. I looked up at the sky, down again at my phone. I called Mom.

Justin! Justin, did you hear?

Yeah, Mom, that's why I'm calling. I want you to know -

I love you, baby! I love you so much! I can come to you, I can.

No, Mom. Not now. Just listen a minute. I waited until she got quiet. I thought she was crying. Mom, I said, I love you. I want you to know - But then I couldn't think what I wanted her to know, what was most important to say, if there was anything I hadn't said that I should have. I was on the sidewalk in front of the house. Listen, I said, I'm sheltering in place. I'll find you after. I love you, I said one more time. I love you I love you I love you, she said until I hung up. I felt bad about that, hanging up.

The whole street was asleep. I walked up the steps, opened the screen door. The house was quiet. I walked through the downstairs. Phil had his door closed. I stood and listened for a moment, to hear his breathing, but all I heard was my own pulse, the clicks and roars in my ears. I walked softly up the stairs and saw Roose on his mattress. His phone vibrated on a pile of laundry but he didn't hear. I nudged Dylan's door open and saw him and Addie entwined, their faces slack with deep sleep. I couldn't wake them up. The list I was making in my head, that I pushed aside to call Mom, that list was back and it wouldn't stop ticking and I couldn't do that now to my friends, I couldn't wake them to say they wouldn't wake up again. So I walked softly back down the stairs, out the front door, across the street to the beach again. I found a spot on the sand and lay down, closed my eyes. Later I'd have to explain why I thought it was a good idea to let my friends die unknowing when they might have been awake for last thoughts. Later I learned Dylan would want to see his end but Addie wouldn't want to see her end. Much later we'd talk about what we decided anew in the days, weeks, months after we could have died.

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