SHORT STORY

The critical period

by Nanna A. Skriver



"Magic reverence" by Mane Hovhannisyan

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The woman who gave birth to me only ever demanded two things from me: Don't go down into the basement, and if you do, don't tell anyone about what you saw.

I'm half expecting *that woman* to come running when the real estate agent's fingers close around the doorknob. He pulls open the door. My chest tightens. He does it so effortlessly. It seemed so heavy back then.

The agent's lips move. *And this… is the basement.* I mime along to the words. From where I'm standing, I can only hear the occasional guffaw whenever the agent for just a moment succeeds in making the young couple forget what house they're viewing, but I don't need to hear his words to know that's what he is saying. For the past two years, it's been the same every viewing.

The woman, young and vibrant with eyes that are already redecorating my childhood home, caresses her pregnant belly. That's when I realize it. They must not know. If they did, they wouldn't consider raising their child in this house even for a second. A part of me wants to break through the window and tell them about the mistake they're making. Another part just wants all of this to finally be over. Her husband puts his arm around her waist and gestures for the real estate agent to take the first step down into the basement. The agent flicks on the lights and leads them downstairs.

It feels intrusive.

I've only been down there once since the police recovered everything they needed for their investigation. Thinking back on it, I am overwhelmed by the same fever dream sensation that came over me that day. Even after all this time, I still remember it all so vividly: the wave of nausea crashing into me as I stood before the room where the woman, whom some still insist on calling *my mother*, carried out her experiment; my knees going wobbly, forcing me down on all fours; the vomiting. I hadn't eaten for three days, so only bile came up, its acidity burning my throat. Being in the room, understanding what had happened there, realizing that what I'd seen the day I defied our only house rule had not just been a fabricated childhood memory… that's when I blacked out. Somehow, Andrew dragged me out of there. He sat me down on the couch from which I'd spent so many hours watching the dark red door and told me the same thing she would always tell me. *Don't ever go down there.*

As the memory fades, I steady myself on the masonry and squeeze the bridge of my nose. Looking up, I lock eyes with the real estate agent who's on his way back up. He stops on the top of the stairs and discretely nods his head to the side. I can take a hint. I pull my hood up and bury my hands in the pockets of my jacket. I cast one last look at the *FOR SALE* sign hammered into the front lawn and leave.

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The metal name plate on the apartment's door only reads one name: *Andrew C. Smith.* Underneath it, a plastic label reading *M. & K. Wagner* has been stuck. I understand why he wrote our names like that. To save space. But seeing my last name accentuated in this way always invites a sour taste into my mouth. He said it was a temporary solution. That he would have a new plate made.

I have barely closed the door behind me when the legs of a chair scrape against the floor and hurried footsteps carry Andrew out into the entryway.

"You went there again, didn't you?"

"Well, hello to you too," I say, taking down a hanger and dressing it up in my jacket.

Andrew rubs his nearly bald head, moving the white wisps out of the place he'd combed them into this morning.

"Kevin, we talked about this."

"I know."

"Then why did you go there?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I don't know."

The old man lets out a long, deep sigh, then stands aside.

"Go say hi to your sister."

I swallow hard.

"If the two of you are still working, I don't want to disturb her. I need to get going anyway. I just came back to change my clothes."

"It's fine," Andrew says to my dismay. "We're taking a break right now."

I bite the inside of my cheek. There's no use in trying to make Andrew understand. He won't. So I kick off my shoes and prepare myself mentally.

My sister sits at the dining room table. Her head is bent slightly at an angle so her brown curls fall in front of her face. She doesn't seem to notice. Her eyes are fixated on a word card. Next to the stack of cards a purple plastic cup stands. I clear my throat, and she immediately looks up. There's a childlike wonder in her eyes, like she sees everything for

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the first time.

“Gewen!” She lets go of the word card and gets out of her chair. Throws her arms around me the moment she’s close enough to do so, burying her face in my shoulder.

I freeze. Then force myself to pat her head.

“Did you miss me, Maggie?”

Maggie. Andrew chose that name. *Ms and Gs are some of the easier sounds for a toddler to make*, he’d argued. But Maggie isn’t a toddler. That’s the problem. She’s two years older than me.

“Maggie mish Gewen,” she says.

“Do you want to show me what you and Andrew have been doing?”

She nods and takes my hand, eagerly pulling me to the dinner table. Her hand is clammy. I want to shake it off, but I don’t. I have to stop myself from immediately drying my fingers off in my shirt once she lets go of me. She picks up a picture with a cow on it.

“Ow!” she proudly exclaims.

“Yes, it’s a *cow*,” I say. “ Good job.”

She picks another card.

“Wabbit!”

“That’s right. It’s a very cute rabbit, isn’t it?”

“Gjute wabbit.”

A heavy hand lands on my shoulder, startling me.

“Maybe you should take over teaching, Kevin,” Andrew says. He chuckles. “Then I could observe and take notes, doesn’t that sound wonderful?”

I move slightly to the side so his hand drops from my shoulder.

“I’m sure you’d love that.”

“I’m sure Maggie would too, wouldn’t you, my dear?” The moment he starts addressing her, he is much more careful with his enunciation. “Wouldn’t it be more fun to study with your brother rather than this old geezer?” He points to himself and pulls a face.

Maggie’s eyes go wide, and her mouth hangs open a bit. Her gaze moves between Andrew and me. Searching, begging for help.

“It’s okay,” Andrew encourages. “You know all the words. Now, put them together.”

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I can almost see the wheels turning inside her brain, desperately trying to comprehend the world around her.

Her eyes turn glossy, and she starts wailing. The only sound she has always known how to make. She flails her arms around, knocking over the plastic cup. Its contents spill out over the table, soaking the word cards and dripping down the edge of the table onto the floor. Andrew is soon by her side, holding her tightly to prevent her from hurting herself. Had she been a little kid, he could've picked her up, but she's a twenty-year-old woman. She shouldn't be acting like this. I clench my jaw. While Andrew hushes her in his arms telling her *it'll be alright* and that he'll *be there every step of the way*, I leave the dining room, rip my jacket from the hanger and pick up my shoes, not bothering to put them on before I'm out in the stairway where I can breathe.

"I like the sweatshirt," Julie says as she sits down across from me. "It's very boyfriendy." Warmth rushes to my face.

"Sorry," I say, scratching my cheek, avoiding her eyes. "I was going to change into something nicer, but … well, something came up."

"Don't worry about it." She reaches her hand over the table and ruffles my hair. "You look cute."

I can't help but smile. Her most attractive feature is her straightforwardness. After living a lie my entire life, I appreciate it.

A waiter comes down to our table and takes our orders.

"How were your classes?"

"I didn't have any today. Only Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Oh." I give myself a mental slap in the face. I should have remembered that. Now she'll probably think I don't pay attention when she speaks. "Well, how was yesterday's class then?"

Her face lights up.

"It was really interesting! We're learning how to understand and analyze the grammar of a language without being a native speaker of — or even near fluent in — said language."

"That sounds —"

She holds up her hand, interrupting me.

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“You don’t have to pretend you think it’s interesting.”

At that, I relax a little.

“Thanks. Honestly, I’m sure it is interesting, I just don’t have enough knowledge of it to understand and appreciate it.”

“I’m amazed Andrew hasn’t thrown all his books on linguistics at you yet.”

Instead of clenching my jaw, I grip the hem of my shirt, so Julie doesn’t see the impact of her words. It’s impossible for her to know how big a part linguistics has already played in my life — even if I wasn’t aware of it at the time.

“Andrew is a busy man,” I say.

“You don’t have to tell me twice. Being one of the leading researchers within your field of expertise will do that to you.”

“You almost sound jealous?”

“Of course. After all, I hope to one day call him a colleague rather than my professor.”

I raise my eyebrows. We’ve been dating for a little over two months, but I didn’t know that.

“Really? What do you want to specialize in?”

The waiter comes back with the drinks we ordered.

“Probably the same as Andrew,” Julie says and takes a sip of her ice water. Her lips leave a dark red mark on the rim. “So first language acquisition.”

I don’t answer. Instead I circle the rim of my own glass with the tip of my finger.

“But who knows,” Julie continues. “I’m only on my second semester. I might change my mind. But right now that’s what seems the most interesting to me, and it’s a field where a lot of research still needs to be done.”

My gaze moves to the window. I can’t look at her. Not right now. I didn’t know this about her. It makes everything harder. More complicated.

“Kevin?” She tilts her head. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I obviously made you feel uncomfortable in some way.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.”

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I finally look at her.

“Can we please just change the subject?”

She bites her lip. The couple sitting at a table close to ours go quiet for a moment and exchange looks before continuing their conversation. Once again, I feel the urge to slap myself hard in the face. It’s not her fault. She doesn’t know. I can’t blame her for having a dream that coincidentally hits very close to home.

“How’s it going with that math assignment? It’s due this Sunday, right? You seemed a little nervous about it.” Her words trip over each other to exit her mouth first, like she’s desperate for the mood to return to how it was.

I decide that’s what I want too.

So I tell her about the assignment that — in the whole scheme of things — doesn’t really matter. I explain how I was scratching my mind for a couple of days over one question, but now I think I have the solution. Even if I’m wrong, I’ll probably still get enough points to at least pass. As I talk, Julie loosens up again, and we manage to have the nice evening we’d been looking forward to. We eat and drink and laugh at things I don’t even think are that funny, but with Julie, they become funny.

Once we’ve finished our meal, we split the bill and go outside. The sun is setting, and the temperature is also on its way down. Julie shudders and wraps her scarf snugly around her neck. I turn to face her and put my hand on her cheek. She sighs and closes her eyes, pressing her cheek harder into my hand. I’m about to remove it when she grabs my wrist with both hands, forcing mine to stay where it is.

“It’s warm,” she mumbles.

The air is already turning her nose red, so I bend down and kiss it. She opens her eyes which meet mine, lets go of my wrist and twines her hands around my neck, pulling me down towards her. Our lips meet. It’s not an explosion of fireworks like books and movies always make it out to be. It simply feels right. As our lips separate, Julie lets out a shaky breath containing the words: *I think it’s time I show you my apartment.*

Julie’s apartment is just one room. I only see this now, lying naked on her bed with her head resting on my chest. Either she didn’t expect to bring me home, or she just doesn’t care about me seeing her mess. The only pieces of furniture in here are the bed we’re lying on — I think some pieces of clothing might have been lying on top of it when we arrived, but now they’re on the floor — a desk stacked with books and cluttered with pens, post-its, and

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notebooks in different sizes and colors, as well as a single reading chair. I'm amazed by how many plants she's managed to fit in here. There's only one door besides the one we entered through. Probably the bathroom.

"No kitchen?"

Her finger draws circles on my chest.

"Not my own, no. There's a large one at the end of the hallway that everyone on this floor can use."

"Doesn't that get annoying? If everyone uses it, you can't be sure there's enough space for you to cook when you need to."

"It hasn't been a problem yet." She leans over me and reaches for her pants on the floor, sticks her hand in the pocket and takes out her phone, then lies back down and holds the phone over our heads. Our mirrored images stare back at us on the screen. "Smile!"

I bump my head against hers and smile. She takes our picture.

"It came out well."

I agree.

She gets out of bed, still completely naked, and writes something on her phone before putting it down on the bedside table.

"I'll just pop in the bathroom really quick."

"I'll be here when you return."

Once the door closes behind her, I sit up and put on my underwear and jeans. I stand up on the tip of my toes, stretching my arms above my head until my knees pop.

On the bedside table, Julie's phone buzzes and the screen lights up. I don't mean to look. Don't mean to see it. But the message is right there. Like it wants me to see:

I guess I owe you that coffee. He doesn't look as fucked up as I thought he would.

Even as the screen goes black and the message disappears, I keep staring at her phone.

My hand is shaking as I reach for it. I grab my wrist with the other hand to steady it. The phone is cold to the touch. I click the side of it, and the screen lights up, revealing the text again. My eyes pan over the words. Then one more time. I swipe the screen to unlock it, but the conversation is guarded by a password.

The door to the bathroom opens.

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“I know we literally just ate, but what do you say if we order — why do you have that?”

Before I can answer — before I can even look at her — Julie snatches her phone from my weakened grip. With a furrowed brow, she unlocks the phone, then mumbles something that sounds like a curse.

“What does she mean?” I say. “What does she mean by *he doesn’t look as fucked up as I thought*?”

“Kevin, relax.” Julie throws the phone on the bed and grabs a T-shirt from the floor. “You’re making it into a bigger deal than it is.”

“What does she mean?” As I say it, I throw my arm to the side, not taking the size of the room into consideration. My arm hits one of the stacks of books on Julie’s desk, knocking them over and onto the floor.

To my horror, I recognize one of them.

The Critical Period – Fiction or Fact? by Catherine Wagner.

I pick it up off the floor

“Why do you have this?”

Julie pulls the T-shirt down over her head and crosses her arms.

“Why would I not have it?”

“You understand what she did, right? You understand that she’s in prison —” I hold the book up for her to see and point to it. “— because of this, right?”

She rolls her eyes.

“I understand that she’s in prison because our legal system doesn’t recognize scientific merit.”

“She’s a monster!”

“She’s an inspiration. She did what no one had the balls to do. She sacrificed her future in the name of science. That’s admirable.”

“No. What she did was inhumane. She ruined my sister.”

“Every parent ruins their children a little bit. The difference is that your sister will go down in the history books.” She moves closer to me. I try to back away, but her desk blocks the way. “Your mother made both you and your sister special. She didn’t need to. It kind of screwed up her variables that you turned out to be a boy, and yet, she didn’t put you up for adoption to try again. Really, you should be thankful.”

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“Thankful?” I chuckle. It’s so absurd. I walk past her and pick up my sweatshirt.

“Kevin, don’t be like this.”

“Was it all a lie?” I ask as I stick my arms through the sleeves. “You and me. Did I ever matter to you?”

She doesn’t answer immediately.

“You can’t blame me for being curious,” she finally says.

“That wasn’t my question.”

“What do you want me to say? That I’m sorry? Even I know that ‘sorry’ isn’t really going to cut it. You’re disappointed in me. I get that. We went into this with very different expectations. But you wouldn’t have engaged with me if you’d known why I wanted to get close to you.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t! I’m not some experiment on display for the world to observe and take notes on!”

“Oh, but Kevin —” Her voice is soft, and she looks at me like I’m a child that needs to be coddled. “— that’s exactly what you are. You and your sister were raised under the same circumstances, the only difference being that you were exposed to language and your sister wasn’t. You’re really the only one to whom your sister’s progress can truly be measured, and so, you’ll always be part of this experiment. Whether you want to or not.”

I don’t have anything to say. The straightforwardness that I once found so attractive has now turned her ugly. And so, I don’t say anything. I just leave.

Julie might have allowed me into her home and even her body, but she trespassed on my past.

The apartment is wrapped in darkness when I come back. Andrew’s snoring on the couch and the low, constant humming of the fridge have become such integrated parts of the nights here that they don’t even feel like noise anymore.

For a moment, I linger by the couch. Even though I said I didn’t mind sleeping on it, Andrew insisted on me taking the spare bedroom. He didn’t have to do that. We’re not family. The Agency of Family Law only approved of him as our guardian because he’s the one best suited to undertake Maggie’s treatment and I already knew him from the times Catherine would bring me to her office. The earliest thing I remember him telling me was how

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articulate I was. At the time — despite not knowing what *articulate* meant — it made me feel proud.

My eyes have adjusted to the dark, and I notice the blanket has slid off Andrew. I carefully cover him with it again, then turn my back on him.

I walk past my bedroom and continue to Maggie's. The door stands ajar. Ever since she was taken out of that house, her door has never fully been closed.

Had the door been closed, the clicking sound of me opening it might have woken her or Andrew. Had the door been closed, I might not have risked it. I might have turned away. But the door is not closed and so I enter the room.

On the bed, the silhouette of my sister stands out against the darkness of the room, rising and falling with every breath she takes. I hold my own and walk over to the bed, the carpet muffling the sound of my steps. She looks so peaceful when her brain isn't working overtime to make sense of the world she was deprived of. Languages shape the world around us. But Maggie doesn't have a language, not really, and according to that woman's results, she likely never will.

In one quick motion, I rip the pillow out from beneath her head and press it down on her face. As long as she breathes, she'll be a living experiment. As long as she breathes, all I'll ever be is a one-person control group. As long as she breathes, I can't.

Maggie stops breathing, and I let out the breath I've been holding.

I sit on the front lawn of my childhood home next to the *FOR SALE* sign that has been occupying this space for the past two years. Now, a *SOLD* sticker is pasted over it. It all started here. It seems fitting that it'll end here.

In my hand, I hold the label with my and Maggie's names on it. It turned out to be a good thing Andrew never got around to replacing the plate after all.

I wonder how things would've transpired had I only done as I was told back then; if I hadn't gone down into the basement; if I hadn't found Maggie whose name at that time was *Test subject 1*, written only in the notes on a computer.

I wonder this as a police siren sounds through the night, growing louder and louder.

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