WINNER
TEACHER CATEGORY

A Story IN Miniature

Salvias

Melanie Gaylard, Eltham High School

Her first word was YOU, and it felt like an accusation.

'Six points,' I said, dutifully pencilling it down in the left hand column of the table I'd scrawled on the back of the weekly activities schedule. Mum vs Jo.

'Not much of a start,' Mum said.

'Plenty of time,' I replied, anxiously shifting the tiles on my rack as if there wasn't. The room smelled of lavender drawer liners and hospital grade bleach. A liminal smell.

Mum sighed. 'That woman across the hall makes a fuss *all night*. I can't sleep.'

'Would you like me to mention it to someone, Mum?' I asked.

'Have your turn, Joanna.'

Alongside Mum's O U, I made ONLY.

'Thirteen points with the double letter score,' I said.

'Twelve, Joanna. It's simple maths.'

I amended the score with a 2, tracing its shape back and forth in lead. Then I reached into the velveteen letter pouch and let the tiles spill over my fingers. They clacked and chattered.

Of the many games we'd played over the years, Mum had almost always been the victor. Her seven-letter word count was legend. On Boxing Day 1984, she played QUARTZY for a hundred and ninety four points against Dad. A week later, he'd moved out – for good this time. *Not a coincidence*, said my hurt eleven year old brain. My mum had unnatural powers.

To meet the Y of my ONLY, she played APIARY.

'Remember ours, Mum?'

'Of course I do.' She turned, looked out the window, as if she could hear her own garden humming.

'Twenty two, Mum.'

Piano chords struck somewhere, a chorus joined. Then the pianist slowed, to not leave them behind. *Train whistle blowing, makes a sleepy noise…*

I hesitated before making TRACK with the A from Mum's APIARY – a risk if she had an S. She could destroy me with a triple word score.

'Twenty two with the double word score.'

'Are you even trying, Joanna?'

'Yes, I'm trying, Mum. Are you trying? I'm the one in front.' I immediately regretted saying it.

'Will Nicki come today?' Mum asked.

My heart belted. *Don't contradict, distract* is what they tell you. My sister Nicki had died five years ago.

'I heard from Crystal yesterday. She says she's freezing over there and wants to come home already!'

Mum said nothing. She just moved her tiles about and then looked up at me.

'I'm sick of this,' she said.

'Of what?'

'This stupid game.'

She struggled up out of her seat and shuffled to the bed. 'I want to lie down,' she said, and then did. She closed her eyes and tapped her fingers to the final verse of *Morningtown Ride*.

I cleared the tiles, tipped my rack into the bag. Before doing the same with Mum's, I spun it to face me – to count her remaining points. Old habits die hard.

She did have an S. Two, in fact. She'd spelt out SALVIAS.

'Mum, you should have…'

But she was resting. I finished packing up and put the board away.

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