

Denver

By Sua Im

A quick movement in her periphery caught her attention. Miss June looked up to see a small tuft of brown hair and tiny fingers tapping at the window of the door into her classroom. She got up and walked towards the door, adjusting the wood pin affixed on her breast declaring to the world that she was “Miss June” as she took quick strides towards the eager child. As soon as she opened the door, Denver flew past her and began making her rounds to all of the desks, a single finger successfully tapping each desk she ran past.

“The crayons too, Denver,” Miss June told her as soon as Denver was done with the desks. “We’re coloring today.”

Denver grabbed the box of crayons, as well as the empty box beside it, off of the bookshelf. She sat down at a desk next to the one other student in the classroom, Sethe, who refused to go out for recess because she had a cut on her finger and worried the playground sand would enter her wound.

Miss June bit the nail on her pinky finger as she watched Denver grab a handful of crayons with her right hand and drop them over her left hand into the empty box. She found herself smiling as she watched the sheer joy on the child’s face. She watched the crayons fall and felt reassured as the child’s hand touched each crayon.

The magenta one. The magenta crayon missed Denver’s hand; it slipped right between her thumb and index finger. But before Miss June could open her mouth to warn her, Denver dipped her index finger down into the once empty box and touched the untouched crayon.

Miss June shook her head and smiled. She had done it again; she was lured into playing Denver’s game. No, it wasn’t a game. It had taken her a while to understand that. In September, when the school year first began, Denver was the only third grader to enter her classroom with a parent. Denver’s father nervously approached Miss June and warned her about Denver’s strange tendencies, her need to touch and count and touch and feel. *Don’t indulge her little game*, he said. Miss June took the words to heart for a parent’s word was law. But it didn’t take too long for her to see that it wasn’t a game at all to Denver. Her anxiety, her uneasiness, and eventually her tears shocked Miss June and touched her too. She soon altered her classroom to adjust for Denver’s needs.

“Done!” Denver declared.

“Wait,” Sethe told Denver and held out the crayons she had been using on her notebook.

Denver quickly brushed her hand across all five crayons that Sethe held out for her.

“Done!” she declared again.

Sethe sat outside her classroom door, waiting patiently for Denver to finish counting all the pages of the book Miss June had been reading to the class. She bit her lip as she scratched at the dried mud on the heel of her tennis shoe.

Denver walked out of the classroom door and stood next to her sitting friend.

She looked down at Sethe and asked, "How's your finger?"

"It's healing," Sethe responded. "I put the Neospora on it like daddy told me to so it's healing fast."

Sethe stuck out her little thumb towards Denver, showing off the crusting orange ointment slathered generously on her finger and fingernail.

Denver grabbed Sethe's two hands to help her up. The two girls adjusted their brightly-colored backpacks and began their walk home.

Sethe only lived a few houses away from the school but she always walked Denver home, which was about four blocks further down the road. She knew Denver could get carried away with her counting and touching if Sethe wasn't there to keep her walking.

"Bobby raised his hand fourteen times today," Sethe announced and immediately second-guessed herself. She could never pay attention to the details like Denver could.

"No; only thirteen times."

"Miss June used the yellow chalk eight times and the white chalk nine times today." Sethe mentally ran through the different sentences- interrogative in white and exclamatory in yellow- Miss June had written on the chalkboard.

"Yeah," Denver responded as she touched each streetlight her and Sethe walked past.

Sethe smiled proudly at herself. She tried to think up other counts she made throughout the day but failed to produce any. It was probably better this way anyway. It was important to refrain from talking too much when walking Denver home because she needed to concentrate on touching each streetlight, stepping on each crack in the sidewalk that appeared every five steps or so, and counting the cars on either side of the street.

One time after a field trip to the local aquarium, the two girls let their excitement get the better of them so much so that Denver forgot to touch one of the streetlights. They had to go all the way back to the school and start over. Denver came home late and Sethe heard Denver's father shouting as she walked down Denver's driveway. She never wanted to hear the shouting again.

"Thirty-eight cars," Denver declared when she and Sethe reached her front door.

Sethe watched Denver open her front door and walk in.

"Bye, Denver."

"Make sure to put that Neospora on your finger," Denver advised

"It's Neospora."

"Oh, okay. Bye," Denver said and disappeared into her big, lonely house.

I counted thirty-nine, Sethe thought as she made her way to her house.

Denver's father looked up from the newspaper he was reading as soon as he heard the door open. He watched his daughter enter the house, hang up her backpack and jacket, and touch every rung on the coat hanger before proceeding.

Sounds to me like she has obsessive-compulsive disorder, the doctor told him earlier that day. He remembered cringing at the word "disorder" as if he had heard a painfully loud clash. *Obsessive-compulsive disorder*. Those three ugly words strung together in the most distasteful manner possible. Those three words which existed solely to define what was wrong with his daughter- what was wrong with him as a single father-

came out of the mouth of the doctor who failed to disguise his judgment. The doctor's intrusive questions about how long it had been since Denver's mother passed, how she seemed to be adjusting to life without her mother, how she was doing in school, how her relationship with him- her father- had changed since her mother's death all ended on those three disgusting words.

The doctor had suggested behavioral therapy, *therapy*, and Denver's father felt with his soul every letter of the word "failure" beginning with F and ending with E.

"Hi, daddy," Denver said without making eye contact with him. She was concentrating too hard on touching every cabinet and drawer in the kitchen to look at him.

"Hi, D. How was school?"

"Fine," Denver replied. She had successfully touched every cabinet and opened the door to the one she ended on. She stood on her tip-toes as she reached for a bowl on the top shelf.

"Use the stool," Denver's father advised.

"It's okay," she replied as her tiny fingers grasped the edge of the bowl she desired and the rest of the stack came crashing down to the kitchen floor. Denver looked calmly at the shattered pieces on the floor and began to finger each one.

Denver's father couldn't contain his fury. "I told you to use a stool! What are you doing counting those pieces for? Pick them up!"

"Hold on," she responded calmly as her fingers made their way across the shattered pieces.

She had no discipline. It wasn't his fault that she had some psychological disorder. There probably wasn't even anything wrong with her mind. She was just an undisciplined child who felt no obligation to listen to her father because her mother wasn't standing there beside him.

Denver's father grabbed her by her shoulders and shook her. "What's wrong with you?" he demanded, angry at her and himself and the judgmental doctor.

One, two, three, four...

Denver looked into her father's angry face and knew that she should have used the stool. She was sure that she didn't need it but she only ended up making a mess.

Twelve, thirteen, fourteen...

She knew she should have cleaned up the mess right away or at least apologized for not using the stool but she also knew that if she didn't touch each broken piece, she wouldn't be able to sleep that night. Her head would hurt and her heart would beat three times as fast as normal.

Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine... Twenty-nine!

Denver reached out her hand to touch her father's face. "You have twenty-nine freckles, daddy."

Her father's face softened and he loosened his grip on her shoulders. She smiled and let her fingers dance on her father's face, making sure not to miss a single freckle. Her father wrapped his arms around and held her face to his chest. She could hear his heart calm down.

She knew it. She knew counting them and touching them and knowing that they were there would fix everything. It always did.