

LOUISE SIDLEY

THE CONTEST

HÉLÈNE'S TECHNIQUE WAS TO pre-stack three Oreos into the palm of one hand before adding them to the tower. She'd also discovered early in her training that it was worth sacrificing the extra five to seven seconds to pat and straighten as she went along. She'd won the local event at Fred Meyer's with twenty-five, but she knew the regional competition was going to require at least a stack of twenty-seven.

She'd surprised herself with the winning, considering the night before the local event her dad had taken her younger brother and her to meet Sherri for the first time. They went to Chuck E. Cheese's and Gregory wolfed down his food, something her mom never would have tolerated but, considering it was the first time meeting the woman who had taken their dad away, neither H  l  ne nor her dad said anything about it.

"H  l  ne's a great swimmer," her dad said, as if he'd never spoken about H  l  ne to Sherri before.

"Is that ever nice," Sherri said. H  l  ne noticed Sherri had helped herself to only two items from the buffet, the green salad and a bun without butter. Unlike H  l  ne's mom, Sherri was a rail. Her manicured fingers set down her fork. "How often do you swim, Helen?"

"It's H  l  ne," she snapped.

Since moving to Los Angeles at age three, it seemed she had to correct a person a day of the proper French pronunciation of her name, yet she had no patience for Sherri. Sherri directed her gaze at her dad and beneath her thickened lashes and violet-lined lids, there was a tearing up.

For God's sake, thought H  l  ne. By now her mom would have had the waters refilled, the dirty plates taken away, and her parents would be well into debating the benefits and consequences of stem cell research.

"I'm sorry. I meant to say H  l  ne. You were born in Montreal, right?"

H  l  ne was the Mother's Day baby and coming up it will be thirteen years ago to the day her picture was on the front page of the Montreal Gazette. Her grandmother on her dad's side framed the clipping of baby

Hélène tucked under her mother's chin and hung it in her Ottawa suburban front hall. Her mind's eye took her from the booth, sitting opposite her dad and his girlfriend, to another country, a few thousand miles away, where her mom's unadorned, beautiful brown eyes are happy and hers firmly shut.

"I think I know where I was born," Hélène muttered and got up from the table. She didn't know what she was expecting from this meeting of her dad's girlfriend for the last fifteen months, but this? The glob of potato salad on her plate had a higher IQ.

Two weeks after the local event, Gregory was at Scouts so it was a good night to practice, especially since she hadn't practised the night before because of her birthday. Uneventful as it was, unless she considered ordering in a pizza and her dad showing up late with a box of clothing Sherri had obviously picked out for her because they didn't fit, as a celebration worth remembering.

Hélène dumped out a package of Oreos onto the kitchen table and wondered how in the world Sherri had done it.

They were a family. Sure, her parents argued. Didn't everyone's? Most of the time, the fights were about what Hélène considered to be silly, mundane things. Like the time her dad forgot to take back a DVD and it costing another five dollars. It wasn't as if they couldn't afford it. Her dad held a lucrative job running a medical laboratory and her mom stayed at home, though she'd been a trauma surgeon in Montreal where they had met as medical students. Hélène had heard once that doctors become used to being poor students so they never learn to spend. Never mind that. She suspected as far as her mom was concerned, it was the principle of the thing. The DVD didn't have to be late. Her dad said he was sorry, and then questioned why they weren't borrowing from the library in the first place. Her mom wouldn't let him have the last word and, by that time, her temper flared. He hadn't put his dirty laundry in the hamper. He hadn't gone to Freddy's on his way home from work, where the two-quart bottles of diet coke were on sale for half price. He hadn't called his mother in weeks. All of which, she'd repeatedly asked him to do.

There were two categories. Kids aged seven and under and ages eight to fourteen, competing at 1400 grocery stores across America, vying for the grand prize of a \$20,000 Savings Bond, free tickets to major league games

in your state, and a year's supply of Oreos. H  l  ne tried to imagine what a year's supply would be. A bag per week? Ten bags a month? For sure, having all those cookies in the house wouldn't be good for her mom's erratic diets. H  l  ne never knew her mom as slim; nevertheless, in her parents' engagement and wedding photo albums, her mom was as pretty posed on a wagon of hay as she was in her bridal dress.

Her mom was driving H  l  ne and Gregory home from their private French school in downtown Los Angeles, weaving in and out traffic, when she told them of the *Only Oreo Stacking Contest for Kids*. H  l  ne didn't need to look at the grocery bag overflowing with bags of cookies sitting in the backseat of the car to know how important this competition was.

Two years earlier, she'd sold the most Girl Guide cookies in the entire state of California. She was sure her mom had taken her to every neighbourhood in all of greater Los Angeles. Every day of the week for six weeks, she'd donned her uniform and knocked on doors while her mom idled at the curb, map and pencil in hand, a diet coke in the console. H  l  ne earned an all expense paid trip to attend a two week Girl Guide camp in Wisconsin that summer. She would have rather gone on a family trip, but she'd won and had to go.

Why wasn't her mom fighting back? This was their family. Surely, she'd win hands down.

The day her dad told her mom about Sherri and that they'd been having an affair for almost a year, her mom retreated to her bedroom and her dad drove away with no more than an overnight bag. Gregory told H  l  ne that that meant he wasn't going to be gone for long. He'd taken the same bag before when going on business overseas and had always come back. Often with presents, he reminded her. H  l  ne nodded and told him they'd better make their own dinner. "And don't make things worse," she warned him.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gregory asked.

"Don't you get it? Dad's got to see what a mistake he's making."

Over the next few months he was back. Lots of times. He'd take Gregory to Boy Scouts, H  l  ne to her swimming. In fact, it was as if nothing had changed. There was this other person, yes, but it was as if she were fictitious, a nonentity. They never mentioned her, nor that his bike, his surfboard, and his kayak were slowly disappearing from the garage.

An orange glow flushed the west-facing window as the land cooled and the ocean fog, sliding in from the sea, joined forces with the LA smog. She was working on her twenty-second tower of the night, when Gregory sauntered into the kitchen wearing his wrinkled, beige shirt with badges pinned on the sleeve. He stuck out his tongue and H  l  ne, ignoring his goofy face, set the stop watch for thirty seconds and stood poised at the kitchen table. She ignored her dad, too, as he led her mom into the bedroom.

The moment H  l  ne set a cookie onto a tower of twenty-five, she heard her scream. The bedroom door stayed shut, yet their shouting and incoherent words broke through. She couldn't concentrate anymore, swept the cookies into the bag, and took Gregory to the basement where they watched TV until they fell asleep on opposite ends of the couch.

The next morning, she awoke early to a quiet house. She turned off the TV and let Gregory sleep. On the kitchen table, she had a stack of fifteen and was about to add the three nestled in her palm when her dad walked in. He was bare-chested and wearing his green surgeon pants. Hunching over, he pointed and counted the number of cookies she had stacked up so far.

"What are you trying to beat?" he said.

"Last year the winner was twenty-six."

"How much time?"

"Thirty seconds."

"Here, let me try," he said, and grabbed a handful of cookies out of the bag.

"There isn't a category for over forty," she said.

He ignored her and continued to build. He was using both hands. She didn't tell him about pre-stacking in your hand first. He was supposed to be the genius. The doctor doctorate. Or was it doctorate doctor? The one who gave speeches all over the world to rooms full of doctors about the latest in cancer research.

His tower collapsed after twelve cookies.

"Time's up," she said.

"Humph," he said. "It's a kid thing." He opened the fridge and helped himself to a large glass of orange juice.

"Are you going to stay home with us today?" she asked.

"Fraid not. I promised Sherri I'd take her to the farmer's market." He looked at his watch. "Oh shit. I'm late."

It was the first time he'd said her name in their house.

"What about Mom?"

She knew it was a stupid question the moment it came out.

“She’ll be okay.” He smiled. “You know Mom.” He put his arm around her shoulder and patted her back. She could smell his greasy sweat, but she didn’t turn away from him.

On his way out of the kitchen, he stopped and looked at her. “Hélène?”

She thought maybe he was going to change his mind. All of a sudden, come to his senses and this whole nightmare would be over. He had slept over.

“Yes, Dad?”

“Try pre-stacking them in your hand first. Two or three at a time. I think that’d work.”

She batted her unfinished tower and the cookies tumbled, broke apart, and skittered along the floor like ice.

“What’d you do that for?” he said.

She got down on her hands and knees to clean up the broken cookies. She couldn’t look at him. Why couldn’t she tell him off like she could annoying boys at school?

“I know this is hard on everyone, but I can’t do it anymore.” He went to the cupboard and took out the broom.

“I heard Mom scream.” Hélène sunk back on her knees.

“I wasn’t going to tell you.” He swept the chocolate crumbs into the dustpan. “I guess you’re old enough now. I told her Sherri isn’t liking this in-limbo thing we’re doing.”

This time her name effortlessly entered the room.

“What about us?” Hélène whispered. He stopped sweeping to look at her.

“That’s the other thing. Sherri’s pregnant. We’re going to have a family.”

She had six weeks to train between contests. She practised every day after school and now, with three weeks left, she was benchmarking twenty-eight, twenty-nine. Once she’d stacked thirty-two, but Gregory didn’t believe her. The nationals were going to be held in Orlando Florida, hosted by Universal Studios. Miss Universe Brook Lee and baseball great, Ozzie Smith, were serving as the official judges. She just had to win the regional’s first.

There was swimming practice, too. Three times a week, twelve months a year, she stretched a bathing cap over her head, squeezed into a Speedo, and swam her lengths. The cool chlorinated water dried her skin and hair. The goggles made owl circles around her eyes. But that day in the

pool, after her dad had told her the news about Sherri being pregnant, she concentrated every core of her being into breath and stroke. After seventy laps, her coach said, “What’s with you, H  l  ne? I haven’t seen that much determination in months.”

She shrugged. “I just felt like it,” she said and headed toward the shower.

She stood under the harsh stream and let the lukewarm water mix with the sudden flood of tears.

A few days before the regional’s, H  l  ne found out Sherri wasn’t some abstract stranger. She worked in her dad’s lab, and her mom, always having kept herself involved in the business, had known Sherri since she was hired. So, H  l  ne thought, her mom knew what a ditz she was.

“How could Dad leave us for her?” H  l  ne asked her mom, while she worked on a twin tower.

“It’s ‘cause she’s a slut. Right, Mom?” Gregory stuffed an Oreo into his mouth.

H  l  ne scowled at him. “What?” he said. “It was cracked. It’s no good when it’s broken.”

“Not the cookie, you idiot. You don’t even know what you’re saying.”

“Do too. That’s what Evan said she is. He knows ‘cause his dad left a long time ago for one.”

“So Evan’s a divorce expert is he?”

“Shut-up.”

“You shut-up. I was asking Mom.”

Their fights were becoming more and more like their mom and dad’s: explosive, senseless, and now, routine. Her mom padded over to the couch with tall glass of Diet Coke and a family-sized bag of all-dressed potato chips. It was dark outside; she’d been in her pyjamas all day.

“Actually, H  l  ne, Gregory is right. But try telling your father that.”

She had been listening after all.

That night H  l  ne lay in bed thinking that her mom wanted to be DQ’d. Why else had she let herself go like she had? Gaining more weight and not even washing her hair. Her mom used to be a competitor. H  l  ne was sure of it, because she was who everybody said H  l  ne got her competitive spirit from. If her mom wasn’t going to fight for him, she would. Once she got him back, then ... Hesitating on hope, H  l  ne thought further: they’d fall in love again and Sherri would be the single mother, not theirs.

By the end of the week, H  l  ne figured she was as good as she was ever going to be.

The regional event was at the food court in the mall on Saturday morning. Tables were set up end to end for the fourteen contestants from each category to stand behind. The Oreos were equally arranged onto paper plates and Nabisco Oreo promotional posters and banners were plastered everywhere. They'd arrived two hours early so her mom could get a front seat. H  l  ne wasn't expecting her dad to come. The evening before he told her over the phone he'd regretfully promised Sherri they would pick out a stroller today.

Her mom took out her video camera, readying to film the entire event. Gregory took full advantage of the free cookies while H  l  ne paced the perimeter. She could barely watch the younger of the two age groups compete. Instead, she eyed the food court to see who she was up against. A few were practising on their tables. H  l  ne shook out her arms and wiggled her fingers, keeping herself nimble. The sweet smell of sugar and chocolate filled the air. Her heart was pounding worse than before a swim meet. The regional contest awarded prize money as well as the trip to compete in Orlando. But that wasn't what was on her mind. Instead, she was focussed on what her dad would see. Her winning would make clear to him all the good they could be, what winners they were. He'd be proud enough to come home.

She watched as a six-year-old boy was crowned the winner for his age group, and then it was time. The emcee called up each contestant and, predictably, he'd called her Helen. She took her spot second from the end, gave her arms one last shake, and analysed the position of every cookie on the plate.

"Ready ... and GO!" The large portable clock was set for thirty seconds.

H  l  ne didn't look up. Her hands were a blur of motion, feeling, as if blindly, the ridges of each wafer aligning themselves. Her mind focussed on the count.

Half a minute later, the clock resounded and she let her hands drop to her side. They had to wait three seconds. The contestant's tower to her immediate right collapsed. One more from down the table fell. She held her breath. By her count she had twenty-nine. A split second later, it too fell. The winning spot was taken with a puny stack of twenty-four.

On the way home, only Gregory spoke. He wanted to know if they could stop to buy some peanut butter cookies; he was sick of all the Oreos they'd been having.

Hélène was rued by her defeat and, as if life from now on was going to be a series of failures, she dreaded swim meets and the writing of her final exams. One Friday morning in mid-July, after much begging, her mom let her stay home from the pool. She'd feigned being sick at her stomach, claiming she might have caught what her mom had been sick from.

She woke up to her mom sobbing. Fierce wails were punctuating her breath, as if her mom were screaming for her life. Hélène flung open the sheet and rushed through the hallway. The bedroom door was ajar and she could see her mom's bare feet crossed on the bed. She squatted down and listened:

"Mom, oh, Mom ..." There was a sharp intake of breath. "What am I going to do?"

There was more crying and Hélène heard her blow her nose. Her mom didn't say more for a long time. Whether her mamie was telling her mom advice or they both were hanging on in silence, Hélène didn't know. She was about to tip toe away for fear of getting caught when she heard her mom say, "I'm too old to have a baby."

Hélène found her feet, ran to her room, and dove into bed. She knew something she shouldn't, but eclipsing it was knowing that her mom was in. She'd entered the contest. Their baby was going to be better than Sherri's, guaranteed.