

Sad Little Bird

Emmal's mother looks around for someone to rescue her. She has been late for work three days in a row, and she's worried that this will be her last day on the job if she is late again.

"Don't worry, Emmal," Mrs. Mohar coos. "I'll be back early to pick you up."

She wishes she didn't have to leave her son so long every day. His caregiver says he is fine after she leaves, but how can she really know? What if they sit him in a corner all day? How can she be sure? "Don't cry! *Amma* [Mama] loves you. I won't be long. Oh, don't cry my little bird!"

One of the teachers approaches; she lifts the sobbing Emmal and carries him to the breakfast table, where the other toddlers are already eating. "Don't worry," Darla says over her shoulder as she plops Emmal in a chair. "He'll be fine. He's always okay after you leave."

Emmal's mother isn't sure, but she has to go. "Don't cry, my little bird. I'll be back early," she tells her son again, but Emmal still sobs. She leaves before anyone can see that she is crying too.

When Lilly arrives a little later, she asks, "What time did his mother say she would pick him up?" As one of Emmal's regular teachers, Lilly knows this will be another long day. The toddler has been coming to the center for more than a month, and he still has trouble settling down.

"She said she'd be here *early*," replies Darla, rolling her eyes. Both caregivers know that Emmal is generally the last child to arrive in the morning—disrupting breakfast—and the last one to be picked up in the afternoon.

Emmal finally calms down enough to eat some banana, but Lilly figures he'll start up all over again the next time he's hungry. Breakfast

children are always like that; no one can make them happy when they want their mother. Lilly steels herself for another day of Emmal's cries: "*Amma* early! *Amma* early!"

If she could at least get Mrs. Mohar to stop saying that she'd be there early! She has to talk to her. At noon the director agrees to let Lilly make the call from her office. "But keep it short," the director says. "You know how I feel about bothering parents at work or getting too involved in their personal lives."

The conversation is short. Lilly asks Mrs. Mohar to try to get to the center before breakfast starts. She also points out that her promises of "early" don't help. Emmal just cries all day. Mrs. Mohar is stunned and doesn't say much. Lilly returns to the room feeling satisfied. She is unaware of the impact her call has had on this quiet refugee mother.

Mrs. Mohar is very upset and completely confused. Why did the other teacher tell her that very morning that Emmal was "always fine" after she left? Should she have mentioned that her car was broken down and that she and Emmal were going everywhere by bus? Should she have told Lilly that Emmal's father left them last month, or that she will lose her job if she is late just one more time? Will the center kick them out if she can't manage? And even if she could get there earlier, what can she do about Emmal's crying?

She feels lost and alone, with no place to turn.