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Nora Wendl

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They were dessert fingerprints, my grandmother told me. Light orange, barely visible on the white paint in the hallway. The fingerprints came as individual dots, or as faint trails disappearing before the row of bedroom doors. Every time the children made a mess, half of her went to annihilate it, and half of her hung back wondering if she should. She debated every swipe of the rag.

“Leave it,” her husband said, before going to work.

Mary didn’t leave messes.

Behind her, morning light stepped softly through the bathroom window, watery gray. It made the fingerprints glow against the wall where she was crouched, scrubbing, three-months pregnant.

The children had left together for school not long ago. John, at eight years old, had taken the lead, Fran and Jean following behind. Jeannie swung her head from side to side as fast as she could, slapping Fran’s face with her brown pigtails.

“Wow, Jean, you should be careful. Shake your head harder, you might fly away,” Fran said.

Jean stopped, but only because Fran might be right. Fran had a middle child’s sensibilities. He was often right.

Mary scrubbed at the little orange traces. The lump in her belly was becoming evident as she tried to bend further to reach the baseboard. Like a big-gish, softish rock in the waist of her house-dress. She let her mind drift a little as she eased down to all fours.

Tonight she would make a hot water chocolate cake for Jeannie’s birthday.

She couldn’t find it in herself to manufacture a cake like Helen, the neighbor, churning out an elaborately pink confection for the birthday of every child on the street. Naturally, Helen had none of her own.

A hot water chocolate cake. With six pink candles. She would make it as one layer, in a pan this time. She had tried frosting a two-tiered round cake earlier in the week, and everything had come trickling down the sides, collecting in puddle of syrup. The cake had absorbed all the frosting and the bottom became a lemony swamp. The children had eaten it happily with spoons, Jeannie pushing her pigtailed face into the plate, coming up triumphant with a snout full of cake mush. Tonight, she would be sure to bathe the children at the sink before they ran around the house with their sugary fingers.

The hot water was on to boil now. The presents were wrapped. Were

there any candles left in the cupboard above the kitchen sink? Would she have to walk to the store to get more? She could always take the bus into town.

Mary looked at the small white watch face at her wrist. Thirty minutes until the bus stopped at the corner of Helen's house.

She stood up fast, and came back down on one knee. Everything inside of her turned upside-down and burned.

She sucked at the air. She groped blindly on her hands and knees, crawling into the bathroom. Once inside, she leaned against the solid door, slamming it shut.

Nobody was home. She pictured Helen next-door, making the pink cake. She tried to scream, "Helen, Helen, help me," but her voice had gone, and she would have felt foolish anyway, because she didn't know what was wrong with her.

Her arms drug her across the white tile floor, flesh squeaking against the hard surface, knees battering and bruising under her. Every stitch seemed to be searing her skin. She tore at her nylons, pulled them off in one elastic stretch. She tugged at the dress, at the buttons running up her spine, heard it tear as it passed over her head. Naked, she put one, two hands on the cold porcelain bathtub. One leg up on the ledge of it, Mary rolled herself in, hands skittering to find a hold on the blank surface. She found the soap-dish mounted to the wall, and she held that with her right hand, pushing her feet against the end of the tub with the faucet and nozzles.

She panted prayers and crossed her legs, and didn't scream in a way that the neighbors would think something very strange was happening to her. She closed her eyes, gripped the soap-dish harder, heard her knuckles crack. Her eyes saw red and saw black and saw nothing, and then in a rush of warm, it was over.

Red on the porcelain. Red on her hands, on the dress that she had not pulled away in time. Her underwear lay in the center of the bathroom, trapped in the pool of her nylons. The faucet leaked, drop after drop. She hadn't noticed that before. There were cracks in the white paint on the bathroom door. The magazines in the stand next to the toilet were in complete disarray. Fran's fire-truck lay on its side behind the toilet.

Mary gripped the free edge of the tub with both hands, and pulled her knees under her. Everything had come out. Everything. She was kneeling next to it, looking down. It was as if they were in a boat together, a small white porcelain boat sailing on the watery light that bathed the ground. She kneeled there, on the verge of exiting the tub, her knees gnawing with dull agony. The small blue thing lay calmly by the drain.

No riotous howling, no doctors or friends, no sweating husband or flowers. Just the rag she had been using to wipe the wall, the blood-spattered pool of clothes, and a patient blue baby the size of her thumb.

Mary leaned out of the tub. She plucked up the dress, and pulled it over her head, her arms. She crawled out of the bathroom. In the hallway, the rag lay waiting to wipe away more fingerprints. She passed it, and crawled into the bedroom. Her fingers found the cord that connected the telephone to the wall, and pulled it until the phone was brought to the floor in two pieces. She touched the piece with numbers on it first, wrenching the clear disk around, letting it spin back, around, back, around, back, seven times to reach the doctor. Then she pulled the spiral plastic cord that led to the second piece, and cradled it between her ear and her shoulder.

After four low, fat rings the doctor's voice boomed across the line.

"Hello?"

"There's a blue baby in my bathtub."

"Who is this?"

"Mary Albers. This is Mary Albers."

"Well, Mary! How are you..."

"Did you hear me? Did you hear what I said? My baby. My baby is in my bathtub."

"Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus, Mar, I'm so sorry. We need to see you right now. Where's Pat?"

"He's at work. There's a goddamned baby in my tub..."

"Can you walk? I'm sending an ambulance to..."

"Don't send anything, don't send anyone! I don't want the world to watch me, carried out on a stretcher like a corpse! I can walk! *I called you.* I'm fine! I just want this baby out of my tub before my children come back from school. Jesus, it's Jeannie's birthday..."

"Get a sack. Get a paper bag. Get a jar. Just get the baby and the rest of it into something, and get to St. Ambrose, I'll meet you in front. Get here as soon as you can."

Mary dropped the piece of the phone that sounded like the doctor.

She stood up as if for the first time, not pregnant. She pulled her dress down from under her arms, straightening it over her shaking legs, streaked with dried blood. The brown wash ran in tracks that were wide at the insides of her thighs, coursing to thin lines at her knees. She walked down the hall, into the bathroom, running a hand along the wall to steady herself. She moved a hand up the wall to light the room.

Mary looked at the floor. She turned and stepped out of the bathroom, and returned with the fingerprint-wiping rag. It was still damp. She kneeled on the tile. The first few wipes smeared the blood wider on the tile floor. Her arm kept rowing along the tile, wiping away the blood, moving the damp cloth over the tiles until it faded, then disappeared.

She dropped the rag in the bathtub and went to the kitchen.

The water for the chocolate cake was boiling over on the stove. Mary

turned the range off and went to the cupboard. There were a number of mason jars for leftovers there. She picked one up. The lid was screwed on tight, and it took her a few tries to get it off.

She walked back to the bathroom with the jar. She put the jar on the fat lip of the tub. She picked up the baby the way she picked up raw chicken breast, and she slid it carefully into the jar. Behind the glass, two black eyes bulged blankly. No real nose, knobs for feet, knobs for hands, impossible fingers, sea-shell ears, curled up body.

Screwing the lid on tight, she felt the bird's weight of it tumble a bit. She put the jar on the tile and went to the kitchen for a paper sack and another jar.

It was approaching eleven. Pat would be back for lunch in an hour. In the kitchen she wrote a note, something about gone to get ribbon, gone to get candles, there's roast beef in the fridge.

She almost forgot why she was in the kitchen. Sack and jar.

The afterbirth, sanguine and lush, resisted the jar. Mary pushed it in with a squelching sound and put the lid on it, screwing it tight. It looked too ordinary to have been expelled from her body, like the raw liver she often bought from the butcher.

Both jars went into the brown sack.

Mary used the boiled water to wash the tub and rinse the fixtures. Her dress joined her nylons in a pool beside the tub. She poured the water down her legs and plunged her hands into the rest of it.

She walked naked into her bedroom and looked in her closet. There was a lot of blue on the hangers. She pulled a town dress out and unzipped the back, slipped into it legs first, then arms, the teeth of the zipper nipping at her fingertips. Light blue. She studied the mirror. Her hair was damp with sweat, stuck to her neck. As she pulled every last pin out of it, she dropped them on the dresser next to the gifts. She brushed the copper length until it lay smooth, scraping her scalp with the comb's tines. Then she twisted and coiled it around her fingers, wound it onto her head, spearing it with the pins. She dusted on a light powder, applied a little color to her lips, some cream to her scalded red hands.

She picked up her black purse, counted out change for the bus, put her pillbox hat and well-tailored blue jacket on. She slipped into her black pumps and picked up the brown sack that was outside the bathroom door.

Her keys sat in a small crystal dish on a shelf in the kitchen. She took them and left the house, locking the door behind her.

The spring air felt soft on her face. She felt light and very young. The bus pulled up just as she approached the corner. She fed the meter a quarter and took a seat, thankful for the empty space next to her.

"Special delivery, miss?"

Mary didn't move. A man two seats ahead of her had turned in his seat, eyeing the brown sack.

“You got something special there for somebody?”

“It’s...today is my little girl’s birthday.”

The man smiled and faced front, retreating into his newspaper.

He got off three stops later, in the middle of downtown.

The hospital was the end of the line, and Mary stepped off in the back rather than face the driver.

Nobody she knew had seen her.

Mary walked into St. Ambrose. The room was electric, stale, no doctor in sight. Two secretaries at the front pushed piles of paper around behind their tall counter, wary of the sparse, injured population of the waiting room: one little boy with a bleating wail cradled his wrist, his mother’s nose buried in his light hair, shushing him. A woman with a lump under her shabby jacket and a grim face. An old man with lost eyes and a lot of spit on his lip.

“Sorry, lady, no gifts of food to visitors. You’ll have to leave the bag here. Who’re you here to...”

“I need to see Dr. Kendall.”

“Oh, he went to see someone. It was an emergency with a patient.”

“When will he be back?” Mary tried to focus her eyes on this woman with her pile of paper and her smoke break and her dumb face.

“I...well, I don’t know.”

Mary turned around and walked out of the hospital.

Damn her.

It was nearly one, by the watch-face that had twisted to the inside of her wrist. Mary held the paper sack carefully, only touching the part of it that folded over at the top.

There was Jeannie’s cake to bake, the ribbons to buy, the table to set, the dinner to make, the children to greet when they came home from school. And this paper sack to deliver.

The hospital sat at the edge of town, the way hospitals usually do. Somebody’s muddy farm to the left. The stretch of road to the right, leading back into town, and beyond the town there was her house, her bathroom with its thick scent, the window open wide. Did she clean it completely? What if the children came home before her and saw something? She needed to be examined. How did she know there wasn’t anything wrong with her? Where was the doctor?

She left the shelter of the entrance portico and sat on a wrought-iron bench on the lawn, near an outdoor patio for patients. Some faded, terminally ill people rested there, together and alone like a smattering of islands. Mary put her bag in the grass, near her feet.

She could see a cloud of dust churning up the road. The bus. Mary looked back at the entrance. No Kendall. She looked out at the parking lot, the full rows of empty cars. She listened to the ill noises, the lost coughing and the

struggling breath. She stood up, retrieved her bag, and walked to greet the bus at its stop. She climbed up into its musty gut and struggled with her coin purse, silver discs spinning out of her hands. Her mouth opened to apologize or scream, and nothing came out. The driver just smiled and shook his head, his square jaw understanding. People did things like this. He'd retrieve the coins later. She nodded and moved to take a seat. The bus pulled away, and she fell into an empty bench too close to some rowdy children. Skipping school, she guessed.

She got off in the middle of downtown. There was the card shop where she bought Jeannie a little heart-shaped birthday card and a length of smooth pink ribbon to tie up the boxes. There was the department store where she bought the little candles to push into cake, the little plastic candle holders to keep the wax from spoiling the frosting. She carried the bag with her into each store, sometimes resting it on her hip like a child.

In the card shop, the glass jars had clinked together. Mary's vision began to tunnel as the attendant counted out her change cheerfully, laying it on the counter. Mary's hand was shaking too hard to collect it. She simply nodded at the young woman, snatched the thin envelope that contained the card, and waved to her to keep the three dollars and odd cents.

She dashed out just in time to get on the smaller bus, the bus that went to the neighborhoods. It was around three, sun catching in the large storefront windows as they rumbled past.

She sat at least four rows behind everybody else. She leaned forward, her brow resting on the back of the seat in front of her. Her lower back was beginning to cramp. She could feel sweat beading up between her eyes. She took the pillbox hat off, and laid it next to her on the seat. She licked her dry lips, tasting something awful and cosmetic. As the bus built up speed, her insides churned like a steam engine. She breathed heavily. The jars clink-clinked together as the bus hit a pock in the road, and salt water flooded her mouth. She spat it quietly on ground next to her, keeping her head down so nobody would see. She put a hand over her stomach and bit her lip, gritting her teeth against what wanted to come up.

She felt soft in her seat, warm. Mary opened her eyes. Underneath her, a dark pool was slowly forming on the brown vinyl seat, drops reeling onto the floor.

Then all movement stopped. They were at the corner bus stop. Mary looked out of her window, and stared at her own house as though it had sprung up from thin air. Dr. Kendall stood on the front porch with Pat. Kendall was talking with his hands, Pat listened with his mouth turned down, hand furrowing through his thick hair. They both smoked.

The door hissed open. The only door, past all those people, the only door on the bus opened. The door closed. The bus crept forward three feet, waiting for traffic to clear up so it could cross the street. Mary stared out the window, still

watching her husband and the doctor.

Kendall looked up suddenly. Mary's forehead fell against the window as the bus jolted them off, through the intersection, toward the gray distance of downtown. As they accelerated, her vision lagged and her hearing very simply vanished. The doctor dropped his cigarette and leapt off the porch, suspended in air for a long time. The bus churned, moving as though the road was molasses. The glass jars ground into each other. Pat came right after the doctor, white undershirt exposed, the sides of his blue work-shirt flapping like slow sails in the wind. Both men moved their mouths widely, as though eating air. Mary could trace her name on Pat's lips.

The molasses road became too much for the bus, and it drifted over to the sidewalk. Mary's head became too much for her neck, and it drifted into her collarbone. The brown paper sack slipped from the seat, opened, and one jar with a small blue child fell spinning to the floor. Mary saw Kendall slam the glass of the bus door wide open, saw Pat right behind him, mouth still moving. She saw the two of them climb into the bus, saw the bus driver lift from his seat, and the heads on the bus turn, slowly, one by one, as the jar rolled over and over. She says she watched it move, catching the late rays of afternoon light until it was gone from her view. Then she looked down where the warmth was spreading wide to cover the seat. Mary watched the pool that was collecting on the floor, wondered who she was, and drifted into blackness.