

## CLEAR AS DAY

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The carapace of an alligator lay on the camel-hair rug, grinning, four inches long, and plastic. It had been discarded where its hunter could keep watch; his one eye, squinting, gigantic behind taped glasses, blue, acquired shadows from the drowsing fireplace behind him. His other eye, closed.

In the middle distance his mother sat in a cushioned alcove and knitted a thin scarf that had already begun to unravel at the end. Every once in a while she glanced at her son and gently put down her knitting. Then she looked at her wristwatch and breathed deeply for five seconds.

"I think it's working," she said to him over the mound of his body. He was overweight for his age but clutching at the knee of his half-bent leg he looked long and fecal. His other arm stretched out away from her towards the alligator and his hand was cupped as if he was about to pinch the air.

"Spleurcch!" he said and the hand closed. His mother stared at him and frowned so that her forehead creased above both eyebrows. He should be at school, she thought, but the problem with educators these days was that they didn't teach kids to have an inquisitive mind. When she was a child no bigger, there was no school in Liebenthal. She learned to have an inquisitive mind from Mr. Nambe who taught her how to read from Proverbs. That was the problem with Joey. He might have had an inquisitive mind but if he did he never showed it.

The boy turned over and looked seriously at her face as if he had heard her through the floor. His eyes moved in their sockets under a thin vegetable skin. It wrinkled and then smoothed out when he blinked. Mr. Nambe had died a year ago and she wouldn't be having her son taught by educators. The only thing left of the preacher was in her. He had given to her his knowledge, and she figured that the rules of things being conferred meant that she

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could teach Joey about having an inquisitive mind without being blasphemous to Mr. Nambé's memory. In his later years, the old man had been just about family, and she was teaching Joey after his memory no matter what Ron had to say.

Ron always had something to say. Just because someone had an inquisitive mind didn't mean it entitled him to ask stupid questions. Just about the only stupid question she couldn't remember him making was the one where he asked her to marry her. She couldn't even remember if he'd forgotten it. Though she didn't care much one way or another, the nerve of not remembering the circumstances of Ron's proposal stuck with her through the years. Other things stuck with her too, like two weeks ago he'd broken the back door he slammed it so hard. She didn't know how the man could be happy, asking her to get the cheapest gardeners and then not tolerating spicks.

Joey had never asked a question in his life. He never seemed to need to. As he surveyed her face, touring her nose, which was small, her mouth where the boil was, and the brittle gray hair that split over her shoulders, she knew in her soul that he understood her deeply. Looking into those sluggish eyes it was clear as day. It saddened her. It felt like he had already left her behind at eight years, and the body would follow.

His head swiveled towards the back of the room where the blinded door was. The sunlight edging in from between the bright green slats turned his face and exposed teeth an unripened color. "Curious about something?" she asked, and leaned forward, to which he stuck his thumb firmly in his mouth. With a cluck she returned to her watch, and brooding there breathed deeply for almost five seconds. Outside, the unpleasant squeal of the garden gate, followed by the tap tap of footsteps down the concrete path distracted her. She could tell it was Rebecca because the rhythm of the walk was so ungrateful. You could learn a lot about

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someone by the sound of their walk. Knitting in this alcove for years she'd heard a hundred different walks up the sidewalk out back, and some walks she'd heard a hundred times.

Joey's face gradually returned to a healthy hue as his sister's shadow mounted the stairs to the back door and she nudged at its broken hinges. Her silhouette was a shapeless blob that stood on shortish legs and trailed the shadow of a backpack that she still took everywhere. The blob stood fiddling for a long time.

"You'll have to come 'round front," she said from her alcove, and checked to make sure Joey wasn't getting scared by the shadow. He was rolling a piece of lint between his fingers.

"I'm picking the lock," Rebecca murmured.

"Rebecca. It's the hinges." Her mother leaned over and slowly ran her hand over Joey's head. "I gave you the key this morning anyway."

"I'm breaking in."

Her mother frowned at the blob and then down at Joey, who had pointed his index finger at the door with his thumb up and begun to make explosive sucking noises on the other. Then he gave a delighted squeal and crawled on his three available limbs (one remained in his mouth) behind the corduroy chair by the fireplace. His mother put a hand to her head and pursued him behind the chair and up onto the mantle where he was agitating the fireplace poker set. She lifted him gently down, keeping in mind that excitement was bad for the heart. She did her best to calm Joey down and not to get too flustered herself, but sometimes he became animated and had to be kept out of Ron's room or from getting tangled in a telephone cord. It was modern knowledge that heart attacks didn't happen only to old or fat people these days, and for more reasons than they used to. It was her opinion that at any point Joey could get excited in passing at a toad or a beetle, begin to convulse, and die like Mr. Nambe.

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Rebecca's encouragement of the boy made taking care of him so hard that she had insisted the girl find a job almost as soon as she got back from New York, or at least make herself useful. So far, she had done neither. It just showed that fancy education was overrated. No matter how proud Ron said he was of her, she expected that each night Rebecca had been back he had come over just a little more to her way of thinking, which she thought daily became more justified.

"Now stop it, Rebecca. You'll have to come around the front if you want in. Anyways, you're scaring Joey, and I dare say you're scaring me." The scratching at the door intensified. "Will you at least fetch me one of my tonics on your way through? They're in the refrigerator."

The blob's fiddling continued half-hearted for another minute before the thing finally shambled away; the room brightened considerably with green light and the shadows shifted back towards the fireplace. Tap, ta-ap, ta-ap, went Rebecca's footsteps back up the sidewalk. Some walks, thought her mother, were new.

She turned her face to Joey who had taken the thumb out of his mouth and was working on the lint again with his teeth. The wet sticky ball of it came tumbling out of his mouth and stuck to the carpet near where the alligator was sitting, just waiting for someone to step on it. She wondered what the child was thinking. He was old enough to talk. Ron supposed he was even old enough to work, but she wouldn't hear of it. The best place for that boy right now was among the pews where he could acquire an inquisitive mind, not the cutthroat values of the modern man. The wondering took her back to her childhood, which she always thought of when she thought about how cruel the world had become. Liebenthal was once as tender a place as you could have imagined in the entire country. There was a sweetness to everything; even the milk tasted better then. When she was sixteen she spilled some of it on her long blue

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dress one morning, and after finishing with the cow had been very careful to put it away in her closet just as it was without washing it because she knew one day the milk would be different. She still had that blue dress in her closet or in Joey's closet (she used both because the boy didn't own much clothes and those he did he kept in a pile by his bed mostly). She kept it around more as a memory of the milk than out of any care for the dress, which she had always thought wrinkled too easily and had worn to a country dance with a boy who turned out to be misguided. Now even the boy was probably gone. There was one sorghum field up by the oil drums where a bunch of them out of college used to live and work odd-jobs until they found a reason to go to the city. The sorghum field was a funny color, kind of purplish, and produced the best tasting sorghum in the county, not bad coming out of a state known for it. It had been carefully contained in a square field edged in on the sides by railroad ties that the wasps made wormy, but as the years went on the kids left and there was a bit of a problem about the sorghum. The government took interest and then no one took any interest so the stalks had eventually spread far enough south that she could see their shadows out the back door. In the setting sun they were a purple sea of stalks, or a cloud bank.

She poked her head out the living room door down the hallway. It was long and went to the kitchen and the rest of the house. Wicker baskets that Ron collected rested in piles along either side. They reflected a bleached green from tiny skylights that let in sunlight at intervals down the hall. There were three doorways on the same side of the hall, each of them surrounded by a larger than usual pile of wicker baskets. Telephone cords and parts that Ron always had extras of from his work spilled out of their fronts. She held her breath to keep from breathing in the swirling dust, then shouted, "Rebecca, where's my tonic?" Before she was forced to inhale she retreated into the living room and closed the door against the cold.

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She saw that Joey had removed the lower jaw from the alligator and was examining the inside of its mouth with a concerned expression. "Find anything intriguing in there?" she asked. He looked up sadly at her as if she had just said something very unfortunate and stupid.

She had no idea how Joey had broken his glasses. She supposed it happened in some fit of excitement because when she got back from picking a wicker basket full of sorghum one day, Ron was taping up the glasses and putting a splattered red paper napkin against the boy's nose. She demanded to know what happened to him so she could deal with it appropriately but the dumb man just said, "you always need to know these things don't you? I'm the one gonna to take care of things this time. Look at him, he'll be fine." Then he turned to the child and asked, "that makes fine sense to me, doesn't it make fine sense to you?" The boy looked at his father and then appeared not to be looking at him even though his eyes didn't move.

Over their cornbread and chili that night she tried asking Ron about it again, but he put down his spoon and looked at her like she hadn't finished her sentence and he was expecting her to say more. Joey was privileged with the care of parents who were willing to spend almost fifty dollars on a pair of glasses for him to wear. He needed to be taught how important it was to respect his privileges, and damn if Ron was going to do the teaching, so she pressed him and for a while he didn't answer. Rebecca was quietly separating the peas from the chili and Joey was looking across the table at the magazine rack. Then he said, "why do you want to know?" She told him why, but then he asked more of his infuriating questions until finally he shoved his chair back from the table and cried, "why are you making it out like it matters?" and fled. The rest of the meal was silent, but not out of a common feeling of prejudice. Rebecca rolled her eyes, stood up, and crossed the room to the magazine rack where she selected an issue and

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put it in front of Joey like she was smacking a fly. Then she sat down again; her face was too round from corn-bread filling and white so that every little jiggle when she sat down reminded her mother how spoiled the girl was. Neither of them had been taught properly in the end, and after going to college Rebecca expected life would be served to her by her mother, who still did all the cooking. She didn't even have the modesty to cover it up: the ingratitude gave her a mean complexion that was even uglier than the fierce acne that collected in the pits of her cheeks. She turned to Joey, for whom she still had hope. The child was drawing fangs on the cover of the magazine with a smiling cowboy. "Will you tell me what happened, or won't you?"

Rebecca's surly footsteps made an unbroken trail from somewhere indistinguishable down the hall, through the living room door which hung ajar, and let in a draft, to the carpet by the knitting alcove where her mother was sitting. The breeze tossed the ends of her faded yellow hair. The strands of it were so pathetic they doubled on themselves and tangled in the girl's bulky green sweater. She stood before her mother with one hand on her tilted hip and the other holding one of her mother's tonic packets; after giving these to her, the older woman looked up at her with a broad, surrendering smile. "My daughter," she sighed, and tore the paper packet open.

"Margaret," the girl responded. She collapsed in one of the chairs with a bovine huff. She was lazy and stupid, thought Margaret. The only redeeming consequence was that she didn't meddle in her mother's business like some daughters were given to. Daisy Watkins, who she had talked to on the telephone earlier that day, had a daughter that was three years younger than Rebecca—too young to play with Rebecca when they were kids (even though she

was ugly, Rebecca had been a snob)—but had already somehow got it into her head that she was going to start managing poor Daisy's affairs. The husband had died in a mill accident, which didn't help, but the woman wasn't even fifty and here was her daughter cleaning the house and selling the land.

"I talked to Daisy Watkins today," Margaret said, but Rebecca pushed herself up from the chair with her arms and walked to the hallway door. "Don't go!" her mother cried and waved her hands ridiculously, then she remembered to stay calm and set them in her lap. "I have something for you." Rebecca made a suspicious face and settled back into the chair. Joey said, "blech!" and cast away the alligator, electing now that Rebecca had decided to stay to tug at her shoelaces. His disposition had brightened considerably and he hummed the wedding march as he pulled the ends. She half-smiled down at him while her mother said, "I talked to Daisy Watkins today and got her to hire you at the daycare in town. Do you remember Daisy?"

Rebecca made a horrified face: her chin pulled back so her cheeks became swollen and showed their purplish pimples in profile like blowfish spines. While this was happening her lips peeled away from her large square teeth. "Daisy Watkins is a bitch and her daughter is a slut."

Her mother frowned and her forehead began to itch. "Daisy has been part of this town for decades. She has a good head on her and an inquisitive mind. I don't know what they teach you at college but I bet it's not to tell things about people that aren't true and mean to boot. And behind their back, on top."

"Then I'll call her," Rebecca said in a tight voice, and reached out from her chair to where they kept the phone on a shelf by the fireplace.

Her mother looked at her sadly as she dialed the number on the rotary disc. Daisy's



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number had a lot of high numbers in it so she had to turn it all the way around several times; it took long enough that Margaret was able to breathe deeply for five seconds. When Rebecca had finished dialing she leaned back with her legs over the side of the chair and the receiver propped between her raised shoulder and head. "Is this Miss Watkins? Yes, I thought so. Did you know that you're a slut?" She bunched her lips together and drew them apart again as she listened, then she reached back and slammed the head of the phone back onto the base. She brought her legs to her and hugged them, making a cavity that she hung her head into. "And your mother is a bitch," she whispered fiercely into the cavity.

Her mother watched Joey pull a long thread from the carpet. He tied it to a similar one from his sleeve and used it to pull off his shirt. The protrusion of each side of his chest and stomach was a little shriveled, like the skin of a walnut. "Just until you find something better."

From within her cave, Rebecca's voice sounded like it was coming straight from her abdomen. "I have a degree," she said, and was quiet. Her mother shook her head. "Well I don't see you making it obvious."

"I can't work for daycare," came the voice again. Her mother agreed that it would be a disaster. Rebecca didn't know the first thing about teaching a child how to respect the worthwhile things in life, probably from lack of experience, she thought. It would be good for her to realize this. Maybe then she could put things back to where they were four years ago and make a different choice. She would come to her mother and instead of money she would ask for forgiveness. In return she would be as loyal and supportive as any daughter in Liebenthal was twenty years ago. Rebecca was privileged with the care of parents who were willing to pay four thousand dollars in tuition even if it only meant she finally realized where

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she could find true wisdom.

Rebecca had folded her legs across each other but her head still hung as if she were hiding from something. Her hair spilled at tortured angles from her scalp almost to her knees. Without looking up she muttered, "I've got an interview today. This afternoon." She shifted on the chair and there were pops from the springs underneath like metal popcorn. Joey stared at her, fascinated. She noticed this and then twisted all of a sudden, her arms flopping down beside her in the chair and her head tilting up to face the dead light bulb in the ceiling. She bounced once against the upholstery and laid in an awkward position where her neck and leg muscles pulled tense out of her skin. Joey snatched the alligator from the floor. He held it in the vertical cup of his hand cried, "pac-choo!" Rebecca relaxed and let gravity take her to the seat where her weight annoyed the springs again. "I'm dead," she said to him and grinned in an irritating way.

"You've got an interview," repeated her mother. She knew her daughter was lying to her. Looking at her crumpled there it was clear as day. The girl was content to play make-believe bank robberies and shootouts and showdowns with the child when he needed to be learning more about the place of his birth, the plants and the people that made him who he was. She was content to this when she could at least be learning a little about how to do good works at the daycare. But she would not. There it was, the outside world, shimmering through the slats over the back door, and here were the children (the child), trapped inside as if what was beyond them was poisonous.

Rebecca's wan lips closed back over her ugly teeth. The spots on her face were the same color as her lips. Together they raged as if the teeth inside were about to burst forth and present themselves, streaked in blood and water like the soldier who pierced Jesus on the cross.

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The memory of Mr. Nambe, laid in his coffin with his gray chest exposed, returned to Margaret. Of course the town had had to honor his wish to be buried with his chest bare. Back then, the town felt respect for its dead, in particular Mr. Nambe, whose passing away was mourned even by the atheists who owned the drug store. Just the day after, two more had died, Jacobs and Fimberly, and then the month after that the whole Geraldine family drowned. The funerals became more empty each month because it was too hard to respect all the dead. But Margaret always paid respect. She had a place at Mr. Nambe's side during the funeral. Even back then her fingers were crooked; they were so crooked they were like claws curled over the lip of Nambe's coffin. Hung over his exhausted body she noticed something. A reflection grew on his cagey chest by his left nipple and then spread down along the ribs. The water broke into three little trails. One hung in the curl of a chest hair; the second ran out before it reached the sharp curve of his side; the last one, a fat milky drop, reached his underside. It half pulled itself away from the dead man's skin and trembled uncertainly. Mr. Nambe's thick steep eyebrows seemed to express displeasure. He was willing the drops off but they sunk into his body anyway. The shininess on his chest had become a scum. The last drop trembled and wiggled and began to pull back up against the skin when in a violent convulsion his chest expanded with breath and the drop was flung from him. Margaret started.

Five, four, three, two, one. Joey had jumped from the fireplace and somersaulted across the carpet. He raised his hands in the air for Rebecca, who smirked past him at her mother. There was a cup of water on the alcove shelf that Margaret grabbed and emptied the tonic powder into. Without watching, she moved the cup in a circle so the water inside splashed up over the edges and in trails down the outside into her palm. Then she turned it upside down

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over her mouth and drank it.

Before she recovered from the taste of the tonic, she heard an awful scream and looked down at her children. Their eyes were cadaverous and squinty; both of them were completely still except for their blinking eyes. Then, as if death were a natural state that you could thaw from, they began to move again and Margaret realized that the scream couldn't have come from them because it had come from the garden gate outside. A patient shhuker shhuker sounded from the walkway that led to the back of the house. The sound produced a shadow at its climax by the back door that quickly passed, taking the footsteps with it around front. As long as Margaret had known him, the sound of Ron's footsteps had stayed the same no matter what sort of shoes he was wearing. He was not a light man, so when he walked his medium bulk swayed back and forth, widening his footprint and if he was on gravel protracting the hiss of his step. The constancy of his saunter reminded her of the past, and here it was clomping towards them through the house, catching up with her.

Rebecca stood up and made as if to leave but when she lifted her foot she fell straight to the carpet because Joey had tied her shoes together. The boy was laughing at her and trying to get another carpet thread around her wrists when she shook him away with a scowl. "God damn it, asshole," she whispered, and reached out to where the plastic alligator was lying and threw it at him. Joey took cover behind a low table and made a sound effect that was like a bullet ricocheting in his mouth. When she saw the object had missed (it bounced off the plaster next to him and fell right where it had been), Rebecca hauled herself into a squat. Whispering some curse words, she began to untie her shoelaces, but not in time because just then Ron appeared in the hall doorway, letting in the draft again.

"What's this that's going on?" he asked while he shifted his weight from foot to foot like

a big Bacchus. He held a brown canvas hat in one hand that he unconsciously crumpled and released, crumpled and released. He seemed to be laughing at the room. Margaret shed her knitting and stood up as straight as she could. She insisted she had everything under control and that there was nothing to get excited about.

Behind the low table, Joey's neck and head appeared and then his hand which he raised to his forehead in salute. "The prisoner almost escaped, mister," spoke the boy solemnly, and he left his hiding place to deliver the alligator to his father. "She was carrying this here." Joey grinned at Rebecca as if he expected her to play along.

Ron ignored him except to pluck the alligator from his hand. The man turned his sagging sour cheeks to the sky, which made them look like goat bladders attached to the side of his face, and then looked back down again at Rebecca. He had small unnatural eyes that were symmetrical and blue; they looked like minerals under the slick highway of dirty white hair on his head. "Can't you be on your way to growing up?" he asked. His previous tone was revealed to be a ruse because now he was whispering fiercely. This was the moment Margaret had been waiting for. "Before you left, Joey was just a child, but now you can see he's old enough to know there's no place for violence among good people. Ain't that right?" He said this to Joey, and the boy's eyes widened. Ron held his gaze, the muscles in his face crawling, but Joey looked too scared to answer. Without being provoked, Ron looked away and as if glaring at Joey had sustained him, he sagged and shed the black nylon bag that was strapped across his shoulder to the floor. The weight of it clacked against the parquee like a breaking bone.

He found his way across the room to a reclining wooden chair and gradually filled it. "Here we are," he sighed. "The family. We're all together. Ain't that nice?" Rebecca finished untying herself and got up to leave but he waved her down again. "Did I give you the

impression that I ain't proud of you? I sure am proud of you. You've got a real education. Being independent and all means a lot to this self made man. I know you'll do us proud. You just get out there and make the world a place for honest folks. Peaceful folks. The world don't need any more of this." He held up the plastic alligator. He tried to give it to her but her hands wouldn't move from the arms of her chair where they clung so hard the blood was pushed out of them. He shrugged and set it on her knee. "I just wanted to say if I got the chance I wouldn't go back and do it any different." Him saying this made Margaret furious but she tried not to show it.

He looked proudly at Joey and Rebecca and then turned to Margaret, who sat pressed into the corner of the alcove and was quietly grinding her jaws together. He smiled and said, "which brings me to this. Did you know I had a surprise for you?" She hated the way he made everything into a stupid question. He flipped his hand into his left pants pocket and arched his back a little so he could pull something out of it. It was a slip of folded paper. She took it from him with a jabbing motion and read it quickly. He was grinning at her as if he expected her to play along with a clever joke, but she read it over and over again and each time her face became a deeper shade of purple and his smile got smaller. "What does it mean?" she said.

"Well now I thought you'd be joyed, baby. You're the one keeps saying Joey needs better than those dumb state teachers. This's private school. A school that teaches kids to make a difference in the modern world." He pointed at the slip where it said that.

"I," Margaret managed, "know what Joey needs."

Ron grinned broadly. "Then you know for sure what you're holding in your own hands."

"I," she repeated, "know what Joey needs and it ain't fancy educators."

Ron took the paper back. "Did you see where it says it starts next week? Don't you think

we should be getting him a suit? A four thousand dollar school will change this boy, mark me, but a suit'll make a man of him in an hour."

"Are you listening to me? I told you that it ain't..." She was gripping one of the pillows in the alcove so hard she felt her hands would tear through the fabric like bird's claws and she would lift up into the air among the cloud of feathers and fly down the hall and out of the house. Ron began to see that she was getting agitated and started to raise his voice. "How should you know so well what it ain't? You proved that you weren't a judge of people last week you hired those spicks. You think you know what's up but I told you those spicks were trouble, and lady you're so stubborn look what you made me hafta do." His finger stuck out sharply against the bright light from the back door. Her eyes followed it, which was strange because they also seemed to be sinking into her face. He continued: "you're thinking I'm not gonna take responsibilities for what I did but I'm gonna. I'm gonna fix it because I hold this household together. It's the truth, and I know to fix it. This 's how.

"First, you're getting rid of the spicks. They're greasy like goddamn peccaries and they're violent. A gentle woman like you needs a place where she can be safe with her family away from violence. She needs to be clean of it. I love you babe why don't you hear the reason in what I say?"

Margaret hated that he decided to end all that with a dumb question like that one. Her face bulged with outrage, but because she felt it would be giving him satisfaction to answer his question, she ostentatiously examined the mountain lion embroidered in the rug instead. She felt like if she was silent long enough she could draw him into the embarrassment she felt in front of her children.

"Second, Joey's got to get himself a better education than how to cook cornbread and

chew hay. He's got a mind in there, see, that I know is worth keeping. That boy's from you and me and if we let him rot here honey that's you and me rotting. I know I got to rot some day but it's a ways off. The rest of this town gave up but not me. I'm a self made man and you're my wife.

"Do you understand what is I'm saying? Will you hear me once when I'm telling you it matters? Won't you darling tell me you love me and that you know I do the best a man can for his wife and his family? You love that boy do you not love that boy? Look at him and tell me the truth whether you see that face on a responsible working man with a tie and a wedding ring belong to some woman sweet as you or whether you want to see it wasted as a farmer or worse a scabby old preacher?"

There was a wind blowing inside Margaret. It started near her liver and made curly-cues around her organs until it got to her throat. She felt she might want to whistle it out, but her lips were clammy and plastic and would not move. Instead she breathed out as hard as she could, but it was like the pressure inside her could not be diminished by anything but a tune. The sensation became so painful that she could no longer sit, so she stood, and when she could no longer stand she put one foot in front of another until she was in the hall. If Ron had still been there being blasphemous to Mr. Nambe's memory, she couldn't have said. The tunnel of the hallway was well marked by the thin skylights that were blue and streaked across by striations of white cloud; the little windows passed by her like the dotted line on a highway. The enamel on the bottom of her shoes went click, click on the parquee. She could tell a lot of things about the sound of a person's walk, and this one was compounded like it was being played by an instrument that made two separate noises when you hit it. Each pair of notes was very loud, dominating her mind and gripping her thin breast where the volume of the pain



continued to accumulate. At the same time the noise was balanced by the sound of colossal rejection, which was like a big drum. A baby's cry when it's left alone in a room grows louder for a few days before it shrinks away. Like this, the cheerless echo from her footsteps in the hall was gobbled up by the wicker baskets piled at her feet. She felt deprived among the bricker-brack that spilled out of them, even though the telephone cords and the plastic parts looked like the treasure of a dragon's hoard. Each unscrewed lid made a crescent mouth with the bottom part of its basket, like it could eat.

Margaret felt she had almost been consumed when before disappearing into the whoosh of wind inside her the tiny voice of her footsteps was joined by a few others. There were enough other footsteps to keep her going but she couldn't tell exactly how many. Each one vibrated with the same sense of discard that hers did, so the air filled with a lonesomeness that was powerful and the baskets shrank back. By the time she had passed by the three spackled doors, Ron's room, Rebecca's room, Joey's room, and at last into the kitchen where her footsteps became light and whole again on the cracked yellow linoleum, the parade of steps had grown into a ringing chorus. No procession had ever been as strong in its communion, no gospel. The whole thing was leading to something, she could feel it. It would happen only seconds away. As she came closer she could feel the cadence. It was a series of notes. She stopped stepping and listened, and the chorus of footsteps reduced.

Then from somewhere in the house the doorbell rang. It was an off-key imitation of Row Row Row Your Boat that was missing the Your Boat part and instead made a low mechanistic belch. Margaret thought it was gloomy but Rebecca loved it.

She knew to say "I'll get it!" into the posterior of the house so that no one would come and bother her. She had everything under control, no matter what Ron said. He didn't always

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say bad things but he had a nasty habit of always asking stupid questions. The kitchen was difficult to navigate because it was so small. There was almost nothing in it but a baking pan for cornbread and some big bowls, both of which she had to jostle as she scooted between the foot-wide countertop and an oil stove. Brushing against the oil stove got her dress, which was already dirty, even dirtier. There was a trick to opening the front door from the inside, so it took her several tries before she got it right. All the time she heard the footsteps outside that had guided her here. The door swung open and there was a man with a puppy-dog face. Then she looked closer and saw that it was not a man with a puppy-dog face but one of the brown boys that were supposed to come by on Tuesdays and do the gardening. Behind him were several others, and it was Tuesday. Every one of them was smiling at her.

"Rock clearing today, miss." the one in front of her said. Margaret stood in the doorway and let her eyes adjust to the sunlight. The leader was clean shaven except for the top of his head which was almost clean shaven. He had a nasty brown spot between the corner of his mouth and his nose changed shape each time his expression changed. She shook her head and said, "I'm sorry. You all can't work here. You're fired." She smiled apologetically; they all smiled back.

"Fire?" asked the boy. He appeared confused, but fished in a shirt pocket that looked sewn on and produced a plastic lighter that was clear and purple on the bottom.

Margaret bit her lip and shielded her eyes against the dust that was coming in on the wind. "No," she said. "No work."

The boy laughed and looked out over the garden. The back of his head had a sweaty bulge as if it was too small for the amount of skin that was put there. "Many works."

She brightened. "I'm glad to hear it. Usually the winter is pretty slow around here."

"Please," the boy said, and smiled.

"Oh no I couldn't. I'm sorry but I can't. I just know I'll have to get out there and do some of it myself now but that's the way things are." She kept shaking her head while she talked and it seemed like this gesture was annoying him. His smile became a hard line.

"That's the way things are," he repeated. One of his friends shifted his weight from one foot to the other.

"I'm afraid so dear." Her voice was very small against the wind that had begun to howl over the ridge.

The boy put his hand out, palm up. "Week," he said plainly. Margaret smiled sadly but none of them returned the gesture. "But you didn't do any work."

"Week," he said again. "That's the way things are."

They looked at each other over the open hand. His eyes were shiny like they were sweating. She didn't understand how they stayed so shiny because the wind on the ridge was picking up dust and blowing it all over the place and into the sorghum field. The sky was beginning to darken so she could look up to where the road turned away from the house and see the dust plumes evaporating like earthen flames against the sky. She took his hand and solemnly shook it, then closed and bolted the door.

Margaret returned to the living room and saw that Joey and Rebecca had gone. Ron was still sitting in the wooden chair. He didn't look up because he seemed very interested in the fireplace, which had expired. He looked drunk but he hadn't had time to get drunk and he was holding a glass of water. Who had gotten the glass of water for him? That he had a glass of water and there was no one around to have given it to him gnawed at her, and after satisfying herself that no one was coming back to take it she lifted it from him tenderly and

looked at it. The glass was absurdly thick and all of its edges had been rounded. There was more glass on it than there was space for water to be poured there. He smiled up at her and then looked back at the fireplace and began to cry. She put some more of the tonic powder in the water that was left in the glass and handed it back to him. His face was smooth and burnished; there were no creases in his forehead at all except for creases of age.

"What did we do wrong?" he whispered. Margaret let her hands rest on his shoulders while they bobbed up and down like bubbles in a wand. She massaged him lightly, though she felt her hands were too small for him to feel any benefit from them. There was nothing to say. There wasn't even anything to do but look at the fireplace which she thought was very beautiful. It started out badly like a mouth but where it rose up it started to curve and was pockmarked with little ornaments like seeds. The vegetable appearance of the chimney made her feel like she was very firm. She was growing from somewhere muddy and putrified up into the sky where she could look down and pity her dirty roots. His head was down there, near her feet, twisted in an uncomfortable way to catch her eyes. He stared at her, and waited for an answer. She leaned close to the man, whose tears were beginning to dry on his neck, and whispered, "I forgive you." She felt so purged and secure after saying it that she felt she could leave Ron with the glass of water.

She returned to the alcove and finished knitting. She wondered if she was happy, even though Joey was going to private school. She decided that she *was* happy and finished the scarf with a final motherly stroke and held the whole thing up to look at it. It was striped yellow and purple along its width and all of a sudden it had little bits of glass stuck in it. It wasn't supposed to have little bits of glass stuck in it so she tried to pick them out but instead of picking at the scarf she found she was picking at the carpet. She didn't know why she was

on the carpet but figured it had something to do with the peculiar rainbows that grew over her vision and made a tinkling noise. She turned to point them out to Ron but he was also on the carpet, and bleeding and shouting. An awful scream rose over everything urgently like a tea pot whistling. She thought it was coming from Ron and she got up to ask him what was the matter but then she realized it couldn't have been coming from Ron because it was coming from the garden gate outside. She could see it slam shut through a jagged hole in the glass of the back door that was as big as a chicken. Beyond the hole she saw the Mexican boys loping away and thought they might know what happened, but she decided to get Ron to stop shouting first. There were two cuts in the fat on the left side of his face that had stopped bleeding and a lot of glass scattered over his back. When he stood up this fell away and revealed more cuts all over his clothes. He kept cursing over and over and stormed out of the room without answering her questions. Soon he reappeared with a rifle which he used to knock the rest of the glass out of the door and plunged out into the garden. She waited there for several minutes, slowly becoming aware of a dull pain in her jaw and up the side of her face. She felt she might want a mirror but it seemed to her like if she went to find one in another part of the house they would all be broken like the back door. She waited a long time and then heard the rifle in the distance. The sound was small and hopeless like a bug getting smashed and was almost consumed by the howling wind. Finally Ron came back. He stepped through the door, streaked in long lines of blood and sweat. He said nothing and returned through the hallway to his room.

She felt urgently she should check on Rebecca and walked up the hallway to her room. Five feet away, Joey's door hung open. She had forgotten about Joey so she tip toed over and looked inside. Joey's room was squarish and had walls with thin horizontal grooves in them.

On the floor was a low table with a lamp and there was an inflatable mattress that Joey sometimes slept on. Sometimes he slept on the pile of clothes he had pushed up next to the tall narrow window. The pile of clothes was gone, each one folded and arranged at the foot of the mattress. The low table had been pushed against the wall and on top of it had been placed the plastic alligator which had now regained its lower jaw. The closet had been organized. The sheets on the mattress had been smoothed and ironed and retucked; they creased in even lines like sunrays out from a depression in the middle where Joey was fast asleep. The boy shifted uneasily and mashed a finger against his closed eye, then returned his face to the mattress gratefully, but the sunrays did not move.

Margaret backed slowly away from the opening, less afraid of waking the boy than disturbing the strange and sudden order of his room. Back in the living room, she surveyed the damage. Her expression was sad, but her mind was on other things. It drew her out of the shattered back door and onto the sidewalk in the garden where the last rays of sunlight were painting with invisible ink. The wind was tugging her clothes between her legs and up almost over her head, and she found it most comfortable to climb the road and stand exposed on the ridge with a sight out onto the fields and in the distance the town. The follicles of purple sorghum closest to her were almost black in the challenging light, but before her where the fields touched the skyline the crest of them was a mighty red. Even at that distance, where they were a carpet to the naked eye, she felt she could make out each stalk, coursing with vegetable blood. And between them there was one place where the sky stabbed back, a blue protrusion where her daughter walked in Margaret's stained dress down the road to her interview.