

21W.740
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Her hands are brown, smallish, the bones are too clearly defined, slender and delicately jointed, the fragile skeleton of a bird. They push out against taut skin, brittle skin which rips at the slightest touch, leaving the hands covered with tiny, half-healed sores. When she moves I am always afraid that her bones will tear through, skin crumbling away like old paper, leaving the tangle of veins pulsing and exposed. These hands move quickly, as does she, striding through our house, only stopping to direct us about our chores – “Anne, please collect your clothes from the dryer and put them away! ... William, could you please take out the trash and put it in the bin!...” – her body thin and shapeless as a boy’s, grey sweatpants sagging, stretched out by too many years of wear. When I think of her I cannot remember her smile. In the fuzzy blackness of my head I call forth her profile, hair pulled back, stealthy threads of grey crawling up her temples. Thin lips pressed together, the image turns toward me and my stomach sinks in a way all too familiar, frightening: I am eleven years old again and she is angry at me, I don’t know why, I never know why.

Each night I await the swish of her car coming into the driveway, crackling over the gravel. The slam of the car door knifes me in the gut: I stand motionless behind the edge of the wall, tightening my stomach, hardly breathing, hearing the click click click of her shoes, sensible brown flat heeled shoes with round toes, advancing relentlessly. She opens the door and the air changes: a breath of cold, perhaps the wind? I hesitate behind the wall, not sure whether to show myself or to hide; sullen, afraid. I know that a movement will give me away, but if I wait too long – and I always do – she will walk around the corner and find me. I falter, and the ability to choose is lost.

I watch her hands in the kitchen, they are alive, independent of her. I am as wary of them as if they had been small unpredictable animals, darting here and there, biting if I come too close. Capable hands, they lift, wash, wipe; I keep my eyes steady on those hands.

“This is how you do it,” she says, “you must lift the toaster and wipe underneath, because that’s where all the crumbs fall. If you don’t, the cockroaches will come.”

I nod, a promise not to forget again. I don’t want to break the night-silence. I don’t want to hear my voice next to hers.

“It’s late, and you should be in bed. Did the children go to sleep alright?”

I whisper an answer and creep away. I don’t know what she does. Walks through the dark house, probably, to the bathroom and the bath I ran for her. The bathroom is unnaturally bright and the artificial light is not kind: it brings out the grim lines of her face that the shadows hide. She takes off her clothes. It used to embarrass me, her nakedness, but now I can imagine it, her body a straight line from armpit to knee, flat chested, almost clumsy in its formlessness. The skin on her legs is wrinkled and beginning to sag. She steps into the steam, sits down, sighs. Closes her eyes. Tries to rest.