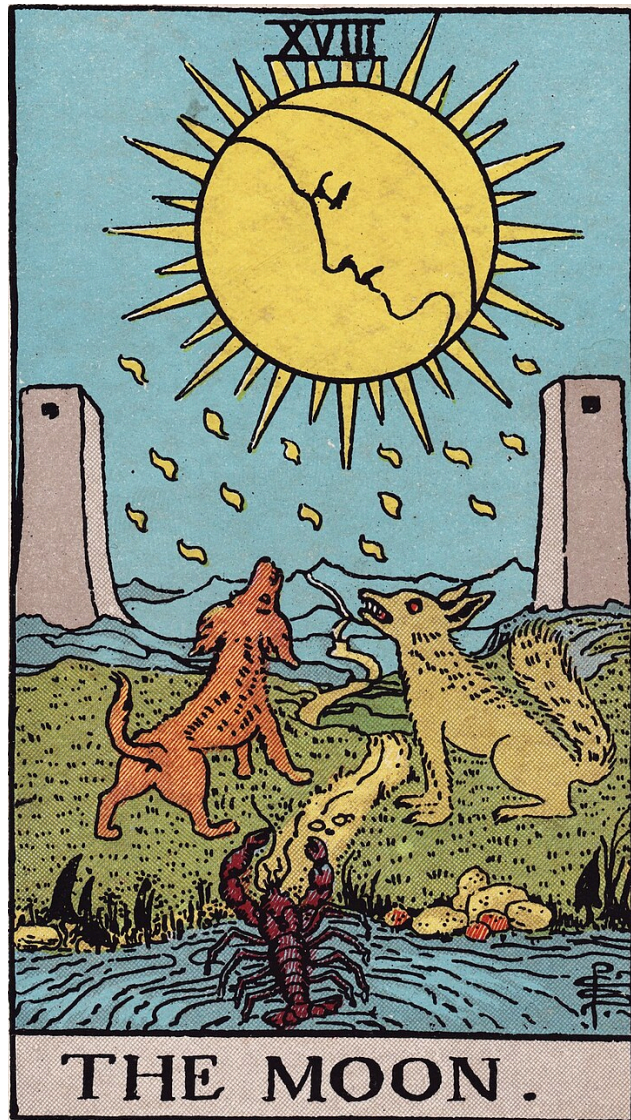


# Vanished Gods



a pair of sacrifices  
by Charles Wolfgang Keane Tuomi



## Bubbles

Six words, scribbled in blue ink, on yellow paper.

Six words, on a note taped to the screen door of their tiny, sagging lakefront house, fluttering like a flag in their pickup truck's headlights as they pulled up the driveway. Betty had barely been able to see through her tears that night, but she had caught a glimpse of that note, and right then she had known.

She had remembered.

Six words rasped through a rictus full of sharp teeth.  
Six words blown into her face like death smoke belching from a factory in Hell.  
Six words, nineteen letters, one boy's life.  
"I said I wanted him gone."

#

The problem was, there was the way events actually happened, and there was the way Betty remembered them happening, and these two things might have been the same, but they might have been different, too, and Betty, it seemed, had no way of knowing.

There was also the way her dreaming mind remembered them happening, which was almost definitely not the way they happened, but which seemed real enough while she was caught up in the dreaming. She had re-lived this oneiric version so often that it had begun to gain as much credibility as the other two versions.

Each time she closed her eyes and drifted off, the dream came, an always-running movie that was just being unpaused, to twist Betty up like clay in the hands of some demented god, then to wake her up soaked in her own sweat and screaming, with her eyes and her crotch both burning, and with Jimmy -- dear little Jimmy, with his crisscrossed toes and ever so slightly bucked teeth, his perpetual impish squint and stick-thin white legs -- nowhere in sight. Gone.

#

A little ham-colored arm came first, handless and barely recognizable, ending in ragged, bloody stumps on either end. It slipped from Betty Traylor's birth canal with the ease of a bowel movement, flopping momentarily on the silver metal of the delivery room table before going still. Then a foot, its preposterously tiny toes still wriggling as if tickled, squeezed out with a gentle pop. A leg and a chunk of buttock wrapped tight in the elephant-gray umbilical cord. An incomplete heart that looked almost chewed. Three tiny fingers. And with a wrenching push from Betty, accompanied by tearing and burning and a surge of unthinkable pain, the utterly bald, wailing head tumbled from her like a bowled ball, rolling right off the table and into some dark corner of the hospital room.

The head did not stop crying.

Betty Traylor's legs were mounted to stirrups. Her legs were spread wide. She was screaming her birth pangs toward the dirty tiled ceiling and squeezing her eyes closed tightly enough to make them trickle dark blood down the sides of her face, but she still saw all of this, in the way you see things in dreams.

None of the details eluded her.

Try as she might to squeeze herself closed to it she still saw it all.

#

Heart pounding, Betty Traylor looked down at herself, at two hands folded over the soft mound of her belly, at the dog-eared yellow piece of paper pinched by its corners between the bone-white tips of her forefingers and thumbs.

She sat up. The bed was drenched in sweat. Her crotch ached from where the pieces of the dream baby had emerged. Her throat burned from screaming. Her eyes watered and would not stop blinking.

It was another morning. A foggy morning of dim gray light and here I am, Betty thought, alone.

She shook her head, trying to shake loose the dream, knowing in advance how futile the gesture was. She had dreamed it for years now, ever since the day a sepulchral doctor with a long face and oddly fang-like canines had told her somberly that she would never be able to have children, that her physical equipment simply would not support the endeavor. For a woman who had dreamed of little else but having children of her own some day, it had been the worst news possible. She had not taken it well, to say the least, and the rest had followed. The dream had stopped for a while, after she took Jimmy home from the hospital.

Now it was back to a nightly occurrence.

There was nothing to be learned from the dream. That was the worst of it. It was a broken record, simple pain replayed again and again with no point. It was a lament to her own sterility and dreaming it accomplished nothing.

Useless. Much like the letter she clutched now, clutched always it seemed, in her hands. Betty stood and shuffled barefoot over plush orange carpet, down the short, shadowy hallway that led into her kitchen. A small room, filled with dark paneled wood and mustard yellow tiles, it was the type of space that could never seem clean no matter how diligently one cleaned it. She had long ago given up trying.

The fog-mud scent of nearby Lake Throw drifted through a small, half-open window over a stainless steel sink. A half-filled coffee pot waited on a coffee maker next to an old stove. Under the coffee maker was a small piece of paper. A note.

Love you, it read.

Another meaningless note, she thought. It told her nothing she did not already know. But if one day it were not there...

Shaking her head again, Betty poured herself a cup. The coffee was cool; she knew without checking a clock that she had slept even later than usual this morning.

A single, antique-looking chair was pulled up to a small kitchen table near the doorway. The table had an olive formica surface and thick, silver metal legs. The chair groaned beneath her weight. It was old, rickety, due to collapse any day now. She insisted on keeping it only because it had sentimental value; it was the first piece of furniture they had gotten for the house when she and John and Jimmy started their new lives. Betty had been driving through town and seen it on someone's curb, set to be thrown away, and she had not been able to resist taking it home. It was a turn of the century piece, dark pine, and while it had never been terrifically sturdy it had character.

Jimmy had sat in the chair most mornings, once he got big enough not to need the high chair, spooning Cheerios or Chex into his mouth and singing repetitive little kids' songs and swinging his pale thin legs back and forth above the kitchen tile. Some mornings when she sat down lately, she almost felt the warmth of his bottom on the seat, as if he had been there only moments earlier. As if she could call his name and he would come barreling down the hallway from his bedroom, everything at full-speed...

Betty rubbed her eyes with her knuckles. She shifted her weight and the chair cracked loudly. She pictured it giving way and crashing under her, and she herself sitting stupidly atop the pile of smashed wood like a witch about to be burned, her faded floral nightgown pulled up to reveal her thick pink legs goosepimpling in the cool morning air. The picture was almost enough to make her laugh, but not quite; she had heard herself laugh here before, alone in the cold echoless light of morning, and it was not a sound she preferred to hear very often. Betty lay the small note carefully on the table in front of her now, pinning it to the formica with splayed fingers. Squinting, she read it, slowly, her lips mouthing each word as her eyes passed over it.

Fool, part of her whispered, and it was hard to disagree. But it would be harder still, she knew, to ignore the letter. This reading and re-reading and re-reading the damned thing each

day was a ritual she had fallen into and could no longer avoid, as involuntary and as futile as her dream. It was as if she had all this time been missing some secret code encrypted in the single sentence written in uppercase block letters lengthwise across the page.

She knew of course that there was nothing to be found. The letter was incapable of producing any more insight than it had four and half months ago, when it arrived. As an instrument of pain, like her dream, the letter remained effective, but as a source of information it had long been as barren as her own womb.

Still, she read it.

Then she read it again.

Then Betty Traylor lowered the letter and sighed.

The answers lay elsewhere, not in this crude document or in old dreams but in her own memory. She knew that. She was sure of it, thoroughly positive.

Memory was ripe with truth.

A careful consideration of the relevant facts, a turning over of the evidence, a rotating of the pivotal notions in a certain way, was what she needed to make sense of what had happened. The answers were simple, only hidden.

Not ineffable, simply unknown.

A miracle, she had recently read, is the result of causes with which we are unacquainted. Once those causes are discovered, they are no longer miracles, but natural law.

The final explanation would not involve magic or voodoo or any other of the foolish, illogical notions the text of the letter seemed to imply. It would make sense, the truth of it would heal, the letter and the past would abandon their hold over her, and life, such as it could be, would begin again.

I need only feel as much guilt and shame and pain as I allow myself to feel, she told herself, her teeth pinching her bottom lip, sucking it inward. Stick to the facts, damn it, the facts. Remember something important. The facts!

Betty Traylor recited these things to herself now, as she had done over and over again in the quiet of her small kitchen each day after her husband left for work. She listened to herself, too; she deep-down believed herself.

That was why, as the days had turned into weeks and the weeks into months, she had puzzled endlessly over the finer points of what had happened at the Burnham County Fall Festival on September 23rd of the previous year. With the mindless compulsion of an animal lapping at an open wound, Betty Traylor had obsessed the details. She had pored over each

character in the six-word message that had been waiting for them when they returned home that night. She had navigated the slim branches of recollection and possibility, and the fact that she reached an abject failure of comprehension over and over again did nothing to keep her from almost immediately beginning the process anew.

Eventually the pain of her loss and constant failure had become a fact unto itself, as tangible as the paper in her hands or the gelid coffee now pooling in her stomach, something to be felt and acknowledged and flexed each morning upon opening her eyes, in the same way she automatically squeezed her hands into testing fists. It was a key aspect of Betty by now, a descriptive attribute like her height, weight, gender, and birth date.

Her pain.

Betty put the letter down on the table and thumbed vigorously at her eyes again, sighing. She sipped again at her mug of cold coffee, picked the letter back up.

The letters, written in blue ink, began to blur. She squinted, but the fuzziness only worsened. The sensation in her legs begin to recede, as if they were falling asleep; she felt herself begin to drift, to float. It was all familiar, the same routine. In moments, she knew, she would find herself wandering among the dizzying, expansive wilderness of facts and speculations and memories once more, a novice hiker caught exploring without a map or compass, blindly seeking a way out, staving off the lunacy of panic and despair with the myth that salvation, for sure, was always just around the next bend.

#

Betty Traylor watched soap bubbles drift past her mind's eye. They beckoned to her and she followed. They were taking her away, back, all the way back, they always did, and she always let them.

#

Stick to the facts, damn it, she had warned herself.

The weather. The time. The witnesses. The Machine and how it happened and where Jimmy might have gone and most importantly, where he might be now. That was the only important thing, really – learning where Jimmy might be, finding out where the gone things go, and how to get there. Everything else was mere trivia.

The day's memory had become nearly as reliable as her birthing dream, always beginning in the same place: darkness lightening slowly like a cinematic fade-in to reveal Jimmy's pale five year-old face across the picnic table from her, his thin-lipped mouth nibbling half-heartedly on a corn dog. Then John's big face appeared next to his, florid and pocked with glistening sweat beads, with dollops of canary yellow mustard at the corners of his lips. A half-drunk plastic cup of raspberry lime rickey soda fizzed in the center of the table between them. Sitting across from her husband and son, Betty felt the hardness of the picnic table wood beneath her buttocks. She felt, too, the warmth of the sun on her face, and soaked it in appreciatively, fully aware this late September dip into Indian Summer would be one of the last truly vernal days left for New Englanders to enjoy for a long while. Fulgent sunlight draped itself over the fairgrounds like a paper-thin curtain of polished brass.

A good day, she had thought; what we have here is a legitimately good day.

Carnival sounds seethed in the air: the too-loud blaring of amusement park ride music on bad sound systems and the screeching of young girls, the popping of balloons and the tireless badgering of rubes ("Step right up") by the vendors. The very occasional clang of a strong man bell. Everyone everywhere in the world, it seemed, laughing.

The fair was crowded; people came from all over the county for this celebration of autumn, and besides the residents a few out of staters, early leaf peepers, attended as well. There was one main thoroughfare, a long narrow street of carnival attractions. The ones closest to the gate involved food. Then came booths that sold things, then the games and finally the animals and the rides. The entire fairgrounds was probably two hundred yards long.

It was two fifteen in the afternoon. Betty and John and Jimmy had only arrived at the fair a few minutes earlier, having just made the short drive from the lake house to the park. So it was two fifteen, or very close to it. That was a fact. It was two fifteen and they were just finishing their lunch when the first of the soap bubbles started to appear in the fair's main causeway.

"Huh," said John, pausing in mid-chew of his sausage and looking up. Betty turned her head to follow his gaze.

A few dozen strong and as big as baseballs, the initial wave of bubbles bobbed easily up and down in the breeze, following the flow of the crowd, but traveling just above it like spirits meandering the walkways of the living.

"Cool," said Jimmy. Distracted, he let the tip of his corn dog drop to the surface of the picnic table.



“Jimmy...,” said Betty.

“That’s okay,” Jimmy said, not looking away from the bubbles, taking his hand from the corn dog and wiping it off on a napkin, leaving the uneaten chunk lying forlornly on the brick red wood of the picnic table. “I was done anyway.”

He half-stood, looking for all intents and purposes like some pied piper somewhere was playing a tune that he, being a kid, could hear. And he was not the only one. Enchanted children all around them were oohing and aahing, glancing eastward, westward, skyward for the source of the bubbles.

Like rock stars for little kids, Betty thought. God, they all loved bubbles.

The soap globes were multiplying steadily now, some of them drifting among the people and not just above them. None of them seemed to be popping. Betty wondered if whoever was blowing them was using that new soap they’d come out with, which extended the lifetime of the bubbles considerably but left hard to remove stains on your rugs and furniture; she had learned that the hard way when they had given Jimmy some of it for Christmas last year. Outside, she supposed, they were safer to use.

Someone Betty did not see yelled: “Hey look! It’s a Bubble Machine!”, and someone else to her left cried: “Over here, out in the field!”

In seconds a stampede was on. A throng of squealing halflings tore free from their parents’ grasps and rushed headlong out toward the scorched-looking field that lined the eastern side of the fairgrounds. Betty followed the exodus with her gaze and eventually fixed on the childrens’ destination, the source of the bubbles: a rickety-looking contraption about man-high, standing in the middle of that field like a scarecrow in a field of just-harvested corn. A crooked wooden sign with red spray-painted letters she could just barely read declared it to be the Super Presto Bubble Machine. And that it was, by all appearances. The machine was churning out soap bubbles at an impressive clip. An ankle-high rug of foaming suds had already formed in the field around it. The air teemed with an ever-thickening, glistening cloud of glistening globes.

Hardly any of them were popping.

Betty was just close enough to see what the machine was made of. She could not help but admire the Yankee ingenuity evident in its design.

It was constructed entirely of everyday things. A long green broomstick with a small piece of black wood affixed to it somehow, probably glued, jutting out at a right angle at one end. Some rubber bands and half a roll’s worth of silver duct tape. A small oscillating fan with

black plastic blades. A white bucket of soapy water. A large multi-colored pinwheel. And a big plastic bubble wand, bright pink.

That was all.

Someone had shoved the broomstick into a patch of dry earth, so that the end with the jutting piece of wood was the end facing up. The handle of the water bucket had been slid over the piece of wood so that the bucket hung from it. The base of the fan was duct-taped thickly to the top of the broomstick pole and the stem of the pinwheel was taped to the inside of the water bucket while also being attached, somehow, to the bubble wand with the rubber bands. The mechanics were simple. The wind blew the pinwheel and the pinwheel moved the wand, causing it to dip into the water, then pulling it out, more or less rhythmically. Whenever the wand emerged, the fan blew the soap through its hole and the bubbles spewed out – dozens of small, transparent, rainbow-tinged globular miracles flooding out each minute, over the hay-colored field, floating outwards, downwards, eastwards, westwards, everywards. No one seemed to have taken any notice of the Super Presto Bubble Machine until now, presumably because it had not yet been loaded up with soap and started. It must have stood ignored for a while outside the ring of primary attractions, bereft, while the good folk of Burnham County tasted of the other fair's pleasures.

Or perhaps it had not yet been there at all.

Later, no one would claim to know where the machine had come from, or who put it in that field, or how it got started. Someone had to shove that stick into the earth and fill the bucket with water and soap and flick the fan's switch to 'on', but no one saw them do it. The other vendors and entertainers at the festival all assumed someone else associated with the event had put the Bubble Machine there, just another pleasant diversion on a day full of them. Not one of them acknowledged responsibility for its presence in any way.

It was if, said one sunburned farmer quoted in the newspapers the next day, the machine had appeared in the field of its own accord. Which was strictly supposition, but it was all one had in the absence of hard evidence.

The fan's oscillation and a shifting wind kept the small globes it produced flowing freely in a one hundred eighty degree arc, so every child seemed to be getting his or her fair share. The face-painting booth near the fair's entrance had been busy that day, so a throng of diminutive clowns and cats and masked superheroes romped amongst the dense flow of bubbles, giggling and jumping and grabbing, chasing each other and chasing the bubbles and falling and getting up and running some more.

Smiling parents started taking pictures.

“Clever,” John Traylor said through another mouthful of sausage, sub roll, and mustard.

“Very,” Betty agreed.

“Can I go see?,” asked Jimmy. He was standing next to them now. He put a hand over his eyes and squinted into the afternoon sunlight as he looked up, first at Betty, then John, then back at Betty. His five-year old face was, as yet, unpainted. Betty’s plan was for it to stay that way.

“Can I can I can I?”

John looked over at Betty, shrugged.

It’s your call.

He plopped the last of the sausage into his mouth, licked a gob of mustard off his pink thumb, and glanced at a kite flying high above them.

Betty knelt down, getting to eye level with the child.

“You can go,” she said quietly. “Just remember to be careful. Don’t go too far. Stay where we can see you. And watch out for the bigger - “

She didn’t manage to finish the sentence until Jimmy was five galloping steps away.

“ - kids,” she whispered morosely.

“He’ll be fine,” John offered, behind her now, his meaty hand scratching her lower back lightly. “Just fine. See.”

And Jimmy did look fine. Already in the thick of things, so quick, he laughed along with the other kids and, Betty was proud to notice, pulled himself up short before bowling over a cluster of unsteady toddlers. You really wouldn’t be able to tell he was home-schooled and got so little interaction with other children, Betty thought.

Just this short distance hid so much.

Distance, she thought, was vital. Distance was a significant fact. Distance kept their family together.

Betty had just begun to untense, and was reaching out for her husband’s soothing hand, when the light breeze which had been a constant all day died down. The change was abrupt; Betty noticed it then and remembered it later, how rapid the stillness came on, how jarring it felt. The fan nearly stopped oscillating, the wand stopped dipping, and the machine began, slowly, to build a single, enormous bubble. Many of the children stopped frolicking, cooing in rapture as the monstrous shimmering globe grew. By the time the wind picked up again,

perhaps a half-minute later, just as abruptly as it had stopped, like a movie being unpaused, and the bubble detached with an audible pop and began floating lazily over the kids' heads, it was a good deal bigger than the mammoth beach ball Jimmy often played with by himself in their sheltered backyard.

Some little girl yelled: "Holy moley! The biggest bubble I never seen!" A few grown-ups laughed.

A number of kids, Jimmy among them, were hot on the big bubble's trail. It moved slowly, then quickly, tracing a swirling, winding roller coaster's path across the field, leading its eager, diminutive pursuers on a merry, roundabout chase. Jimmy's eyes were gleaming, his broad upturned face beaming as he sprinted.

"He's loving it," John laughed beside her. "I mean, look at him."

And she did. She hooked her slender arm around her husband's muscled one and looked at Jimmy laughing and grasping for that big bubble and she smiled with something, she supposed, perilously close to contentment.

It was a glorious autumn day and her child was at play in a field full of glistening bubbles and her happiness was so pure it was nearly factual.

#

Her child. Their child.

Yes. Jimmy was their child.

They had raised him since he was an infant, carefully, and Betty thought, well.

They had.

He was well-loved, and he knew this, and he loved them back, with an openness and a warm, clingy ferocity.

It sometimes terrified her, how much he depended upon them, who had themselves proven so undependable in the past. But people change, she often reminded herself. Parenthood had been terrifying and lovely and consuming, and it had altered her fundamentally, worming its way into her DNA and reshaping her as it saw fit, almost always for the better.

They had both become good parents, very good ones in fact. Betty knew that. She was certain of it. Theirs was a good home and Jimmy was a good kid and a little bit of distance was all they really needed for it all to stay good.

She watched him now, running and jumping in the field. She watched him leap, leaving the earth, rising above the other children, puncturing that biggest of bubbles with the tip of his index finger before returning to the ground, drawing accolades from the surrounding crowd, and actually taking a bow, and suddenly she could not breathe.

John stopped her from stepping out onto the field with a gentle snatch of her left hand in his.

“Easy,” he said softly, smiling, looking out at the field and flashing a hearty thumbs up. “He’s having fun for once. Let him be.”

“Having fun? John, he just had half the people on these fairgrounds looking at him. What if...”

“It won’t.”

“But...”

“It won’t,” John said again, wrapping his thick arms around her torso and giving her a loving squeeze.

“Live a little,” he whispered in her ear.

Live a little, Betty thought. Yeah, right.

But then she thought: Maybe I should. Maybe we should all learn to live a little.

Maybe. She just didn’t know.

She looked again at her child, Jimmy. He was resting for the moment, half-doubled over, with his hands on the knees of his grass-stained jeans, catching his breath. He gave her a sidelong wink, his little tongue sticking from the side of his grinning mouth, his one visible blue eye glittering in the brassy air.

Then someone yelled, just over her shoulder.

“Hey! Over here!”

It could have been the same anonymous voice that had directed the children to the Bubble Machine in the first place. It could have been that voice, and she might have recognized it. These were possibilities, glorified hypotheses, but would be worth considering later. Now, though, Betty turned instinctively toward the sound, which had come from somewhere amidst the pack of fair-goers milling about behind her. She saw nothing of interest there, heard nothing more, then turned blinking back to the field.

Like a bubble popped by some invisible finger, her child was gone.

Her child? Their child?

No. Jimmy was not their child.

Not quite. Call the evidence disputed.

Jimmy had in fact been born to a shrewish, nasty woman, a hawk-faced, snarling demoness covered in sinister, vivid tattoos who professed all throughout her labor and delivery to an active distaste for all children, the one in her uterus in particular, who screamed the entire time about the parasite inside her that had been trying to kill her for months, who clutched the front of Betty's scrubs and roared into her face how she just wanted it gone, how she didn't care what happened to it as long as it was gone.

All this she said, and more, to Betty Traylor, her delivery room nurse. Betty Traylor who wanted nothing more in the world than to have children but had been informed she could not. Betty did her best to be patient and supportive, making excuses for the mother-to-be in her own mind: the pain of labor, hormones, mental illness. It helped, a little, but still she could not help being horrified at what the woman was saying. Betty managed to maintain her professionalism, however; there was a baby to deliver, and it was not for her to judge. Or so she told herself.

After a protracted struggle, exacerbated, Betty thought, by the woman's poor attitude, the boy finally emerged squirming and wailing (and whole) from between her legs. The smiling doctor quickly brushed him off and thrust his pink body toward his mother, so that she could hold her new child against her chest, snuggle it, welcome it to her world. The blood- and mucous-covered newborn thrashed and cried, arms and legs cycling, while its mother eyed it like a piece of bad fish. Finally she folded her arms across her gaunt chest, and said icily: "Take it away."

Betty nearly struck the woman across the face. She envisioned herself dragging her nails across the woman's angular features, or closing her hands into fists and beating some appreciation of the gift she'd just been given into her. How dare she reject this boy! How dare she!

Then the doctor deftly handed the child gently over to Betty, saying softly: "Take care of him, please."

And, having no choice, Betty did. She immersed herself in caring for him, feeling some of her rage dispersing as she did so. He scored a perfect ten on the Apgar test, he looked pink and healthy and from the volume of his cries there was no question about the state of his lungs.

His eyes were the deep colorless dark she'd only seen in an infant's eyes - the sightless, uncomprehending gaze of a being freshly emerged from the primordial waters from which humanity had originated. He was a wonder, a miracle, perfect in every way.

Yet his own mother did not want him.

It was unthinkable.

Betty set him up in the nursery beneath a warming lamp, covered him in hospital blankets, and stood crying over him for a short time, thinking of his mother's loveless rejection, wondering what kind of future the boy could possibly have while saddled with such a parent. Even if she gave the woman the benefit of the doubt and considered potential causes for her behavior (the foremost among them being drug abuse, the more she thought about it), there were really no excuses for what she had seen in that delivery room. Whatever problems the mother had, they were certainly not the fault of this beautiful child.

Betty told John all about the woman that evening as they sat up in bed. He listened quietly as she ranted. At the end of it he put down the book he was holding but not reading, turned in her direction, and asked:

"And?"

She feigned confusion with the inquiry, pretending there was no and, that it was merely a story about her work she was relating, but the look on John's face told her he wasn't buying it.

"John...", she started to say.

"You can't, Betty. We can't."

"But John..."

"We can't," he repeated, gently, taking her in his arms and holding her warmly. He was big and soft and comforting and as usual, he was right.

"I know," Betty said miserably. "I know we can't."

#

But she had not known it, not deep-down known it, not really.

The fact that they couldn't was not a fact. The fact was that she could, and she knew it. She turned that knowledge over in her mind's hands the next morning on her way to work like a piece of forbidden fruit, well aware that she could take a bite at any time; aware that she shouldn't, but she could.

The day was wrenching and in retrospect could not have ended any other way.

The woman (Betty refused to refer to her as a mother) refused to spend any time whatsoever with her son. When they finally brought the boy into her room against her will, she thrashed about on the bed like a vampire confronted with a cross until they took him back to the nursery. She spent her time sitting alone in bed staring at the wall across from her feet, arms folded across her chest, occasionally murmuring in a language none of them could understand. Nurses, doctors, psychiatrists came and went to no avail; she was insistent, intractable. No family or friends visited her, and so there was no one else to appeal to. The possibility of bringing in social services if she did not come around by the next morning was discussed. Betty had to periodically check the woman's vital signs. At one point early in the afternoon, she had just wrapped the blood pressure sleeve around the woman's arm, concealing a startling black and red tattoo of some hideous, multi-eyed, genitalia-inspired beast that seemed to growl at her as she covered it, when she asked the woman how she felt.

"Much better," the woman said without emotion, looking out the window at a view of a smoke stack spewing a charcoal-colored cloud into the sky. "Now that he's gone." Betty felt her hand begin squeezing the woman's bicep above where she had placed the sleeve. Her fingers moved of their own accord, without her approval, but she found she agreed with their sentiment so she let them continue.

"Hey...", the woman said.

"He's not gone," said Betty coldly, staring at her white-knuckled hand and the woman's pinched flesh around it. She squeezed a little more tightly, drawing a pained gasp from her patient. "He's in the nursery and he needs a mother. I don't know what your problem is, lady, but I suggest..."

The thin arm whipped out suddenly from her fingers' grip. It was like she had been holding a dozing serpent that had suddenly awakened and slipped itself free. The woman's other hand (Betty would think of it later as a claw) lashed out and clutched her by the throat; a long sharp fingernail pressed against her jugular like a blade. The woman snapped forward in the bed, springing to her knees and bringing her face so close to Betty's that she could feel the feverish heat emanating from the tip of the woman's pale nose on her own. The woman's breath smelled rotten, the stink of dead things tucked away and left to stink. Betty gagged and tried to pull away, then stopped as the nail's pressure increased against her vein.

Betty's eyes widened, terrified. She glanced at the nurse call button, which was too far away to reach. Then, though she did not want to, she found herself looking the woman in the



eyes. Something moved inside those eyes: small, slithering things lazily worming the expanse of the woman's pupils. Watching them deprived Betty of some of her will to resist, somehow. The sneer beneath broadened, revealing rows of small, sharp-looking teeth. A long tongue lashed out briefly, nearly licking Betty in the face before disappearing.

"I said I wanted him gone," the woman said, blowing another cloud of fetid stench into her nurse's face. "And I meant it."

#

Once the woman released her, Betty fled to a supply closet and sat weeping convulsively for a good ten minutes. She could not stop herself from shaking.

There was something horribly wrong with the woman. She was barely human, if that. She was something Betty could not explain, a monster, a demon, a freak. She had murder in her eyes when she'd wrapped her hand around Betty's throat; Betty had seen that clearly. She was not fit to be a mother. The boy would be better off with almost anyone than with that woman, Betty was certain of that.

And so her plan, such as it was, was formed. It was inevitable, really. There was only so much a woman could take, so many addicts and fruit loops and just plain assholes who churned kids out like cookies at a bakery day after day, kids that were doomed from the beginning to lead small, often short, unhappy lives, when she knew damn well what kind of home she could provide for a child and yet she, and the child she would never have, were deprived of the joys these people took for granted, and in cases like this woman, outright rejected.

She would have gladly adopted, but with John's criminal record this was not an option. He had not always been the warm, contented man she lived with now. He had done some things. He had changed, but this transformation was not quantifiable, and could not be conveyed to an adoption services agency. A man with a felony record (and a violent felony at that – a brutal bar fight in which he had nearly killed two men over a pool game gone bad) would never be allowed to adopt a child.

This woman was evil, Betty knew that. Her evil was factual; she had breathed it into Betty's face. The boy needed to be saved from her, and Betty needed a child. The best the boy could hope for would be for the woman to give him up, at which point he would enter the system and begin a childhood of hopping from one foster home to another, never feeling like

he truly belonged anywhere, always feeling like a burden, unwanted, quite possibly mistreated...

Fate had pushed her past her breaking point. It could not, she told herself later a thousand times, have ended any other way.

When Betty Traylor's shift ended three hours later, the little boy was in her bag, and no one noticed, or said anything, as she smiled her goodbyes to her co-workers and left the hospital forever.

The child did not utter a single cry until she reached her car. It was as if they were in on it together.

#

There had been a lot of work to do afterwards, though not nearly as much as she expected. She had stolen a couple of days' worth of diapers and wipes and assorted infant medicines from the supply closet before she left. She pulled the child from the bag and lay him down on the passenger seat as she headed home. She bundled him in blankets and used the bag to prop him up, making sure he would not fall off. He lay there looking content, moving his limbs lazily and cooing up at her. She looked over at him when she stopped for traffic lights and each time she cried.

She had no idea as to her long-term plans, refusing to look past the next few hours. John would not be home until six that evening. She planned her speech, her explanation, her pitch. She would give him the choice of opting out, and plead only for a few hours' head start if he decided he needed to call the authorities. She wondered if he would give her that. They were close, as close as she could imagine two people possibly being, but she had done this on her own and could not expect him to risk spending most of the rest of his life in prison for a decision she had made.

As she stepped through their apartment door, John looked up from the couch. Two suitcases were propped up at his feet. He held a map in his hands.

"Hey darlin'," he said, glancing at the infant, then at her. There was not a single droplet of surprise in his eyes. "Up for a ride?"

#

Trouble with the law ran in John's family. His cousin Ed had done time for a series of small robberies a decade and a half ago. At some point long ago Ed had bought a house in the woods. A getaway. He hadn't put it in his name somehow, it wouldn't have worked very well as a getaway otherwise, but it was his. He also hadn't used it; he had straightened himself out, as far as Betty knew. Either that, or he had gotten smart enough not to get himself caught. The fact that he still kept the getaway around made her suspicious that it might be the latter; he never used it, not for vacations, not to stop in and maintain the place, not at all. It was being kept for something.

John had called Ed earlier that morning, and arranged for he and Betty (and the child Betty was likely going to kidnap; he had been stone certain of that the previous night; he had seen the drawing of her features and the sorrow in her eyes and knew very well that she had been pushed past her point and might just be coming home with the nasty woman's baby) to stay there for at least the first few weeks. He had also emptied their savings and checking accounts and taken out the maximum cash advance on his credit card.

Betty was dazed by John's unblinking complicity, his utter commitment to helping her. He loved her of course; she had never doubted that, but what he was doing for her now was of an entirely different order. She supposed it was part guilt; he knew well how much she wanted a child, and was well aware that his own past was the obstacle to adoption. This was his way of making it up to her, and committing to her forever. He had chosen her over the life he had managed to build since leaving prison, over his freedom itself. He had chosen her over everything.

As they drove out of the city, a maddening trip with at least two dozen eternities spent sitting at traffic lights in heavy congestion, just waiting for a police car to pull up next to them, they listened on the car radio to hear reports about the baby-napping, but surprisingly there were none. The big news story was a proposal by the mayor to ramp up considerably the penalty for littering. There was nothing whatsoever about a baby missing from City General. Betty wondered if the police might be keeping the story quiet deliberately, to fool them (labels flew through her head, hurled at herself like a disgruntled sport's fans invectives from the bleachers: the perpetrators, the criminals, the outlaws) into thinking they might be getting away with it. It was inconceivable that the hospital had not noticed the missing child yet, and they would have to call the authorities right away. Yet there was nothing.

This made Betty edgy. Eventually she couldn't stand the uncertainty.

Just after they'd cleared the city, Betty convinced John to pull over. She wanted to call the hospital and get a gauge on what was happening. She knew they would trace the call, but she had to find out what was going on. She called the front desk and got Lucy, one of her best friends on the ward. Lucy did not seem surprised to hear her friend's voice.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "I was wondering when you might call."

Betty didn't say anything. She opened her mouth to speak but nothing would come out. When Lucy spoke again, it was in a hushed, conspiratorial whisper.

"So what do you think of all this?," she asked.

Betty gulped.

"Think?"

"Yeah. How do you think she got out?"

Betty's head began to swim. She? Who was Lucy was talking about?

"What," she managed.

"The witch lady. Don't tell me you haven't heard?"

"Heard?"

"That woman with the tattoos and the sunny demeanor. Ohmygod I can't believe you haven't heard." Lucy's voice began to accelerate as she realized she would be the one to deliver the news to Betty. Betty could almost hear her sitting forward in her chair. Betty had always thought Lucy should have been a reporter; she loved delivering news, especially bad news. "She disappeared today, right as the shifts were changing. Probably right after you left. No one saw her leave her room, no one saw her in the nursery, she's not on any of the security cameras, but she's gone. And so is the baby. Vanished, both of them. Everyone here is freaking out, what with the way she was talking after the birth. They're talking to the police now; they don't have a friggin' clue what to do. It turns out the social security number and personal information she gave was all fake; they all belonged to some woman who died last year. So they don't even know where to look. Can you believe that?"

Betty once again found herself speechless. Her mind chewed quickly on the information, evaluating its importance to her. The woman, in disappearing, had unknowingly provided cover for Betty while she kidnapped the boy. It was incredible. She wasn't sure whether to feel lucky or sick.

"Wow," she managed.

"Betty, are you all right?," asked Lucy.

“Yeah,” said Betty. Things were clicking into place in her head swiftly. “Fine. Listen. Is Tabby there?”

Tabitha Crane was the head nurse on the maternity ward. She kept the schedules for the nurses.

“Yeah. You sure you’re okay?”

“I just have...stuff going on, is all. I need to talk to Tabby about taking a little time off.”

“Ohmygod. Is everything all right?”

“Fine, Lucy. Really, it’s fine. I just need some time.”

Lucy sounded doubtful.

“Okay, Betty. I’ll try and find Tabby, but listen: if you need anything...”

“I know,” said Betty, her eyes welling with tears. “I’ll call.”

#

“John...”

Betty looked over at her husband. The smile on his face was gone. He had a hand over his eyes, blocking the sunlight as he scanned the field with a frown.

“John...”

“Honey, don’t worry,” John said. “He’s in there somewhere. There’s just so many damn bubbles we can’t see him. He probably slipped...”

Logical words, all of them. They made perfect sense. But Betty got the distinct feeling that John spoke to comfort himself as much as to comfort her. Something about his tone, or the inflection, conveyed no confidence whatsoever. John was, if not exactly scared, nervous. This sent Betty’s heart into panic; John could not be nervous, he was the calm one, the unflappable one. If John was nervous...

Betty took a step forward, noticing with another flutter that John did too.

“Jimmy!,” John called. “Jimmy Traylor!”

A couple of people turned around. The field was chaotic and noisy enough, however, that most folks didn’t yet seem to notice.

“Jimmy!” Betty yelled, trying hard and only partially successfully to keep shrill panic out of her voice. She broke into a half-run, her maroon skirt lifting up behind her in the breeze like a sail. She heard John begin fanning out behind her. Soon bubbles were tickling her bare

ankles. She watched the undulating sea of bubbles near where she had last seen Jimmy, waiting for the sight of a head, an arm raised for help, anything.

She thought of stories she had heard about young children drowning in bathtubs. Was it possible to drown in knee-high soap bubbles, too?

“Jimmy!”

As she ran her eyes scanned the crowd over and over again. Her mind took snapshots that would stay with her forever, an album of details she would flip through over and over again later in a futile search for something useful. A small boy with curly blonde hair in a white t-shirt had a bubble in the palm of one hand and stood regarding it like a crystal ball. His eyes glimmered in the amber-colored air. Twin girls, about seven, were holding one another’s hands and swinging, heads tossed back and mouths open, a cloud of small bubbles drifting over them like the laziest, fattest raindrops the world had ever seen.

And the Bubble Machine itself, which was no longer standing up quite straight, but rather leaning like an increasingly drunk man, like a party clown about to collapse in front of the children it had been hired to entertain. The bubbles were spewing in irregular bursts from it now. She almost expected it to start smoking, then recalled what it was made of. Just a broomstick and a bucket and a pinwheel and some tape, she thought. Nothing to smoke. Just ordinary things.

God oh god, why had she let him play in the goddamn bubbles...

“Jimmy,” she called.

“Jimmy?”

“Jimmy?!”

#

Betty realized quickly how desperate their situation was. They could not involve the authorities, because the missing child was not theirs. Jimmy Traylor, in fact, had no legal name. No Social Security Number. No birth certificate Betty had ever seen. He was, in the eyes of the state, a pure persona non grata. He did not exist, and therefore, he could not be missing (gone, said some part of her mind she barely recognized).

A few of the other parents were now drifting toward her and John with concerned looks. She thought about enlisting their help, her overloaded brain incapable of performing the

calculus necessary to make the decision. They needed to find Jimmy, that was it, if they went to jail afterwards then fine, but finding Jimmy, now, was paramount.

Swiping big handfuls of bubbles away from her legs, turning around over and over again and calling Jimmy's name, Betty felt the wildness bulging behind her eyes. She began to cry, a high-pitched mewling that she had as much hope of suppressing as her breathing. As she and John searched, calling, an awful certainty arose in her: that the balloon payment for the time she had borrowed by snatching Jimmy from his crib at City General that afternoon was being called due, that this was the inevitable result of a deed she had only ever been partially able to justify to herself.

"I said I wanted him gone," the woman had said.

And the hate in her eyes, the deathly stink of the air from her mouth.

Betty tried calling Jimmy's name again, but nothing but the sound of a caught breath came out. The bubbles had begun to pop now, the Machine had almost stopped making them, and she and John had swept a large amount of them away from the spot where Jimmy had last been, and he was nowhere, nowhere to be found.

Beyond that spot and all around them there was only empty field. There was no place to hide anything.

Out of the corner of her eye, Betty saw a female police officer heading their way. The officer was short and stout. She walked briskly, said something into a walkie-talkie, regarded John and Betty as if unsure of what to make of them.

It's all come due, thought Betty as the little cop walked up and began asking John questions Betty could hear but not comprehend. The woman's mouth moved, and generated sounds, but she might as well have been a garden gate creaking for all her intelligibility. All Betty could process was the panting in her own head, the desperate retching breaths of a woman seeing her dreams dissipate before her very eyes.

The dreams had been impossible to begin with, of course. Betty had known that all along. She had no right to expect happy endings when the story began the way theirs had. It probably could not have happened any other way.

#

Facts are facts, this is true, but they are not forever.

It was a fact that the child John and Betty Traylor called Jimmy disappeared that day in the field, lost in a sea of bubbles. It was also a fact that, after nearly five months, he had still not been found.

Betty told herself these things, spoke them to herself in her head and labeled them, each of them: fact, fact, fact.

But everything, in the end, is merely believed. The winds of circumstance shift or the borders of knowledge get redrawn, and what once was no longer is, or vice versa.

Facts are not forever.

Betty Traylor resisted the supernatural in her quest for an explanation. She sought what she perceived to be a more believable solution. But over time Betty found conflicts between credibility and simplicity. The idea that the boy's mother was a witch or demon of some sort, that she had tracked them down and made him vanish with some kind of dark magic that day in the field filled with bubbles, was preposterous, and insane, but simple. It was the shortest distance between any of the points. It strained credulity, but it fit the facts, while nothing else did.

This realization had dawned on Betty Traylor gradually; its strength waxed and waned over time but it had grown on the whole. She began each morning at the same point, desperate and damaged by her nightly dream, resisting even the prospect of magic or voodoo or any such foolishness, declaring it preposterous, yet each day it seemed she came closer to, if not accepting it, accepting it as possible.

Like a spiral, she thought; the entire process was like a spiral. You moved in what seemed like hopeless, redundant circles that only revealed themselves as progress over long periods of time. You traveled the same paths, almost, again and again and again. Eventually, if you were patient enough, you got to the center, where the answers were. And just maybe, you saw where the gone things go.

Betty stood now, folding the letter and slipping it into the pocket of her bathrobe. The light filtering through the window over the kitchen sink indicated it was some time in the middle of the afternoon. She had been sitting at the table, unmoving, remembering, for hours. She had not yet eaten anything.

She walked out of the kitchen and into a small living room, moving almost guiltily, as if embarrassed of what she was about to do. She went to a corner of the room, lifted up a loose corner of the old carpet and underneath that, a damp wooden floor plank. A small space was below the plank. In the space was a book.



*Vanishing Spells: How to Make Things Disappear (And How to Get Them Back!)*

A page very near the front of the book was bookmarked with a slip of paper. On that paper were notes, scribbled in Betty's own handwriting.

Round and round we go, Betty Traylor thought. She brought the book back to her kitchen table, poured herself the last of the coffee, and began to read.



## Art History

When I was four years old, I carved the Venus of Willendorf out of a bar of pink soap with an old penny. My mother walked into the bathroom just as I had finished chipping a tiny chunk from the statuette's abdomen, giving her a belly button.

"Happy burt day!" I blurted, and sprang to my feet, nearly losing my footing on the slippery tub bottom. I held out the dripping Venus in my palm. Bath water glistened on her faceless head with its pleated hair, rolled down both sides of her absurdly ample bosom and over her almost grotesquely fecund middle. A tear-sized pool had already formed in her newly

fashioned navel. I flashed my best and biggest toddler grin, the one I saved for special, the one I knew Mom could not possibly resist.

“That’s...sweet, honey,” Mom said. She barely glanced at the Venus as, smiling distractedly, she reached over me to unplug the drain. “Time to get out now, OK? And you’re not supposed to stand up in the tub, you know that...”

If she had attended college, or even paid attention in high school, (and couldn’t we fill an anthology with stories that started out just like that) she might have recognized the Venus for what it was: a meticulously crafted, inexplicably accurate replica of one of the earliest known, and one of the most famous, examples of prehistoric human art. The quality of the piece demonstrated both considerable skill at the art of sculpture and an in-depth knowledge of the original artifact. I could not possibly have possessed either at the age of four.

Mom should have been stunned, maybe even frightened, by the fact that her little boy, not all that far removed from his last day in diapers, would even think to make such a thing in the first place. Never mind carving it over the course of a twenty minute bath, with nothing but an old penny for tools.

Then again, if Mom had paid attention in high school, she would not have been under the bleachers with Tom Taylor when she should have been in Algebra, and I would never have even been born.

Mom lifted my naked, skinny frame from the tub and wrapped me up in one of our coarse towels. My teeth started chattering the instant my toes left the water. It was April, but it was a frigidly cold night, and we didn’t have much in the budget for heat during April.

“It’s not my birthday, Arthur, but that’s really sweet of you to think of me,” Mom said, toweling me off. She was gentle, but moving quickly, and the roughness of the towel left the skin on my thin, pale legs the bright pink of a moderate sunburn.

“Is it my burt day?,” I asked.

“No, sweetie. You just had a birthday last month.”

I pressed my trembling lips together and creased my forehead as Mom spun me around to dry my backside. I looked down at the little Venus in my shaking hand.

“Maybe it’s her burt day,” I said.

“Yes, honey. I think it probably is her birthday.”

I insisted Mom take the Venus from me after story time that night. I was afraid I would squash her while I slept.

When Mom bent over for our good night kiss, I sprang from the bed and wrapped my arms around her neck just about as tightly as I could. I heard her grunt from the sudden addition of my entire weight on her back. I knew I would soon be too big to do this, but she still fell for it nearly every night, so I thought she must still like it.

I held on for as long as I could hold on, squeezing. Eventually she stood up, like she always did, and wrapped her warm arms around me, and squeezed me back. She rested her left cheek against my right cheek and we swayed, as if we were dancing. I remember the too-flowery smell of her perfume, the vibrations in my belly and skull from her tuneless humming in my ear, and the feel of her soft skin on my cheek as her face curved, finally, into a smile.

#

When Mom thought I was asleep, I heard her talking on the phone in her bedroom. Our apartment walls were thin; I heard just about everything she did in there.

“Am I getting that fat?” she asked.

A pause.

“Well Arthur thinks I’m fat. He carved this little statue today out of soap. I don’t know how the heck he did it. It’s a woman, and she’s obese...”

Another pause.

“I don’t know, Sherry. She has big floppy boobs and an enormous rear end and if that’s what he thinks a woman looks like...”

A longer pause.

“Well, whatever. All’s I know is, tomorrow I’m going on a diet.”

#

The Venus ended up on Mom’s dresser, leaning on its footless leg stumps against the base of the mirror, next to my great grandmother’s jewelry box. It was as close to a place of honor as we had in our apartment. That jewelry box – as Mom had told me on the half dozen occasions she had caught me sifting through its drawers and playing with her necklaces – was the Only Nice Thing She Owned.

I stopped in to see Venus once or twice a day. I never played with her, never even touched her, just sat on Mom's bed quietly, and watched her. I wondered what it would be like to be a Venus of Willendorf. To have to stand, or lean, all the time, wherever someone else put you. And to have no face, and no ears. You couldn't see, hear, eat, or smell. You couldn't ever go outside and catch bugs in a jar.

It was sad, in a way, but Venus didn't look sad. She didn't look like she felt much of anything, really; she wasn't a very expressive sculpture.

In that way, Mom was very much not like Venus. I knew just how Mom felt about some important things, though she never actually told me.

For instance, Mom never actually told me she regretted my having been born. She never gave me any overt indication that she did not love me deeply, . But she said things, things that got my little mind thinking, like when she would show me pictures of herself in high school. "See? You're mother hasn't always looked like this, Arthur," she would say. "I used to be quite the looker." And there was something heavy and significant and awful in the way she uttered, "used to be" and "always", that gave me a pit in my stomach and made me look at my hands in some confused, disappointed way.

In her darker moods, after one of her crying fits, we would sit in the kitchen, sometimes in darkness, me on her lap, her on one of our creaky old chairs. She would hold me tight from behind and rock back and forth and whisper into my ear.

"Just don't be like me when you grow up, Arthur. I want you to be something," she would say, over and over again.

The older I got, the more I hated this. I would tell her she was something; she was my Mom. I failed to understand why that made her cry so hard until much later, when I realized that what I had said was true: she was my Mom, that was what she was, and that was all she was, and being my Mom meant, to her, that there were a lot of other things she otherwise could have been but never would be. She was just my Mom, and I was a cute kid, a sweet, good kid with potential, but.

I asked Mom a few times about my father: what he'd been like before the accident, before he drove his pickup truck into the oldest elm tree in Newcastle and left her alone with me. Mom said he was funny and good-looking and I reminded her of him sometimes when I cocked my head sideways and smiled.

I could see the weary way her mouth sagged when she said it, could see the shadow pass over her eyes.

She was no Venus of Willendorf, my Mom. She had an expressive face, and a mouth that said things even though they went mostly unsaid. Or maybe I was just a sensitive child. Either way, from very early on, I knew how she felt.

#

One afternoon, about a month or so after her burt day, Venus disappeared.

Mom was in the basement doing laundry and I was puttering around the apartment looking for our cat, Jake. After coloring Winnie the Pooh and Tigger for close to a solid hour, that particular brand of child boredom which can only be alleviated with an act of mischief had struck, and at some point I decided I needed a furry tail to pull. Jake could make the funniest noises when properly motivated.

I had just checked the space under Mom's bed for the lump of brown fur, when I noticed the empty spot on the dresser where Venus should have been, but was not. A thin, raised, pink outline – shaped like a crudely drawn heart - stained the wood where the tiny stumps of her legs had met the dresser.

I walked over, guessing the Venus had probably fallen to one side and rolled away, or maybe it had fallen off when I had slammed my head into the other side of the wall while using my bed as a trampoline the previous night. But Venus was not anywhere on the surface of the dresser, or under it. Over the course of the next couple of minutes I confirmed that she also was not stuck between the dresser and the wall, or under Mom's bed, or in any of the shoes in her closet, either. She also was not inside the jewelry box (I didn't think Venus could even fit inside there, but I checked anyway).

I left Mom's room to check my own, pulling every book out of my bookcase, going through every drawer in my own bureau. I found Jake cowering behind my trash can, but I left him alone for the time being.

I stumbled out of my room and ran at full speed down the short hallway leading to the rest of our apartment, which wasn't much: a cramped, dingy kitchen and a small yellow area that doubled as both dining and living room but was not big enough to do either job very well. Venus was not behind the couch, or between its cushions, or in the refrigerator, or on the kitchen counter, either.

Venus was not anywhere.

I was out of breath from my running and searching. I was not upset so much as I was curious. Where could she go? How could a Venus walk, with those big legs of hers stuck together like that, and those puny non-feet?

Eventually Mom walked in, red-faced and sweating. She had climbed eight flights of narrow stairs with a basketful of bed sheets, because Some Idiot had the elevator on stop on one of the floors above us.

When she saw the state of the apartment, Mom's eyes widened. She actually dropped the basket. I turned and surveyed the damage with her, nearly as surprised as she was, honestly shocked, to see the scope of what I'd done in such a short period of time. We walked together through the rooms, as if touring the world's smallest and messiest museum.

In the kitchen, the refrigerator door was open. I had moved items off some of the shelves to see if Venus was hiding behind one of them. A milk carton stood in the middle of the kitchen floor, surrounded by a jar of pickles, a bottle of ketchup, and a half-filled carton of now mostly broken eggs.

In the living room, the couch was pulled out from the wall and its cushions had been thrown onto the carpet. A small lamp had been knocked off the side table. The bulb had broken.

Bracelets and necklaces spilled out of the drawers of the jewelry box in Mom's bedroom and were tossed all over the dresser. Shoes littered her entire floor.

The floor of my room was covered with articles of my own clothing, and a couple of dozen books and a few miniature dump trucks were scattered on top of those.

Mom asked me what the heck was I thinking. I shrugged and looked out my window. I think it was one of those moments parents have sometimes, when the sheer enormity of a young child's misdeed prevents them from being able to summon the appropriate amount of anger, because their minds are so busy generating the appropriate amount of disbelief. The place, Mom finally said to my back, looked Like A Hurricane Had Hit It. I Had Better Get Cracking and clean things up, or there would be No Story Time Tonight.

#

As bed time approached, I tried to hang around Mom's room, to see if she would realize Venus was gone. She stood in front of the bureau mirror, pulled the earrings off of her ears,

opened the top drawer of the jewelry box, and tossed them in. She took off her watch and put it right on top of the heart-shaped footprints. She didn't seem to notice anything different. I decided not to say anything to Mom about what had happened to her.

#

I found Venus late the next day, in the first place I should have looked: the tub.

My mom always tossed my favorite water toys in with me when she put me in for a bath: a big orange boat that didn't float so well, a plastic blue soap dish in the shape of a seal that floated a little better, and two plastic fishermen in yellow rain slickers and matching hats. Mom's sister, Auntie Sherry, had given me a slicker and a hat, just like those on the fishermen, for my fourth birthday. I wore them around the house every day, Fisherman Arthur, knocking things over with my fishing pole (a bright red plastic baseball bat with some string taped to it, if I remember correctly). Mom couldn't keep me from filling up the sinks and splashing in them, roaring out nautical commands no sailor would recognize, for a solid week. I heard Mom talking on the phone the night she put the slicker and hat away for a while, saying she couldn't wait until Auntie Sherry had a kid. What goes around, comes around, she said. She was already looking at drum sets.

After plopping me into the water Mom told me she would be in her room if I needed her, and she'd be back to wash my hair and behind my ears.

"Okay," I said.

I put one fisherman in the orange boat and one on the soap dish. I was just about to crash the two floating toys together, to see how far the fishermen would hurtle upon impact, when I saw Venus. She was lying on her side on Mom's soap dish in the corner of the tub.

"Hello," I said.

"What, honey?," called Mom.

"Nothing!," I said.

I slid across the tub bottom and picked up Venus. Her head, which had been the rounded cheese wheel shape you've seen in pictures of the real thing, was rubbed flat on top, and the grid of bumps (thought to be braids of hair) that covered it were mostly flat as well. Her left side had lost most of its definition: you couldn't tell where her arm started anymore, and the side of her leg was flattened. Most of the chips in her abdomen I had so carefully



flicked off with the penny to match the original were gone, as was her belly button. Her abdomen was now almost perfectly smooth.

Someone had used Venus as a bar of soap.

Mom had used Venus as a bar of soap.

I held Venus in my hand . Something about her was a little more expressive this way. Her half-flattened head seemed to have a happy tilt to it, almost. Or maybe that's what I wanted to think.

Either way, I was curious.

I started to rub Venus between my hands. A thick lather of pink soap gathered in my palms, and the smell of lavender filled my nostrils. After a second or two, my skin started to tingle.

Later in life, I would be sitting outside the principal's office with Fernanda Karl after hitting Mrs. McLaren with a stray spitball, and Fernanda would drop a handful of Pop Rocks into my palm and wink at me. After a brief interrogation, during which I determined to my own satisfaction that the Pop Rocks were neither poison nor some cruel girl trick, I put the Pop Rocks in my mouth. When the series of small, gentle explosions began (the first girl-induced fireworks of my life), I would think immediately of Venus and that day in the tub. The rubbed off Venus soap felt like Pop Rocks on skin: tingly and vaguely electric and explosive but, nice.

I took the lather and rubbed it all over my body, over my belly and under my armpits and down my arms. I took my Papa Bear face cloth and rubbed more Venus soap into it, then washed my legs, the backs of my knees, between my toes. I lathered up again and ran my hands over my scalp, like Mom did when she washed my hair.

My whole body was tingling, and warm. I felt like my skin was laughing. I couldn't help grinning.

After a while Mom came in, stopping two steps inside the doorway. I was holding Venus. Her face went white.

"Oh, honey, I'm so sorry," she said, looking crestfallen, staring at Venus, her bottom lip trembling. "We ran out of soap the other day, and I didn't have any money..."

"Don't worry, Mom," I said, holding up what was left of Venus: a smooth chunk of soap just a little too big for me to be able to close a fist over. It was no longer recognizable as human, except in the most abstract sense; it was shaped more like a pear. The grin on my face

was going strong. I felt like I was glowing from the inside, like my skeleton was a bulb emitting honey-colored light through my skin.

“I think she likes it,” I said.

The grin lasted only a few minutes after I had been dried off and dressed. I did retain a certain unusual inner warmth for a while longer, though by the time I was scheduled to hit the hay, that was mostly gone, too.

Mom read me two extra stories that night. She didn't listen when I told her it really didn't matter, because she knew it did. For the first time in a long time, when she leaned over to give me a kiss, I just offered her my cheek, said, “good night Mom I love you”, and rolled over.

She laid down next to me then, wrapping an arm around my torso, her head sharing my pillow. Though I didn't feel angry something stopped me from turning myself around to comfort her when she began to snuffle, just the same.

Mom stayed with me in my room until I fell asleep, which normally never happened.

#

The next night, I heard her talking on the phone in her bedroom again.

“I feel awful, Ma. Arthur was so sweet about it, which just made me feel worse,” she said.

There was a pause.

“I hate this. I hate it. This is it. I'm going down to sign up for that realtor's test at lunch tomorrow.”

Pause.

“I can pass it, Ma. Sherry's a realtor, how hard can it be? Things are going to be different from now on. I'm not going to sweat my whole life away in that laundromat.

“I mean it this time. This is it.”

#

I don't know if Mom ever took the realtor's exam. I do know she never became a realtor. She worked at the laundromat for a while, then moved on to waitress at the diner down the street from our apartment for a few years. Then she died, collapsing of a brain aneurysm on

the sidewalk on a muggy August day when I was only eight, and I went to live with Auntie Sherry, who finally had herself a kid but no one to buy him a drumset, and that was it.

#

A week or two after I had first used Venus to wash myself, I found what remained of her, just a splinter of pinkness caught in the tub drain, after one of Mom's showers. Mom had felt badly about using Venus at first, but felt less badly, I guess, as time wore on. Probably because I had used Venus for every one of my baths, although I was careful not to use too much of her at once.

I picked up the soap sliver and smelled it one last time: lavender and sunlight traveling up my nose, evoking yet another involuntary grin. Then I pushed that last bit of Venus carefully through a hole in the drain, imagining it slipping down the pipes and floating underground on a gentle current until it reached the ocean. She could have adventures out there, I bet. She wouldn't need to stand where people put her all the time. She could get eaten by a fish and travel to China.

I put my ear to the drain. I thought I heard her echoey giggling as she plummeted to freedom.

I tried to stuff one of my fishermen down the hole too, but he wouldn't fit.

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