

HYSTERON PROTERON

By
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I sat on the edge of the tub while Linda took a bath. She pretended to ignore me as I slid my hands beneath the water and caressed her stomach.

It was so quiet in the bathroom that the smallest sound was amplified, like we were in a cave. The pages of her magazine. Water dripping from my hands. Our breathing.

All echoes.

That's when I noticed the red swirls at the bottom of the bathtub—twisting slowly, turning the water between her legs pale pink.

~

Linda never seemed afraid at the hospital. Whenever I tried to talk about the possibility that we might lose the baby—she's had two miscarriages—she would change the subject.

"I know this is hard for you," I said while we waited for the test results.

"I hate the curtains in our bedroom," she said.

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

"Why?"

"They're a profound failure of imagination," she said.

I massaged her swollen feet. "It's not a big deal. We'll get new ones."

"No." She flexed her toes until they were pointing at me. "I have to leave them up. They'll remind me to be more careful the next time I go to Ikea."

We could hear someone walking down the hallway outside the room. We both sat rigid as the steps came nearer.

"It's going to be okay," I finally said.

"I suppose you're right. Why get worked up over Ikea?"

Linda stared at the curtains in the hospital room—she seemed to be looking through them, at something beyond the window. I tried to see what had captured her attention, but the thin white curtains made everything outside strange and blown-out, as if a nuclear explosion had just taken place.

I didn't share my impression with Linda. She continued to stare at the curtains, both of us pretending the footsteps weren't getting closer to the room.

~

Linda never seemed afraid—not until after the doctor told us the medical danger had passed.

“You and the baby are fine,” the doctor told her.

“That's great,” I said.

“Just great,” Linda said with a smile, but I could tell something was wrong.

The day after we got home she painted the baby's room yellow and green. The next day she put Winnie The Pooh art on the walls and a butterfly mobile above the changing table. The day after that she knitted a small blanket out of the softest yarn I've ever felt.

Then she started watching a lot of horror movies.

One day when she was watching *Rosemary's Baby*, she paused the movie at the end and stared at the frozen image on the TV.

“It floors me every time,” she finally said.

“What does?”

“Mia Farrow *knows* the baby's evil, but she can't stop her maternal instincts. I'm not sure I've got that kind of commitment in me.”

“Are you considering a pixie cut?”

“You think this is a joke?”

“Okay, so what if our child’s the spawn of Satan? We perform an exorcism.”

“We’re lapsed Catholics.”

“We’ll call in the Pentecostals.”

Linda sighed with great dissatisfaction. “We can’t even get it together for an exorcism.”

“I promise you—you and I are going to be great parents.”

She shuffled over to the DVD player and took out the disc. “When you’re at the store, could you pick up *Village Of The Damned*? It was rented last time.”

“The original or the remake?”

She gave me a look. “If you have to ask, don’t even bother.”

Then she laughed and for just a few seconds everything was back the way it used to be.

~

Five years ago the university where I’m finishing my dissertation was bequeathed the Paris Brothers archives. Nicholas and Benjamin were photographers who specialized in campaign photos at the end of the last century—between 1892 and 1900 most of the political candidates in the Ohio Valley posed for the brothers sitting astride a white horse. These photos were used in posters and newspaper ads with the caption:

Vote for _____ . He won’t put the cart before the horse.

While cataloguing the archives I discovered that the brothers had also photographed time capsule dedications: dozens and dozens of pictures of mayors and beauty queens and priests standing beside about-to-be-sealed cornerstones. Because the brothers kept meticulous records, I’ve been able to locate and have volunteers retrieve many of the time capsules.

I never know what I'm going to unearth when I open one of them. Poems written in spidery script. A silk American flag, smelling faintly of rose talc. A prayer book with delicate hand-drawn illustrations of Christ fending off temptation in the desert.

My children are going to inherit a better world, one farmer wrote on brittle, faded parchment. And that makes me sorely glad.

Before I could finish reading the farmer's letter, it disintegrated in my hands and the remains scattered on my desk. Whenever I breathed, the tiny bits of paper would rearrange themselves, like a shifting Rorschach test:

Valkyries. Garden clippers. The skull of an unidentifiable animal.

A breeze from the window scattered the pieces all over my office. I tried to gather them, but they kept crumbling into smaller fragments, until eventually they were like dust and seemed to disappear into the tiles on the floor.

~

My best friend Jerry is a research fellow at the medical school, developing a drug that retrieves long-term memories through the olfactory nerves. He hopes one day his work will benefit Alzheimer's patients, or people who've had head traumas or strokes. Unlike me, working with a five thousand dollar NEH grant, Jerry has a blank check from Pfizer.

Jerry always tries to explain how these compounds work, but the biochemical underpinnings are way beyond my two semesters of undergrad biology.

"Look, it flatters me that you think I'm that intelligent, but I have no idea what you just told me," I say.

"It's exactly like what you're doing with those time capsules," Jerry says when he finally gives up expounding complex molecular theory. "We're both unearthing the past."

“Oh.”

“Yeah. ‘Recovering the past so you can live in the present.’ That’s Pfizer’s marketing slogan when we go wide after the trials.”

“They’ve already got a marketing slogan?”

“You better believe it. The future’s already here as far as those fuckheads at Pfizer are concerned.”

~

Linda and I watched the end of *It’s Alive*, the scene where the mom watches helplessly as the police kill her mutant baby.

“Where do you think these actors are now?” I said without looking at Linda. “Selling time shares? Amway?”

I expected to hear her laugh but she was quiet—when I looked over at her, tears were streaming down her face.

Because I was surprised, I took an extra moment before I hugged her. And I hated that, because my surprise meant that somehow I’d failed her.

~

Jerry invited me to his office to try out the latest results of his research. He put a drop of aqua gel on a long cotton swab.

“Wipe this on the inside of your nostrils,” he said, making exaggerated motions to demonstrate the procedure.

“You look like a stewardess when you do that.”

“Fuck off. Now think of a specific memory.”

“How specific?”

“Opening Christmas presents when you were little. That seems to be a good one for people, there’s usually a lot of sensory information attached to the memory.”

I swabbed the inside of my nostrils—the fluid had no smell—and waited. I thought about the first Christmas after my parents split up, when my mom woke me up at dawn to drive me over to my dad’s new apartment.

I waited for a moment, staring at Jerry’s bald spot. “And?”

“Jesus, you’re as bad as the undergrads with the fucking five second attention span. Give it time to absorb.”

“How will I know?”

Jerry sighed. “Trust me, you’ll know. Just stop with the questions already.”

I was about to make a wisecrack, but I was overcome with smells: coffee, cigarettes, the faint hint of body odor and day-old English Leather. These were the smells as my dad opened the door to let my mom and me into his studio apartment. I could literally feel my dad’s hug again—the jabbing desperation as he wrapped his arms around me, holding me just a moment too long.

I could see the nearly empty apartment.

I could see the shabby twin sheet still on the couch.

I could hear my mom’s rushed goodbye after my dad asked her to stay for breakfast.

I could hear him say “Hey pal, why don’t I fix pancakes?”

I could see his frenzied search through the empty cupboards and refrigerator.

I felt small again—small and hungry and anxious to please my dad.

“No it’s okay,” I found myself saying out loud. “I’m not hungry.”

Jerry stood in front of me with an expectant look. I tried everything I could—biting my cheek, thinking about the Angels losing the playoffs—but I couldn’t keep myself from crying.

Jerry handed me a box of Kleenex. “That happens sometimes. I should have warned you.”

I nodded, embarrassed, and wiped my eyes. Then: the smell of blood.

Metallic.

Salty.

Dense.

“Jesus, is my nose bleeding?” I asked.

Jerry checked my face. “No.”

I wiped my nose and looked at my hands. “It’s like my nose is full of blood.”

“Were you bleeding in the memory?”

“No. I was opening Christmas presents, remember?”

Jerry studied my nose and made me open my mouth. I couldn’t tell if he was annoyed or concerned. “You’re not bleeding.”

He took my pulse and blood pressure as a precaution. “You’re fine,” he said, twice in a row. “*Really.*”

He tried to lighten the mood by telling me about one of his wife’s biology students, a vegan girl who refused to dissect the fetal pig, but all I could concentrate on was the smell of blood, until it finally disappeared when I got back to my office.

~

I tried to tell Linda what happened with Jerry, but once I started to talk about my dad she interrupted me.

“*He* is exactly why I find it hard to believe there’s a God,” she said. “That asshole’s still ruining lives, and your poor mom dies of cancer. Where’s the justice in that?”

I decided not to tell her about the blood. We were watching *Firestarter*, a scene where the little girl unleashes the full extent of her incendiary powers against the bad guys. Linda rested her head on my shoulder.

“You know what this movie makes me want, more than anything right now?” she asked.

“What my love?”

“A cigarette.”

I laughed and put my face in Linda’s hair. The smell of her lavender shampoo changed into the sharp smell of blood. I jolted my head back.

“What?” she said.

I examined my hands and the front of my shirt. A leaf blower suddenly screamed into action next door and I jumped off the couch.

“John?” she said.

I went into the bathroom to look in the mirror, but there wasn’t any blood coming from my nose. I noticed Linda in the doorway staring at me.

“What’s going on?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing my ass.”

“I thought I was getting a nosebleed. That’s all.”

She rubbed her stomach and stared at me. One of the characters in the movie let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“Why don’t you pause it?” I finally said. “It sounds like we’re missing the best part.”

Linda continued to stare at me.

“That was a joke,” I said, annoyed. “The usual response to humorous stimuli is to laugh.”

Linda's eyes narrowed. "I don't want you using Jerry's drug anymore."

"Oh Christ—"

"He's not even in trials yet."

"He told me how it works. It's not dangerous at all."

"Oh, well there you go. Here I was worried and apparently you're getting a second PhD in biochemistry—"

"It's just like what I'm doing with the time capsules."

"No it's not! You seem different."

"No. *You* seem different, ever since you got back from the hospital. But do I nag you about it?"

Linda reacted like I'd punched her. "I'm scared, asshole."

"Linda—"

"I thought you understood that."

"I *know* you're scared."

I kissed her and kept looking into her eyes until I saw forgiveness. "I won't use Jerry's drug again, I promise."

She stroked my face with a worried expression. "Maybe you should call your doctor. Just to be safe."

"I'm not sick."

After that I didn't say anything. I rubbed her belly gently, but the contact seemed only to annoy us both. Linda pushed my hand away.

"Am I being unreasonable?" she said.

“I’ll check with him if that’ll make you feel better,” I said, with no intention of making the call.

“Thank you,” she said.

Later that night the cat was staring at the same spot on the ceiling. He didn’t move—not a muscle—for almost an hour. Linda said there must be a mouse up in the attic.

“Don’t mice move though?” I said. “Wouldn’t the cat get bored and stop staring at the same spot?”

Linda told me I should ask the cat these annoying questions and leave her alone.

~

I received a time capsule from Aberdeen, Ohio. One of our volunteers, a member of the Ohio State Historical Society, retrieved it last week and mailed the contents to me in a sealed Rubbermaid cargo box.

I put on latex gloves and pulled out a bundle of letters wrapped in pale blue linen. The first was a proclamation written in calligraphy, signed by Mayor Albert T. Montgomery, expressing every wish that the descendants who opened this box would be living in peaceful and prosperous times.

The rest of the letters were written by schoolchildren.

The first read:

My name is Winifred Palley. I went to St. Louis this year, but I can’t say I liked it very much. I will make my own dress for confirmation. It will have tiny pink roses and red trim.

The next read:

My name is William Martin. I hope to be alive when they open this box, but I am not Methuselah. I hope I will marry a beautiful woman and move to California and then I will have lived a very happy life.

Then I found a letter addressed to me.

From my son.

~

My first thought was that Jerry or one of my TAs was playing a prank on me. Or maybe even Linda. But I dated the paper fibers and the ink—the letter’s at least a hundred years old.

My “son” writes that he planted the letter from the future, knowing I’d find it in my research. He writes that, for reasons too complex to explain, he can’t come to me, otherwise he’d have delivered his message in person.

He writes that Linda is going to die of cancer in five years. He included scientific papers that he claims is the formula for a drug that cures cancer—he wants me to patent the formula and sell it to one of the drug companies. He writes that unless I do this, the government is going to withhold the cure from all but the wealthiest.

He writes that he understands if his letter troubles me. He writes that he’s only trying to do the right thing. He writes that he loves Linda and me very much.

He writes that I need to be careful because *they’re* watching me too, but he doesn’t explain who they are.

~

I was staring at the fire detector on the bedroom ceiling when Linda looked over from her magazine.

“You seem sad,” she said.

At that moment everything about Linda—her voice, her smell, her eyes—made me feel worse. “I called the doctor. If that’s what you’re wondering.”

“That’s why you’re sad?”

“I’m not sad.”

Linda went back to reading the magazine. “Could’ve fooled me.”

“He said I was fine.”

“Did you tell him about Jerry’s drug?”

All I wanted to do was go to sleep. I put my head on her belly. “Yes.”

Suddenly the baby kicked. I rubbed the spot on her stomach and the baby kicked again.

We both laughed at the same time.

“I had a dream this afternoon. That we were having a boy,” Linda whispered.

I didn’t say a word—it seemed like the room had turned ice cold.

“For whatever that’s worth,” she continued, confused by my reaction. “I mean, I’m still glad we don’t know whether it’s a boy or girl.”

“It’s going to be a boy,” I said, but I don’t think Linda heard me.

“Maybe I should spit in Drano and see if it turns blue. You know, scientifically confirm this. Hey, we could get Jerry involved.”

She poked me in the arm. “That was joke. The usual response to humorous stimuli is to laugh.”

But I didn’t laugh.

~

While I was staring at the ceiling I remembered what I bought my dad for Christmas that first year after the divorce: a cheap cassette tape of excerpts from Beethoven’s symphonies.

My dad made a big show about it, like it was the greatest present in the world. I got the tape at Kmart and it still had the price tag attached when he unwrapped it—\$4.99. My dad kept going on about how wonderful my gift was. His enthusiasm quickly began to make me uncomfortable, as was the apartment's smoke detector, which kept chirping loudly at regular intervals because the battery was low.

We were listening to the Pastoral Symphony when he started drinking. Bourbon straight up.

We were listening to the Pastoral Symphony for the second time when he asked me if my mom was dating anybody. The Pastoral Symphony finished playing, just as the smoke detector chirped again, and that's when the apartment seemed to turn ice cold.

~

I was opening a packet of contact sheets I'd ordered from some negatives in the Paris Brothers archive, when I decided to talk to Jerry, to see if any of his test subjects had experienced any unusual reactions. I called him at his office.

"Let me see if I can find him, Mr. Reynolds," Jerry's receptionist told me before she put me on hold. She never failed to call me Mr. Reynolds, which, in addition to being oddly formal, always made me think she was talking to my dad.

I cradled the phone in my neck and flipped through the contact sheets. The negatives were from several time capsule dedications in southeast Missouri between 1898 and 1900.

I'm not sure which I noticed first—that the on-hold music was the Pastoral Symphony, or that there was a man who appeared in every single photos.

The man was dark-haired, young, dressed inconspicuously. He stood in the background of each of the photos, holding a small sign with writing on it.

The images were so small that I couldn't make out what the writing said. I found a magnifying loop.

Jerry got on the phone. "Hey John. What's up?"

The images jumped into focus under the glass. The sign in every photo read the same:

John Reynolds, you are in grave danger.

"John?" Jerry said. "Did I lose you?"

~

I cancelled my class and went home, where I found Linda out on the patio drinking lemonade. I kissed her before I sat down.

"How was your day?" I said.

"I dug up dog bones. While I was planting the roses," she said.

"That's awful."

"It was—at first. I mean, you don't expect to find bones in your yard, but of course it makes sense. I'm actually surprised it doesn't happen more often."

"What did you do?"

"I covered the bones back up and planted a rose next to them. I think the dog must have been some kind of terrier." She took a sip of her lemonade. "It was quite peaceful, actually. Like a ceremony."

"Linda—"

"I'm not done yet, I still haven't told you my very important realization."

"Sorry. I'm all ears."

"I realized that no matter what happens, we're just like everybody who ever lived here before us. We're just going to try to do our best."

“Yes.”

“That’s all we can do.”

She started to get up and I helped her to her feet.

“I’m going to fix us dinner,” she said, “and then we’re going to watch *The Sound Of Music*.”

“*The Sound Of Music*?”

“Unless you want to watch *Pet Cemetery*.”

I shook my head no.

“Good,” she said, speaking to my reflection in the sliding glass door. “Because I don’t want to either.”

~

I couldn’t sleep. I kept staring at Linda, waiting for the right moment to wake her and tell her what was happening. She finally opened one of her eyes to look at me.

“Yes?”

“That memory about my dad,” I said. “The one I was telling you about the other day?”

“What about it?”

“He got really drunk.”

“There’s a surprise.”

“He asked me if my mom was dating anybody.”

“Was she?”

I swallowed. “Yes.”

Linda reached down and found my hand. “What did he do?”

“At first he just yelled at me. Asking me who the guy was. Then he started shaking me. When I told him to stop he punched me so hard he broke my nose. There was blood everywhere. I had to get stitches.”

“Oh my God!” Linda sat up and turned on the light. “What did your mom do?”

“She never found out. He gave me a skateboard for Christmas, so he told her I’d taken a spill. A *nasty* spill, that’s exactly how he put it.”

Linda’s eyes began to fill with tears. “Did he—did he do this often?”

“I don’t really remember. Maybe.”

She gritted her teeth. “He is not coming near our child, do you hear me?”

“Linda—”

“I mean it!”

“Of course he won’t come near our child. I won’t let him.”

“If he does I’ll kill that bastard with my own hands!”

“Shh.”

“Oh, John.” She pulled me to her and held my head in her arms. “John.”

I think she expected me to cry, but I couldn’t. All I could think about was the smell of blood that seemed to fill the room. I wiped my nose, which made Linda think I was crying, so she pulled me even closer.

I glanced at my hand, but there wasn’t any blood.

~

Later, when I went to get a glass of water, I found the cat staring at the same spot in ceiling again. I got down on the floor next to him to figure out his angle of view. It turned out he was looking directly at the smoke detector.

All of a sudden he ran to the sliding door and started meowing. After I let him out, he ran to one of the new roses Linda planted and started digging down to its roots. I tried to get him to stop, but he scratched me so hard it drew blood.

I got the shovel from the garage. On the third dig I hit something metal.

~

The box had a letter from the man with the sign in all of the archive photos. He writes that he's an FBI agent in the future investigating my son. His name is Morgan Emery.

He writes:

Under no circumstances should you do anything your son asks of you. It will only have terrible consequences for everyone involved. If he's given you any proprietary information you must not show these documents to anyone. Please permanently dispose of any such information, and this letter, by shredding or burning.

Then he writes that my son is a terrorist who's wanted by several international agencies.

Morgan Emory ends with:

I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you your son is a monster. Maybe you can get him help when he's young and that will make a difference, so that he doesn't become what he's become.

~

I spent the rest of the night watching Linda sleep. Several times I tried to match the pace of her breathing, but it wasn't more than two or three breaths until we were out of sync again.

~

Jerry's usually in his office by six in the morning, but I showed up too early for him. I put the scientific papers in a sealed envelope, with a note asking him to call me, and shoved it under

his door. I suspected I already knew the answer, but I wanted to see if he thought there was any validity to the formula my son gave me.

When I got to my office to wait for Jerry's call I discovered that a new time capsule had been delivered the day before. I knew, even as I opened it, that there would be another letter for me.

My son's note is urgent, like he didn't have much time to write it. He says that it's critical I get the formula to a drug company. He tells me to watch out for Morgan Emory—he's not an FBI agent. Not only that, Morgan's trying to kill my son.

He's going to try to kill you too he writes.

There were dark stains on the letter. I'm sure they're dried blood—my son's blood.

I was touching the bloodstains when I got the hysterical call from Jerry's assistant. She was so hysterical she forgot to call me Mr. Reynolds.

~

Linda handed me a glass of bourbon. "Please drink this," she said.

"I can't stop picturing it," I said. "Like a movie I can't turn off."

Linda sat on the edge of the chair and caressed my face. "I'm so sorry—"

"You know what they said?"

"What?"

"His face was bashed so badly they won't be able to have an open casket."

"John—"

"What kind of monster does that to another human being?"

Linda was about to say something when the lights in the house flickered.

"I thought he fixed that," she said.

“Who?”

“The landlord. The cable guy screwed up the electrical when he was here this morning.”

~

I held the flashlight in one hand and inched forward on my knees. Linda was right below me in the living room.

“Please be careful,” she yelled. Her voice was muffled through the floor but I could tell she was annoyed.

“I am,” I yelled back.

Particles of dust danced in front of the flashlight, like falling snow. I stopped for a moment, mesmerized by how beautiful they were.

“Where’s the smoke detector?” I said.

“What?”

“The smoke detector in the living room? Where is it?”

“Over here!”

While I crawled towards her voice I noticed a shiny new wire, about the thickness of a pencil, running along the edge of the attic floor. It was warm to the touch.

“Over here,” Linda yelled. Her voice was now right beneath me. “I’m standing right under it.”

“Okay!”

“You’re welcome!”

“Thanks!”

The wire went into a small metal box—when I shined the flashlight on it, it gleamed like no other piece of electrical equipment I’d ever seen.

“What are you doing?” Linda said.

“Hold on!”

I took the screwdriver from my back pocket and tried to pry the top off the box. There was a loud whine and a flash. I dropped the flashlight and the attic went pitch black.

“What’s going on?” Linda said.

There was a hum that seemed to come from every direction.

“Can you hear that?” I said

“Hear what?”

“Never mind. Is the cable still working?”

“I’ll check.”

I thought I heard Linda say something else.

“What?” I said.

“John.”

But it wasn’t Linda’s voice that said *John*. It came from somewhere in the attic—a whisper.

“John Reynolds,” the voice said.

“Who’s there?” I said.

The humming stopped and there was silence. Then:

“Please stop.”

But it wasn’t a human voice that said *please stop*. The voice was everywhere, buzzing like swarms of bees around my head.

I held the screwdriver in front of me. “I’ll kill you, I swear to God,” I hissed.

“The cable’s still working,” Linda yelled from the living room. “And the lights stopped flickering. Good job!”

“Do you understand?” I whispered to whatever was in the crawl space with me. “I’ll kill you with my own hands.”

Silence.

“Whatever you did worked!” Linda yelled. “Come down now! Before you get hurt!”

My shaking hands found the flashlight. I shined it into every corner, but there was no one there. Just dust.

I put the screwdriver in my pocket and crawled backwards to the hatch door.

~

One of my friends at the university has access to all of the Census information. You need to have special clearance for it, but I talked my friend into letting me search the database.

“I’m looking for relatives of people from the time capsules,” I lied.

It took me about half an hour, but I finally found the F.B.I. agent Morgan Emery. He’s an eight year old who lives with his parents on Whitmore Street.

At the same house where my mom and I lived right after the divorce.

~

I stood behind a tree in the park across from the house. A little boy—dark hair like the adult Morgan in the Paris Brothers photos—had come home earlier with a little girl and they were playing in the backyard. From my vantage point I could only see the children when they were swinging—sudden arcs of motion followed by screams of laughter.

How small the house seemed now, distorted like a reflection in a carnival mirror. The front porch, however, was exactly as I remembered it, shaded on one side by an old lilac bush. In

the summers the bush was full of spiders, but I don't remember any of them being poisonous. My mom used to sit on the porch after she got sick—she would watch through the branches of the lilac when my dad dropped me off.

I have to believe she knew what was going on. She never asked me to explain the bruises or the bumps, but her sad eyes told me she regretted she wasn't stronger. If she'd been stronger I have to believe she would have killed him.

Morgan's friend finally left and I walked around through the alley behind the house, like I used to do every day after school. Morgan was out on the patio coloring. Someone was playing the piano inside.

Beethoven's Pastoral.

I snuck up to the patio. When I got close enough I saw that Morgan was coloring a Paris Brothers photo: a man who looked a lot like me, sitting astride a white horse. Morgan heard me and turned around. His eyes were so innocent. No fear, just curiosity.

"Do you know who I am?" I whispered.

"Yes," he said. He held up the photo he'd been coloring. "I was making this for you, Mr. Reynolds."

The piano stopped playing and my pulse began to race even faster. Morgan ran up to me and hugged my legs.

"I'll be a good boy," he said. "I promise."

The Pastoral Symphony started again, this time a cassette playing. In spite of the poor quality of the sound, the music seemed so beautiful and perfect that I wanted to cry.

"You *are* a good boy," I lied. I pulled out the screwdriver from my back pocket.

"Please stop," he said.

But it was too late for me to stop.

~

I went by my office on the way home to clean up. The drain became clogged and the sink filled up, until the water turned an unnatural pink: the color of cheap candy. I tried not to look at myself in the mirror above the sink, but that's the thing when you tell yourself not to do something—you can't not do it.

I was surprised to see blood running from my nose. I looked down at my feet and there were splatters of blood all over the floor. I tried cleaning up the mess with paper towels, but I scrubbed too hard and the towels disintegrated, into tiny pieces that became smaller and smaller, until they seemed to disappear into the floor.

The floor tiles cracked easily when I stabbed them with the screwdriver. It didn't take very long to find the letter written in my own handwriting. It's filled with unspeakably horrible things, but the most terrible is the regret: the way it's written sounds like the confession of the damned.

The sink began to overflow onto my head, but I didn't get up off the floor. I just sat there and let the pink water fall over me.

When the water ran clear, I knew it was time to go home.

~

Linda answered me from upstairs in the bathroom. I walked through the dark kitchen and noticed the pruning shears on the counter—she must have worked in the yard again. I wondered if she found the hole that I dug the other night.

Linda was sitting in the bathtub, her back to the door. Her belly rose from the water like a shiny pink island.

I sat on the edge of the tub. She pretended to ignore me as I slid my hands beneath the water and caressed her stomach.

It was so quiet in the bathroom that the smallest noise was amplified, like we were in a cave. The pages of her magazine. Water dripping from my hands. Our breathing.

All echoes.

“Why didn’t you answer your cell phone?” she finally asked.

“I thought I took care of the problem,” I said. “But I was wrong.”

The web of veins on her stomach looked like rivers on a map. And the map was showing the way to my son:

The monster.

I kneeled down next to Linda.

“You look like you’re getting ready to pray,” she said.

“Maybe I am,” I said, as I reached into my back pocket.