

Brimming

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Before the alarm went off, they heard a truck door slam on the street below. The workmen were back, the boss and his kid apprentice. Mr. Uninve's wife rolled to him, draped her arm over his hip. She wanted to try again. He grabbed her noodling hand and pressed it down against the mattress behind himself.

"Don't get up yet," she said.

"I want to get dressed. In case they need to ask me anything." Mr. Uninve stretched his arms upward in the mirror over the vanity and studied the reflection of his wife curled up in the sheets. When she looked at him, he shifted his eyes to her nightstand where her bedtime book, something called *The Gnostic Gospels*, lay open, face-down. She'd started reading books on religion a year ago. "Helps me fall asleep," she'd said. Mr. Uninve had smiled at this, but he could feel in his cheek muscles that the smile was weakly askew.

He stepped into the master bathroom and shut the door. The loamy stench was oppressive. The shit in the toilet was more than two days old.

How could there be a problem with the plumbing? The house wasn't even three years old. He squatted over a bucket on the tile floor. The toilet paper went into the garbage basket in the corner. They'd had to do the same thing on their honeymoon in Costa Rica. At that buggy hotel.

"Remember when?" He stopped because he was emerging from the bathroom and he saw that her eyes were closed.

“Remember what?”

“Nothing.”

The crust of bubbles floating around the edge of the sink reflected the sunrise. He dipped his hands underneath the gray water. The bubbles rose to the sink’s brim.

So much open water inside the house made him nervous. Every sink and tub in the house was now stopped up and half full. The boss had warned them against filling the tubs more than halfway in case they started to leak. Mr. Uninve imagined his whole house filled with water, the floors and ceilings soaked through, the furniture floating, his wife still sleeping on the bed.

He lifted his hands. Drops from his fingertips dappled the surface of the water in the sink and resurrected tiny iridescent soap bubble domes.

Outside, the diesel engine of the backhoe hiccupped to life.

“Baby, can you empty the bucket in the other bathroom, please?” Mrs. Uninve-Anderson said.

“The toilet in there is full,” he said.

“Can you go set it in the other bathroom then?” she said. “And turn on the fan?”

He hefted the bucket down the hallway, careful to keep it level. The bathroom across from the nursery smelled equally like shit. He quickly shut the door.

In the morning, the nursery was the sunniest room in the house. Mr. Uninve stepped past the crib and pulled back the Dalmatian-spotted curtain. The yellow sunlight lit the ceiling and the tops of the walls.

He stood near, but did not touch the empty crib. The bars were painted black like the rungs of a ladder, the base, red like a firetruck,

with white windows and black half-moon wheels along the bottom. Without thinking, he'd once referred to the room as "The False Alarm Nursery," but that had been while they were entertaining four of their closest friends from the firm, friends who were closer than family really, and he'd never called it that again.

Why did he refuse her advances? He didn't know. A few weeks ago, she'd said that he was having a failure of imagination. She said that he no longer seemed to believe that they would be happy. He needed to imagine them as happy parents.

The street below was all broken up. A muddy hole, four feet wide, spanned from one curb to the other. The boss was scraping dirt from the bottom using the backhoe. He maneuvered the metal brontosaurus neck slowly so that only a sliver of clay rose into the bucket. The kid was down inside the hole. Between scoops, he probed the damp clay with a shovel and then spit tobacco juice into the smiles he'd left in the earth.

"You're going to be late for work," Mrs. Uninve-Anderson said, circling his waist with her arms. He hadn't heard her. "The tub downstairs isn't full yet," she said. "You could take a quick shower down there."

"I'm taking the day off," he said.

"You don't need to work?" She tapped a black hat on the fireman mobile into spinning.

"I've got days I can use."

"You need to save them if we're going to go to St. Martin's this winter."

"I've got enough."

"Whatever you say, baby. I'm going back to sleep."

She walked back down the hallway to the bedroom. He walked the opposite direction, down the stairs and outside. He pulled the heavy front door closed behind himself, raised a hand against the sun, and walked over to the hole in the street. The kid nodded to greet him. The boss turned off the backhoe.

“We’re just about to the PVC pipe,” the boss said. “With a little luck, you’ll be flushing your toilets by noon. Once we find it, we just got to cut it, snake out whatever’s in there, and put in a new length of pipe.”

“Sounds good,” Mr. Uninve said. “If you need anything, I’ll be inside. I’m taking the day off.”

In the kitchen, he fixed himself some toast and a glass of orange juice. He decided that he would spend the day getting organized. His home office and the workbench in the garage had become intermingled. There were boxes of files underneath the workbench, wrenches and hammers on the bookshelves next to his desk.

As he pressed the button to open the garage door, he hoped that the workmen would look past his Mercedes and see that he had real tools, quality brands that were worn from use. He owned tools most investment bankers didn’t, a post-hole digger, a miter box, a switch grinder. Anything he could do himself he did. He rarely hired manual laborers. He wanted the workmen to know this, but there was no way to tell them.

By midmorning, he had nearly unbraided the contents of the two spaces, though each now looked messier than before. There were unsorted piles on the shelves and the floors.

On his way to the garage, he stepped into his wife’s painting studio. She hadn’t come downstairs yet. On Saturdays she sometimes

read in bed for several hours before coming down. He hadn't known that she did the same thing on weekdays when he was usually at work.

He flipped through some canvases leaning against the wall.

He was in all of the paintings. After the first interruption—her word, not his—he'd become her favorite subject to paint. He had no idea why. Because she painted from photographs, he never had to sit for her, and because she didn't like to talk about work in progress, he often didn't know that she had painted him until she had another gallery show.

In a stack against the far wall, he found a tall painting in which he stood much as he did now, except that he was wearing bright biblical robes and he wasn't carrying a handsaw. The expression on his face was joyful. He thought he recognized the angle of the smile from a picture she'd taken of him while they'd been vacationing in Turkey two years before.

He eased the canvases back.

He'd come to resent her studio and her art, because she wasn't thankful. She was able to create every day, and still she wasn't thankful.

He didn't want her to be thankful to him necessarily, or to his concept of God, but just thankful. She lacked a general thankfulness. Without thankfulness, she'd begun to hate. She hated the gallery in New York that sold her work, because they pushed her paintings like high-end Thomas Kinkade. She hated the subdivision in which they lived, Holy Oaks, because of the fountain in front of the monument sign. "Why can't they put that fountain in a park instead of on a suburban corner where no one can enjoy it?" She hated their friends from the firm, the friends who had seen them through their hardest

times. “They talk about money like it means something,” she said. “And they wouldn’t know art if it bit off their faces.” She hated him when he wouldn’t fuck her.

He wanted to shake her. Couldn’t she see that without the money from his job at the firm, she wouldn’t have this studio and time to paint? Didn’t she realize that if she’d had to work like he’d had to work straight out of college, she might never have developed the talent that allowed her to sell her work at a profit?

She wasn’t the only one who could create. He’d built this house. He knew how to imagine something into existence.

The doorbell intoned throughout the house. He opened the front door, still holding the handsaw.

Stuart, their next-door neighbor stood on the front step watching the workmen. A dark butterfly of sweat clung to the back of his shirt. His running shoes were caked with tawny clay. When he turned around, his endorphin smile flattened for a moment, but returned as they shook hands.

“Quite a project you’ve got going here,” he said. “Do you know how long the road’s going to be torn up for?”

“They said they’d have the pipe fixed by this afternoon. Then they just need to fill in the hole and call the asphalt truck.”

“I don’t mind,” Stuart said. “I was just curious. I talked to your wife when she came over to use my shower yesterday. If either of you want to come over and use it today, you’re more than welcome. What do they think’s blocking it? Is it roots?”

“They said there’s no way of knowing until they cut open the pipe.”

“You have the day off?”

"I've got stuff I need to do around the house, plus I want to be here in case anything happens, God forbid. What's your excuse?"

"I'm only down at the U one day a week this semester," the neighbor said. "I have a grant to write my Jesus book."

"Hey, boss," the boss called.

"I better get to work," Stuart said. "If you need anything, let me know."

Stuart jogged toward his house, which was slightly smaller than the other houses in the neighborhood, but still too big for a professor's salary. Mrs. Uninve-Anderson had told Mr. Uninve that their neighbor was from old money, St. Paul railroad or Minneapolis flour. She couldn't remember which.

Mr. Uninve went to where the boss stood over the hole. Down below, the kid cradled the white PVC pipe in one arm. A three-foot length had been sawed out so that now there was a gap. The pipe sloped gently from the kid's arms to the bottom of the hole and disappeared into the clay right below the curb nearest the house.

"Thought you might want to see this," the boss said.

The kid stuck a metal snake up the pipe. He pulled back hard and scampered partway up the side of the hole. Soapy piss-water and shit slid over the bottom of the hole. The kid climbed higher and rested his elbows on the street. His heels dangled against the flat dirt wall of the hole.

"What was it?" the boss asked. "What'd you pull out?"

"I didn't see it."

"Well, take a look."

"I'm not going down there till that pipe's done emptying," said the kid.

Something shiny floated in the oozing clay.

"You got any girls might of flushed a tampon applicator or something like that?" asked the boss.

The kid spit tobacco at the shiny thing.

"It's just me and my wife."

"It don't really look like a tampon," the kid said. "It's too slick."

"That might just be the mud," the boss said. "See what it is."

"There's too much shit. Bring me a hose or something to wash it off with."

"You can't wash shit off of mud with a hose. Pick it up with your glove."

The kid eased back down into the hole. He straddled the piss-moist swath at the mouth of the pipe and gingerly squeezed the thing between his glove fingers.

"There's about a dozen of em wadded up," the kid said. He tossed the thing against the far dirt wall. "Rubbers."

The boss stared at Mr. Uninve like he might have stared at a dumb animal.

"You know you're not supposed to flush rubbers, right?" the boss asked. "One gets stuck, it catches all the rest."

"We don't use condoms," Mr. Uninve said.

The boss turned in the backhoe seat.

"Don't feel like you need to lie to me just cause you did something stupid," he said. "I don't care one way or the other. I get paid either way. But that pipe leads right up into your house. So I know anything in that pipe was flushed down one of your toilets. I'll come out here and dig up the street and snake the pipe as many times as you

want, but if you just throw them in the trash from now on, your neighbors won't have to get mad at you for having the street all dug up."

"How soon before we can turn on our water?" Mr. Uninve looked up at the house.

"We'll let you know. But don't turn it on before we tell you to." Mr. Uninve heard the kid laugh behind him as he went in through the open garage.

"How come rich guys can never admit when they've done something wrong?" the kid asked.

Mr. Uninve took the stairs two at a time. The hallway walls slid past him.

He stopped at the closed bedroom door. His own dank scent, the musk of more than a day, hovered on the edge of his nose. The scent was there and then gone. He didn't know what he would say, if anything.

The bedroom door hit something on the other side. The bottom of a bucket stared at him. A dark fan of shit spread across the carpet almost to the bed. His naked wife stepped out of the bathroom, one hand on her hip, the other touching the toothbrush in her mouth. They both stared at the floor. Something underneath seemed to move. Then, at the center of the dark shape, points of white began to blossom. The expensive carpet was already shedding filth. □