

Travail



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I awake to quiet. Neighbors who slammed doors half the night sleeping. Lauderdale Courts sleeping. Memphis sleeping. No sirens, no horns, no roaring traffic.

The apartment is quiet. No snoring. Otis not asleep on the couch, nor sprawled on the stairs. He left while I was sleeping three nights ago. Left with the money I saved for the baby.

Leone wails in the girls' room. "I told you to stop it!" Valerie shouts. Barely daylight, and they're already fighting.

Heels kick my belly. A foot moves across. I hope it's a boy. A man has it easier. Suffers less pain. Walks away and leaves trouble behind. Pain weights a woman down like an iron collar. Don't leave her a place to hide.

A baby's the last thing I need, but I'll do the best I can. That's what I did with Valerie and Leone. I felt happy holding them, counting fingers and toes. Until Otis came home, breathing liquor fumes and curses. The good feelings just floated away like puffs of his cigarette smoke.

Labor will start soon. Pain going on and on. No help. No one to care. "No more babies," Dr. Edgeworth said after Leone was born. "It's too hard on you with your hip like this." Ha! Tell that to this big belly.

Tired, that's the sum of it. My bones are tired, but I can't stay in bed. Every rag in this place dirty.

I start to get up, but a pain tears through my hip. The hip I broke when I was a hungry little kid. I fall back on the bed. This pain ain't nothing to the pain when labor starts. My hip already an everlasting torment.

~

That day's like yesterday. I woke up hungry. Nothing unusual about that. Delma, my mama, gone. Nothing unusual about that either. What was unusual was I decided to do something about it.

Gerda Jacobsen hired Delma to do her spring-cleaning. Delma took me along to help, but Gerda gave me buttered bread and sent me out to play. The bread was so good. Gerda cooked it herself. I saw a row of loaves on the table.

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I didn't have nothing to play with. I just wandered around looking at trees full of peaches. I thought this must be Eden from the Bible stories Delma used to tell me.

When I woke up hungry, I headed to the orchard. The peaches were gone, except a few high up in the tree. I climbed up, stretched out, out, out. My foot slipped, and I fell. My hip, oh, my hip. I could not move. I hollered but nobody came. Everything turned black. I drifted all night, asleep, awake, asleep.

It was daylight when a yellow-haired woman with sleeves like curtains bent over me. I smelled bread, and I knew it was Gerda. "Minnie Hopper," she said. She told a man to take me home. "She lives in that shack on Beaver Dam Road."

"Put her in there," Delma said. The man laid me on my cot and left. Delma was mad as a hornet. Got madder when I cried. "Shut up, bitch!" she screamed. "It's just a bruise. I don't have money for a doctor." She slapped me hard.

In a few days, Gerda came to see me. Delma was gone. Gerda told me to get up, but I couldn't. I hurt too bad, and I was dizzy. She washed me and put a different dress on me. It was dirty, but I had not messed on it. She took me to the doctor. "I'll do the best I can," he said. "But it's too late."

~

I can't lay here daydreaming. Too much work to do. I grab the bed frame and sit up. My swollen belly forces my legs apart. I cackle, though it's not funny. My legs forced apart the first time while my hip was broke.

Chuck Swain, Delma's new husband, came to my bed in the dark. I pretended to be asleep. He touched my panties. I fought and screamed, but he ripped off my clothes and smothered me with his stinking body. My hip hurt so bad I fainted. When I come to, I was bloody and sticky. I knew what happened to me. I cried and cried.

I was dirty. I had to wash off the blood, the sticky mess. I couldn't get up. Couldn't walk. I slipped to the floor. Nearly fainted again. I crawled to the back porch. Found a dirty washrag and a pan of slimy water. Washed the best I could. I dreaded crawling back to bed. I lay on the porch till I was half-frozen.

I started back, pulling myself forward, then stopping to rest. I heard snoring. Delma sprawled on the bed drunk.

I hate Chuck, hate Delma, hate the Hoppers. They're my grandparents, but they don't claim me.

They threw Delma out when she got pregnant. She was just fourteen. Threw her clothes into the yard. They didn't believe her story about a neighbor raping her.

Delma slept wherever she could find a place. Lots of times in the barn where she worked. She milked cows and worked in the fields for food and diapers. As time went on, she spent more and more of the money for whiskey and cigarettes.

When she married Chuck, we moved into his shack on Cane Creek Road. It was like a barn. And living with him was much worse than being alone.

The Hoppers lived up the road in a house built on stilts. They rattled past in their old truck when they went to the Shining Light Church. They always looked straight ahead.

Somebody stuck a knife in Chuck's back. I found him in the weeds where I acted angel

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stories. He was on a pile of broken bottles. I smelled him before I saw him. I knew who he was from his shirt. An animal had eaten his face. I spit on him.

Nobody figured out who killed him. "Good riddance," the sheriff said.

Other men followed, all sorry as dirt. Until Delma's stroke. Now, she can't hardly talk. She lives in Chuck's shack. And spends her government check on whiskey and cigarettes.

I loved to go to school, but I missed a lot. I had to milk when Delma was drunk. Else we wouldn't have nothing to eat.

Once, a cow was gone. It was time for her calf. I waded snow looking for her. I came to a road. I didn't know which road it was. I stumbled along. So tired. My hip hurt so bad. I came to a house and knocked on the door. Gerda opened the door. "My, God, is that you, Minnie?" She wrapped me in a blanket and took me to the hospital. I had pneumonia.

After I got better, she helped me get a job at Formby's General Store. They sold groceries, hardware, sewing notions, and bologna sandwiches. Bertilda Formby needed somebody to put up stock and do the cleaning, and Gerda talked her into giving me a chance.

Otis Watson stopped at the store to buy beer and cigarettes. He was the first man who saw me as a woman. I fell in love with his dark hair, brown eyes, sweet words. I thought he was the answer to my troubles. A grown man telling me how pretty I was. Nobody ever told me I was pretty before.

He was like the dirty books Chuck hid from Delma. He had a pretty cover. I was like Delma. I saw the cover. I didn't see what was inside. If only I'd seen how lazy he was, often drunk, crosswise to the world. If only I'd known he could never be the answer to anything.

I was sixteen when we married. He was thirty. I moved into his shabby apartment at the edge of Memphis. The first night I knew I'd made a mistake. Might as well be raped by Chuck as the man you married. A week later, he come home drunk. He wanted supper. I told him it was midnight, and he slapped me. Life was downhill from there. I was pregnant the first thing. I couldn't leave. Didn't have nowhere to go.

I soon had two babies. I couldn't work, and Otis only worked when he took a notion. Times got so hard I decided to move into Lauderdale Courts with the girls. "You won't catch me living in a damned housing project," Otis shouted. He stomped out. Left me penniless.

Gerda helped me sign up for welfare. Helped me move, paid my rent. She brought me groceries and some of her bread.

Otis showed up in a few weeks. He stayed long enough to get me pregnant and left again. Since then, he shows up, stays a few days, gets drunk, and disappears.

I like living in the projects. The rent's cheaper, and I have a friend, Phyllis Threet. Phyllis knows about drunken husbands and empty purses. Gerda's my angel, but Phyllis is the mother I never had. She wants me to get shed of Otis. To get a job after this baby comes. Says she'll keep the kids.

Otis *is* a sorry father. He ignores the girls or slaps them around. But how can I get shed of him? If I lock him out, he'll beat the door down. I'm scared to death of what he'll do.

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The girls are playing school. Valerie knows her numbers and letters. She'll be ready this fall. I'll get her to school one way or another. She's got to learn.

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I got my GED. Gerda paid for my class, and Phyllis kept the girls so I could go. Otis said it was the “stupidest damned thing” he ever heard of. “A grown woman going to school.” He said I couldn’t go, but I went anyway. He was either gone or too drunk to know.

I pull myself up and head to the bathroom. I take off my threadbare gown and toss it on the pile of towels. I put on the clothes I wore yesterday, pull my hair back, and fasten it with a rubber band. I don’t bother with shoes. My feet are too swollen.

I take the sheets off the beds. One of the girls’ sheets has a rip down the middle. Where will I ever get money for new sheets? I can’t never make the welfare check stretch far enough to cover our needs. We all need new shoes. Valerie can’t start to school barefoot. Phyllis is right though. The money would go a lot farther if Otis didn’t spend so much of it on whiskey.

“Girls, it’s time to go,” I say. I start down the stairs with the laundry, but bile rises in my throat. I drop the bundle and limp back to the bathroom.

I kneel and throw up in the commode. My belly contracts like I was in labor, but I can’t be in labor till I get the clothes washed. Everything turns black. I hold onto the commode until I feel better. My face is covered with sweat. I wipe it on the last of the toilet paper. I’ll have to borrow some from Phyllis. I flush and start down the stairs again.

Valerie shrieks, and Leone starts crying. The wailing pierces my brain. I’m sick, my hip hurts, I have to get the clothes washed. “Get down here!” I scream.

The girls sidle slowly down the stairs. I slap them. “Shut up! I ain’t going to put up with your fighting. It’s time for the baby, and I’ve got to wash all these damned clothes.”

Valerie stops crying. I see hate in her eyes. Leone keeps snuffling. She hides her face in Valerie’s skinny chest. Valerie pats her back. “Shhh!” she says

Look at them! Turning away from me. What if they start hiding from me the way I hid from Delma? I sink into a chair. “Come here,” I say.

They hold back. I see they are afraid. I raise my arms. “Come here.” They run to me. I bury my face in their hair. I wipe my eyes on my sleeve and look at them. They’re a mess but they’d waste time if I sent them to wash their faces and comb their hair. I ought to wash their dresses, but they don’t have any clean ones to put on.

I give them crackers for breakfast. I pick up the bundle and we head out. We cross the street and go down the stairs to the laundromat in the basement.

It’s early, but Audrey Richardson is already there. Her laundry is in the dryer. She’s embroidering yellow rosebuds on a tiny blue sweater. She’s expecting her first baby. Her husband treats her like a China doll. He opens doors for her and carries her groceries. Otis said they make him want to puke, but I think it’d be real nice to have somebody wait on me.

Audrey smiles her sugary smile. Her cheeks are as pink as Gerda’s peaches. “Isn’t it about time for your baby?”

I don’t want to talk to this powder puff. I nod and head to the back. Away from Miss Spic-and-Span. The girls stop to talk.

“You making a sweater for your baby?” Valerie asks. “It’s so pretty,” Leone says. Audrey tells them she’s making blankets and dresses and all kinds of things. It makes me so mad. My baby will be lucky to have diapers and a shirt. Audrey thinks she’s the first woman to ever have a baby, but she’ll soon find out what it’s like. Babies are always hungry, always crying.

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Day or night, makes no difference to them.

Soon Audrey's little dab of laundry is dry and folded in her basket. She walks back to my corner. I smell her perfume. Like flowers. "Let me know if I can help when you start labor," she says. "I'll be glad to keep the girls, or drive you to the hospital."

I keep shoving clothes into the machine. Humph! That's her way of saying she knows Otis is off on a drunk.

Phyllis and other women come in. They're upset over the rumor that the rent's going up. "How will we ever catch up?" Phyllis pulls a strand of gray hair. She's pulled her hair until the ends are frazzled. Wonder how far behind she is?

I'm behind, too, but I have more pressing worries than rent. I finish folding clothes. I'm ready to go, but the girls have disappeared. Probably following Audrey like two puppies. She fills their heads with big dreams, but she *is* teaching them things. How many letters and numbers would Valerie know if Audrey hadn't taught her?

I go back to the apartment, put the sheets on the beds, and start putting up laundry.

The girls burst in. "Mama!" Valerie shouts. "Audrey invited us to a picnic. In the park."

"Can we go?" Leone asks. "Please."

"Go ask Phyllis if we can borrow some toilet paper first," I say. I may need it before the day is gone.

The girls rush out. They're soon back with a roll of paper. "We're going," Valerie says. "Bye," Leone shouts.

They run out, shouting about slides and merry-go-rounds. I picture them on the swings. Flying into the sky. Maybe they'll get to feed the ducks.

~

The year after I fell from the tree, I helped Gerda pick peaches and peddle them. It was hot and dusty, but we knocked on doors till we sold every bushel.

Afterwards, Gerda pulled into the city park and stopped by the lake. She took a basket and ice chest out of the truck, and we had a picnic. Fried chicken, fresh-baked bread, boiled eggs, sliced tomatoes, pound cake, peaches, and Nehi grape. The best meal I ever ate.

Gerda let me feed breadcrumbs to the ducks. We laughed when a little fish stole one of them. After the crumbs were gone, Gerda said, "It's time to go home."

"Let's don't go," I begged.

"Thirty more minutes," Gerda said. "Then we have to go."

I swung as high as I could. I was higher than the big houses we'd stopped at. They had flowers everywhere. Children in pretty clothes played in the yards. If only I could live in such a place!

After I got back to the empty shack, I lay on the filthy bed and cried. Why couldn't Gerda be my mother?

~

I collapse on the bed. But I am miserable. No matter which way I turn, the pain is there.

The baby is coming soon. Today. Tomorrow. I'll look for a job after it comes. Phyllis will keep the girls. And this baby. She'll be good to them. And she won't charge an arm and a leg. Just enough to piece out her welfare check. Maybe she can catch up on the rent. But I won't

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work so Otis can spend the money on liquor. My money will buy things the children need. I might even save enough for sheets.

I drift off to sleep. I dream about pain and tearing and blood. I wake up with a backache. I know that misery. I get up to go to the bathroom. My water breaks. The mess runs down my legs and puddles on the floor.

I get some towels. They're clean, even if they are in shreds. I wipe my legs and mop the floor. It don't do much good. Stuff keeps dripping out of me.

Tears drip, too. I can't stand it. The mess, the pain, Otis gone, no money for a cab. Where are the girls? It's time for them to be home. I oughtn't to have let them go off with Audrey. Time don't mean a thing to that woman. She's carefree as a bird.

A pain takes my breath away. What am I going to do? I don't know how to find Otis, but he wouldn't help. He won't have any money left, and he won't know what to do. All he knows how to do is drink and get me pregnant. He don't know how to deliver babies or take care of them after they're born. I'm tired of his mouth and his fist and his stinking body. How could he take the baby money?

Another pain, and so soon! I'll have to ask Phyllis to take me to the hospital. She'll go on and on about Otis and what I ought to do. And she's right.

It'll be pain of another kind to get shed of him. He'll never just slink away forever like my father did. Phyllis says a few nights in jail will see the end of him. I don't know if she's right or wrong, but I'll call the sheriff if he causes trouble. I have to claim my life back. For the children and for myself.

The next pain is harder. It wrenches my body. I cry out as another pain grips my body. And another. And another.

My hip! Oh God, I'm ripping apart! I have to get help, but I can't move. I scream and scream and scream.

"Minnie," a voice says. It's an angel come to help me, to help my baby. Not my old angel Gerda, who smells like bread, but my new angel Audrey, who smells like flowers. She takes my hand. "Push," she says.

"I can't," I sob. "I can't move."

She grips my hand. My fingers tingle. "Push!" she orders. Her face is red, her mouth set in a straight line. "You have to push."

Strength flows from her small white hand into my rough red one. It flows through me. My body starts pushing all by itself.

Audrey squeezes my hand till it's numb. "Push," she orders. I push with all my might. And then, the baby's there between my legs.

Audrey, Miss Spic-and-Span, pays no attention to the bloody mess. She picks up the baby and places it in my arms. "A boy!" she says. Her face glows like the sun is shining on it.

The baby is covered with blood and slime, but he's all right. He's screaming. His hands thrash mightily. I laugh out loud, tears streaming down my face.