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Dénouement

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Dénouement

She was summoned to a court of soothsayers instructed to tell her the Bad News. The man whose egg cracked first was the man to let her know. A large robed official gave the silent command to begin, and nervously the first young soothsayer stepped forward. He extended his arm, opened his fingers, then watched gravity snatch the egg down. Of course it broke — yellow mucus on stone — and the young man looked at her like God I'm sorry.

Guess, she was told. She held a rigid posture and pronounced quietly: Dad's dead. The young soothsayer hung his head. She was wrong. Sharp edged shell in either hand, he looked at her again, pityingly, and began to speak. Then she woke up.

The room was Saturday bright. She lay there, half relieved, half mad that the dream had ended so abruptly. Instead of stretching, she curled around the slumbering Siamese — cats never actually sleep — which began purring and warming her neck and chest. Sunlight bars striped the bed with shadow; she measured them against the edge of the mattress. Beyond that, the window framed the grey garage roof, arthritic branches scraping against it.

She had heard the car pull out hours before, when she refused to acknowledge awareness. She knew she was then sleeping, and that meant not thinking, for once. But she had heard it. Now she listened to the emptiness of the house. It stroked her like she stroked the cat; too hard, but comfortingly.

A whole day without school, she thought. Without teachers spewing irrelevant names and dates and handing back red-Xed quizzes. Not even a bus ride today. In January that one bus spit her out and into her mother's arms. He was alive. All day she had been counting hours "on the table." With wet fingers she had dropped a coin in the telephone between classes. After French it was only two hours; by World Regions he had been "under the knife" six. But that was months ago, she noticed. The windows were the same. The garage roof was the same shade of grey: kind of blue. The same sun poured in this morning as it had for years of Saturday mornings. Things weren't that different, not compared to what it would have been like . . .

She threw off her covers high across the bed, shading the cat in a slow arch. Heading toward the shower, she shed her gown and began to rationalize. They were tired. They were all tired, sure. Living with it,

with him, like that, for so long. Every day. Every night, at dinner, trying to ignore the obvious slip-ups. The coughing, the gagging, but worst of all, the silence. He, so quiet, would try to work down applesauce, his bald, scarred head bowed. Being quiet so as not to disturb the meal. They all were expected to continue, not looking up from their plates. He was dying, was what Sandy figured. But the doctors had said no. It's all in his mind, they had told the family. There was no more cancer. He just has to decide he's going to eat again and gain weight.

It had been long and tough. But not too tough, she guessed. It could be worse, she thought under hot water, remembering it was April, not January. He is alive, she told herself.

Eyes closed, smelling soap and shampoo, she scrubbed away bad thoughts, replacing them with a film of perfumed memories.

They were walking somewhere, some field in her childhood, up along the railroad tracks. The rusty brown and silver rails smelled oily, winding back into the woods from a field of golden rod and Queen Anne's lace, if she was remembering right. Clouds marbled the sky, their fibers silently breaking away, thread fingers reaching out, she was thinking.

Her father was ahead of her, balancing on the rails, looking very much like a kid himself, much like his free daughter squatted over, examining slugs or ants or, no — it must have been something more like a lady bug. Round polka-dotted button on her finger, that's what it must've been, she was thinking. But the bug held her attention only until her father called to her, pointing out something much more rare, exciting.

"Look at this, Sandy," he pointed down, at the ties. Her little body jogged up to him, then mimicked her father's stance: hands on knees, bent over, butt high.

"Oo. What is it, Dad?"

"It's a mantis."

"A what?"

"A mantis, Sandy, see? You don't find these around too often. Lookit." He picked up a twig and gently pulled the insect's claws out. The eyeball head slowly cocked to the left. "See, it's praying. A praying mantis."

"What's it eat?" Sandy looked worried. "Lady bugs?"

"I wouldn't doubt it. You want to pick it up?" The girl stepped back.

"Uh uh," she said from behind his leg. Her father straightened up and dropped the stick.

"Well maybe we'll let him go on this time," he said with his hand on her head. She looked up and smiled.

"Okay." They started walking.

"Now what was its name?" he quizzed her.

"Prain mantis," she proudly proclaimed.

"Good!" He pulled her up onto his shoulders. "Hold my hands," he instructed. So there they were, the perfect father and daughter, she was thinking, reaching for a towel. They balanced on the rails of a track that went on further than they could see.

"Dad? How do you do this?" She asked looking down on his head, over his nose and her own stuck-out shoes.

"Do what?"

"You don't fall on here." She pointed to the rail.

"You mean balance?"

"Yeah," Sandy affirmed, "balance."

"Well, you can do that," he said. "Look. Lock your elbows." He hoisted her down and lined the little feet in front of his on the track. "Just one foot in front of the other and stretch out your arms. Like this." So they walked a few steps together. "There you go." He released her arms and stopped. Sandy immediately tottered then jumped off the railing. She looked at her father who stood silent while she mounted the iron bar again. This time she succeeded in walking about a foot until her outstretched arms swept the air and she again was forced to the gravel.

"How do you keep from falling?" she wanted to know. Her father looked into the sky before posing the question.

"What do you do when you think you're going to fall?" he asked, hands on hips.

Sandy held the sides of her tummy, puckered her face in thought. She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"What do you do," her father repeated, "when you think you're going to fall?" The girl retained her pondering stance. "Try it," he suggested. "Get on the rail . . ." she did, ". . ." and tell me when you think you're going to fall."

Sandy held her fingers out ballet style and began to walk. On the third step she stopped, her arms teetering. "NOW," she yelled just before hitting the ground.

"Okay," her dad said, satisfied.

Sandy stood up. "What?"

"What happened when you felt like you were going to fall?" he coached.

"I fell," was her answer.

"That's right." He scooped her up again and continued on their way, whistling to a whippoorwill.

She rubbed the towel in her hair until it was only damp, echoing the whistle she imagined her father making. It was Saturday, it was new. It was new and equally the same to her. "Kitty," she called through the door, "let's do something today, okay?" The Siamese yawned and extended his paws, then claws, then moistened his padded feet to smooth over his coat as Sandy dabbed her body dry.

Downstairs was cold. The kitchen — a mess. Mrs. Gumble's chicken soup was on the stove; a scab had grown there overnight. Tin foil and wax paper were everywhere: by the salad from Janis, meatloaf of Lin's. Some godawful casserole of corn and beans and peppers was never put up either. The cat had gotten into the empty ice cream carton, had torn it all up. She did not feed him yesterday, and couldn't remember about the day before. Burger King remains in the sink.

Out of habit, she looked for a Note. There was always a note. He liked to write them, thought it made everyone feel safer that he was in charge and wasn't just being taken for rides simply because he never drove any more. Sandy found it attached to the refrigerator. "At Memorial," it said in scrawled ballpoint, "for tests 8 am Dad." That told her little; he took more tests than she did, she thought.

She thought of the best note, which was in March when They, the authorities, suspected they'd better go back in him since he couldn't walk. They were brilliant doctors, the best in the country. The night before, he told Sandy to pray for him, but she forgot, having had a report due the next day. After the report had been given, after lunch in the cafeteria, after calisthenics in P.E. class, Sandy was at the mercy of the eventual yellow bus ride. She had been eager, then reluctant to round the corner and bring her undeniably brick home into view. The bus threw her out in front of the house, which was looming up, holding in a note what the next course of action — or inaction — was. It said: "Sandy the prayer didn't work this time. Surgery scheduled for Monday 7 am Dad." That was the best note, she thought, scanning the sloppy counters. That was the best and worst and it was not now.

Instead of pouring from the cereal box, she crumpled the wax lining down inside and slammed it in the cupboard. All of it, she thought, grabbing other boxes and bags, carrying the skillet and loaf pan to the sink, where she squeezed thin streams of translucent white from the Ivory bottle. She snatched up hamburger wrappings, clotted and torn ketchup packets, kleenex and paper towels, empty coke bottles. Dish-rag in hand, she wiped the counters and the stove top, scraping off dried blobs with her fingernail.

They'd be home in about two hours, she guessed. The kitchen would be sparkling clean, the refrigerator cleared out and orderly. Her mother would be so pleased she had cleaned up. He'd be tired and quiet and maybe even hungry. They'd sit down and she'd have lunch ready: a grilled cheese for Mom, and for Dad, a milkshake, she guessed.

He could keep down milkshakes. They used to sneak in an egg before discovering some high protein extra nutritious liquid baby formula sauce. Those shakes were thick and cold and gold and sometimes the only thing he'd down. That and little crackers, or sometimes, she realized, cookies. Yes, that's the way it would go, she decided, getting out a stainless steel bowl. They'd come in and sit down and their daughter would serve Mom a sandwich and Dad a marvelous milkshake and some wonderful cookies, for a change. And maybe, she thought, they'd tell her a funny story about . . . about something.

So she started a big batch of cookies. The whole works: chocolate chips, pecans, brown sugar, oatmeal. Hearty, but soft, not heavy. Loaded with calories. The dough whipped around in the mixer bowl; butter, sugar, all creamy. She dropped in two eggs, watching the yellow being drawn in to the beaters, thick as oil, saturating sugar, the whites oozing in and out. It was a turbulent, creamy world around those beaters, Sandy saw. The turning metal walls shined when the rubber spatula scraped them, pushing down, smoothing out. Smooth, smooth, got to be smooth. In went the flour, soft and white, poofing up, mixing right. Gotta get it smooth, smooth.

The cat interrupted her mental chant, meowing only as a Siamese can. His big purple-blue eyes looked up wild and hungry. She swept him up, into her face. "Gotta get it smooth, smooth." Then she kissed him and perched him on her shoulders, carrying him to the refrigerator. He knew to step down when she leaned over, scooping out Little Friskies into his bowl. Hands washed, she went back to work.

The kitchen filled with the sounds of crunching cat food and chopping nuts and Sandy's chant which grew into a song:

Gonna put some nuts in, yeah yeah. Gonna make it lumpy but good. Gonna put some chips in, yeah yeah. Oh I'm in such a good good mood! That just doesn't rhyme — oh no! But do I really care? No, I'm just baking up some coo-kies. And they're gonna be so good; Gonna be so smooth; Gonna be so lumpy; Gonna be so — GOOD! Yeah, yeah. OOooo, Yeah. Hee hee hee hee!

She was dropping the dough onto the baking sheets "by rounded teaspoonfuls" as the last line of her song broke into laughter. "Kitty, you didn't know I could sing, huh?" Batch after batch, those cookies went in and came out of the oven. Smelled so good, she thought.

Chocolate melting into butter melting over pecan all sinking into dough rising up, growing out like a proud man's chest, tan and firm.

Her timing was almost perfect. The car rolled in just as she was putting the last dish in the sink to soak. The tidy white and yellow kitchen gleamed.

"Hi, Sandy." Her mother entered from the utility room, shaking herself off. Muddy droplets fell onto the floor, smeared by her shoes. She went out to hang up her coat. Sandy hadn't noticed it was raining.

Her father appeared, overcoated as well. "What are you making?" he asked, struggling with his gloves. His wife returned to help him. The trail of dirty water increased.

"Hey!" she exclaimed. "This place is beautiful!" She trotted off again.

Sandy smiled. "I'm making cookies, Dad. They're gonna be great. I've got chocolate chips in 'em and brown sugar, and nuts, and oatmeal and all that other good stuff. It's Aunt Selina's famous recipe. But you won't like them or anything," she teased. "Wanna taste anyway?" Sandy offered the shallow bowl of a wooden spoon.

"Look," he began. So she did. Her mother had taken his coat and hat. His scars were clean and shiny. "I'm not going to take this any more." He knocked the spoon from Sandy's outstretched arm. Batter hit the floor. "You better shape up or I'll smack the snot out of you!" He was a plastic head with a white face, she thought. A hard, gnarled ant threatening her. His eyes were wild like the cat's, his hand cocked back like a ping pong paddle ready to serve. It flashed through her mind: We used to play games. He yelled again, "I'll smack you across this room!"

Sandy stood still and stiff and said, "Who are you?"

Her mother stepped between them, horrified. Her hands moved from her mouth to her cheeks but Sandy left the room before they reached her mother's swelling eyes. She stood just by the doorway, out of sight. She heard her father's hand drop, then his heavy steps across the floor. She heard her mother help him along, out of the kitchen to the banister. She heard them climb the stairs, she heard the sheets being folded down. She heard her mother ask if he would like anything. Later, he said. She heard her father lying heavily on the mattress, and the radio being turned on. Then she entered the kitchen where the counters sparkled, the refrigerator shined, and a few wisps of steam floated up from a fresh pile of cookies. Sandy picked up the wooden spoon from the floor.