

NESTS

Abigail Lipscomb

Four feet from the kitchen door, a bear hurls our trashcan to the ground. You and I watch from the window as it drops to all fours and pummels the belly of the can like a seasoned EMS worker performing CPR until the lid pops open. I put my finger to my lips, not wanting to frighten Jori and Baby, who are playing in the next room.

“Jori!” you call. “Come see the bear!”

Jori comes running, clutching a matchbox car in each hand, his 1½-year-old sister lurching along behind.

“Hey,” he says, “you got a bear?”

I grab Baby—she has a name, we just don’t use it—and move away from the window.

Outside, the bear slices open a bloated trash bag with a razor-sharp claw and buries his snout inside.

“We should get them away from the window,” I say and lock the door—a glass door, of all things. We hadn’t planned on bears in the city.

“We need a garage,” I say, pining for the one we converted to a bedroom to make room for our daughter and her children. It’s an old story: reasonably sane couple raises a child who follows the plan—school, soccer, art classes, Girl Scouts—until age seventeen, when she runs away with her low-life boyfriend. Skip to the present and she returns home with two toddlers and no place to live.

“We’ll figure it out, won’t we, Jori?” you say in the singsong, let’s-not-be-cross-and-upset-the-children voice I’ve grown to dislike.

To you it’s just another pesky critter, like the groundhog that lives under the deck, but I know better. The bear is a sign. Our protection has slipped, punctured by a series of bad decisions made by our daughter, resulting in two unplanned pregnancies, and more recently a nonpaying job singing backup for a substandard rock band and living on the road while we raise her children. But also by us, because we raised her—right?

Outside, night has fallen and the bear, having taken its fill, lumbers across the driveway and disappears into a black wall of trees. In his wake, dirty diapers, food scraps, empty cans, and greasy paper towels litter the yard, broadcasting our chaos.

§

It's eight-thirty, well past their bedtime, but you're racing around the den on all fours, barking and grabbing their little pajama-clad legs in your teeth, making them crazy-wild. They shriek and run away, then tiptoe back drunk with joy.

"Eight-thirty," I announce as you scamper by, your legs still firm, though your chin has begun to sag. I'm in my chair with the lumbar pillow for my aching back. I'd hoped to have a quiet hour with you before bedtime—they'll be up again at daybreak.

Jori races to you, climbs on your back, and screams when you buck him off. Baby staggers over and locks her arms around your neck.

"Who's got me?" you growl.

"Roll over, doggy!" Jori yells.

"Ro-dover," Baby shouts.

Cute, right? Everyone should be so lucky, you'd say, to cavort with their grandchildren late in life, late at night.

§

"Look what I found by the road," you say as you haul a scruffy, water-stained double stroller onto our deck. It's one of your favorite things, making use of that which has been discarded.

"No good," I tell you, pointing to the frayed stubs where seat belts should be. "Chewed off by starving rodents."

"No," you say. "This is one of those really nice jogging strollers—a BOB. We could push the kids down the road and let them play in the creek."

"Can't use it if they fall out of it," I say. It's the hope in your voice I can't stand. You've been underreacting for months to everything I bring to your attention. The calmer you become, the more hysterical I feel. But that's not the point, is it? You don't seem to mind that we've lost our empty nest.

"A bungee cord would work," you tell me and disappear into the basement with Jori in tow, leaving the basement door ajar so Baby can fall down the stairs.

Danger Person, I've become, while you make them laugh. While you push them down the road in a stroller without seat belts, swerving and pretending

to let go while I watch for cars. You, not their mother, who is God knows where, and not their father, who is God knows who.

§

“He’s three years old. He should be out of diapers,” you announce at breakfast. You’ve made French toast again because Jori chose it last night when you asked. Carefully diced bits of toast lie untouched under a scrim of congealed butter and syrup on his Peter Rabbit plate because he thought you meant cheese toast. He doesn’t like French toast.

“Jori, don’t you want to wear big-boy pants instead of diapers?” you say.

“No,” he says, frowning as he parks his cars along the edge of his *Construction Site* place mat.

“Well, how about you tell Grandpa and Grandma when the poop is coming and we’ll go sit on the new potty together, okay?”

“The poop is not coming,” he says, poking the air with a little finger. His nails need clipping.

“Even if a small poop is on the way, we need to get onto the potty and wait for it, buddy.”

“Not comin’!”

“Don’t you want to play with the new dump truck Grandpa will get you if you go?”

Jori gathers his cars and scrambles down from his booster seat. “May-be [finger again] *not!*”

“Well, Grandpa just hates to see you sad because you can’t get in the big pool with the other boys this summer,” you tell him, shaking your head in despair. “You don’t want to be stuck in the baby pool with that big, heavy diaper, do you?”

Jori stands before you, two feet tall in his footie pajamas, and puzzles his lower lip between thumb and forefinger. “I don’t want to go swimming,” he says.

“But, Jori,” you say, placing your hand gently on the small of his back, drawing him closer, “all the big boys will be in the big pool, and I know you won’t want to have to play with just Baby in the baby pool. No offense, Baby.”

“I do,” he says and runs off.

§

I’m on a rock ledge halfway up the face of a cliff above a churning ocean. You’re not in this one. The ledge is big enough to lie down on; I’m not in danger of falling off if I stay put. Dozens of nests lined with chartreuse Easter

grass and containing goose-size, neon-yellow eggs are tucked into crevasses in the rock wall.

A woman appears, hands me a pair of purple harem pants, and disappears. *Good*, I think, *extra pants*. Our daughter is with me. “So blue,” she says, gazing at the ocean below. Toward the edge of the ledge is a baby swaddled in a yellow blanket. “Look,” I say, “someone has left us a baby.” Our daughter picks up the baby and is gone.

There are other ledges. A woman above me leaps and dives gracefully into the ocean, surfaces, and swims to shore. A woman on a ledge below lifts her arms and soars to the top of the cliff. They are free to come and go; I am not.

In the distance, across the ocean, a city nestled in pale sand grows violet in the setting sun.

§

It’s only five o’clock on a summer evening, but the kids have had to come inside because of the bear, and I’ve had to have another glass of wine. Through the window, Jori, Baby, and I watch you wind nylon clothesline through the handles of the trash can and across the lid. You bungee the can to the deck too, but that won’t stop a bear. A bear can open anything you can open with a crowbar. A bear can run as fast as forty miles per hour. A bear can kill a moose

with a single blow to the neck and carry the carcass up a mountain in its teeth. Bears are powerful, but worse, they're relentless. They have no memory of defeat.

It's getting dark. You stand in the driveway, in the light of the window, and study your work. You tug on the rope and jiggle the can.

I tap on the window. *Come inside now*, I mouth. *Come inside, come inside, come inside.*

"Come in, Papa," Jori shouts. "The bear is comin'!"

You go back to winding and tying rope. You are so stubborn, you are so macho. This is a failing of yours.

We sit with the kids in the den after their baths and watch *Mighty Machines* on TV. They eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while I fold clothes and you check your phone messages. From outside comes the whump and rumble of the trash can being dragged across the driveway.

"Hear that?" I say.

"What?" you say as you reassemble Baby's sandwich for her. Your eyes are puffy. You need more sleep and you need a haircut—neither of which you'll get anytime soon.

"I wanna see the bear!" Jori says, running to the window.

A black form emerges from the mouth of the can with something in its jaws—the ancient roast I culled from the freezer.

“What is that?” you say. “I thought we were being careful about what we throw away.”

“And I thought we were going to call animal control.” I say, picking up Baby and holding her tight. I’m not supposed to lift her because of my back, but I can’t say no to her little arms stretched my way. Also, of course, she looks and smells like our daughter did at that age: big blue eyes, pale wispy hair, molasses-honeysuckle scent.

§

“I just figured out why potty training was easier in the old days,” you tell me. We’re sitting in peanut-butter-stained chairs with our feet up. “Diapers were made of cloth: they were uncomfortable when they got dirty. Heavier, wetter.”

“Okay,” I say. I was hoping we could talk about something, anything else for the half hour we have left between their bedtime and ours, before we wake up in the morning and do it all over again.

“Yeah, and they sagged! It was obvious to everyone what was going on. Pampers are less...”

“Obtrusive.”

“Yes, underpants under rubber pants would be better.”

Great, I’m thinking. You won’t find rubber pants in a store, and I’ll have to watch the kids while you search online.

“Potty training should work like horse training,” I tell you. “A matter of finding the right reward for the target behavior. You go by their priorities; you don’t cajole. With horses, it’s herd first, then food, then comfort. With Jori, it’s probably candy, or matchbox cars. If those don’t work, we can always resort to negative reinforcement. You know, wait till Baby is trained and rub it in.”

“Really. Sounds like someone’s eager to take over the potty training.”

“Not hardly.”

§

You are a lovely person—a real gem, my mother likes to tell me. And I am so very lucky, she always adds. Okay, yes, a gem of a person, but part of your gem-ness involves being patient, and optimistic to the point that precautions are neglected and I have to step in. This is why I won’t go out there and pick up the trash, though it calls to me, jeers at me, from every window. Diapers, bundled like small reeking presents, stud the yard and driveway, setting our

home apart from our neighbors' with their velvet grass and chiseled borders. Because, I reason, you are less likely to do anything about the bear if you don't have to get your hands in the trash.

§

The chat room I visit when I can't sleep is called "Prodigals." I read the daughter stories.

The daughter of a woman in Canada leaves home at eighteen and can't be found. One day, the mother comes upon the girl panhandling on a street corner in Toronto. The daughter is thin, shivering, and dressed in rags. She agrees to be treated to lunch, but won't come home.

Another woman's daughter marries, moves away, and isn't heard from for a year or more until she calls to ask for money. The woman and her husband find her living on a mountain in Tennessee in a hut with a new baby and no electricity or plumbing. They continue to visit as often as their daughter permits, each time hiking up the mountain with groceries in backpacks.

These are the stories without drugs. The drug stories are worse. The daughter who turns up dead in a shopping cart in the city park, the young girl who turns tricks for drug money. I should feel lucky, but I don't. What if the

neon-yellow eggs in the Easter grass nests represent unsustainable progeny, duds that never hatch?

She'll come back, you tell me—like an optimist would say. But I need specifics, solid statistics. *Seventy-five percent of runaways return home eventually*, something like that.

“We should tell her we’re going to petition for full custody,” I’ve suggested. “Bring her to her senses.”

“No,” you said, touching my hair, “not while there’s a breath of a chance she’ll come back on her own.”

§

Animal control, it turns out, will not touch a bear. We are to call the sheriff if and when the bear shows up again.

In the bathroom, you sit on a stool beside the tub and work shampoo into Jori’s hair while I wrap Baby in a towel. Jori is playing “car wash,” pouring water over his cars, which are lined up along the rim of the tub. Water streams over the side onto your shoes. From outside comes the crash of the trash can hitting the tarmac.

“What the fuck?” Jori says, grinning.

“Jori! Where did you hear that?” you say. “We don’t talk like that here.”

“What the fuck?” Jori whispers, his eyes angelic with their long, dark lashes.

“Jori,” you say, taking his small arm in your big hand, “look at me. Grandpa doesn’t want you saying things like that. If you have to say something, say *heck*, okay? *Heck* is better, don’t you think, Grandma?”

“Well...”

Jori yanks back his arm and giggles. It’s too late. He’s found his first word bomb.

“The bear,” I tell you. “We need to call the sheriff.”

Twenty minutes later the bear is still rooting through the trash when the oscillating beam of a squad car pulses up our driveway. The bear, in no hurry, trundles off into the woods.

“That’s how you do it if you *don’t* want to see a bear,” I tell you as you turn on the outside light and step outside to meet the sheriff. I follow, carrying Baby and holding Jori’s hand.

“He’ll be back,” the sheriff says, passing the beam of his flashlight over our toy-strewn deck. “Probably a juvenile bear in hyperphagia—eating frenzy before hibernation.”

“You need to relocate him,” I say. “We have small children living here.”

“Can’t do that; they’re protected. Best I can do is suggest you keep your receptacle in the garage.”

“We don’t have a garage,” I say and look at you.

“What the heck?” Jori says. “I’m not allowed to say ‘fuck.’”

You and I look at each other with raised eyebrows—a gift, because I know such language distresses you. If it didn’t upset you so much, I’d be using it a fuck of a lot more often.

§

I think about it—what went wrong with our daughter. Like what Tolstoy said about unhappy families, each case of poor self-esteem is different from another. Maybe we spoiled her, indulged her bad habits because she struggled in school, or encouraged her lack of social filter in the name of self-expression. Or, better yet, *you* spoiled her with your infinite patience and generous spirit. But then, wouldn’t it follow that you’ve done the same with me, and I’ve become so self-centered that I can’t enjoy my grandchildren because they require daily sacrifice?

§

For once, you're not up yet, so I make the oatmeal, "eat-meal," as Jori calls it. Baby babbles in her high chair as I mix in the apples you've fried, because *kids need fruit*.

You arrive in the kitchen with Jori slung over your shoulder, both of you singing the Popeye song, *I'm good to the finish 'cause I eat my eat-meal, I'm Popeye the sailor man*. When your phone rings, I can tell by your face—the sudden coming to attention of your eyes and mouth—who it is.

"Yes, of course we can," you say. "But they miss you. Here, let me put Jori on, he found something interesting yesterday. We— No? Okay, I'll tell him."

Jori is already late for preschool when we descend the back steps into a sea of refuse surrounding the car. The smell is knock-you-over-nasty on this warm morning.

"You take him on and I'll get this," I tell you as I set the trash can up, but you continue to pick up trash. I buckle Jori into his car seat; my back is to you. We both jump when the can slams against the side of the house.

"I'm so damn tired of this," you say, kicking the trash bag at your feet, sending more cans rolling.

Ahh, I think. It was you I was missing on my ledge.

I tell you all this because one day you and I will have made stories out of it. We'll have added to and taken away from what actually happened and our stories will be different. Yours, for example, will include what the sheriff said when he passed his flashlight over the empty juice pouches, toy cars, kitchen implements, sodden stuffed animals, and mounds of sand from the sandbox, covering our deck. "Whoa," he said. "Did the bear do this?"

"Oh-ho, no," you said, laughing, delighted. "That's from the grandchildren."

My story will include one of the few nights you were too tired to read to Jori.

We lie together on his bed, propped against pillows; he's chosen *Goodnight, Goodnight, Construction Site*, again. I turn the page and wait, he'll want to identify the trucks before we read. "Friend-loader, men-mixer, crane-truck, dumb-truck, bull-dozer-truck," he says, jabbing at the pictures.

After the story, I settle him into "his nest," as he calls it. I roll up the comforter and tuck it tightly around him. I kiss the top of his head—he smells like flowers from his bath. I turn on the white-noise machine and the night-light that broadcasts stars across the ceiling.

"Ooh," he says about the stars every time.

Downstairs, I find you asleep in your chair with your head back and your glasses still on, your face resolute like Mount Rushmore. I sit down beside you and tell you about the ledge. How I'm stuck with no way off, afraid to dive or fly. "What if she never comes back and I ruin her children too?" I whisper.

Your eyes are still closed, your breathing still regular when you reach over and cover my hand with yours. Your big, warm, familiar hand touches mine, and I see it for a second—your violet city, where bears go away to sleep, and children use the potty, and people who return are allowed to start fresh.

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