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Amber Dorko Stopper

Marilyn the Mennonite

I have always worried. When I was in second grade and coming off of the school bus, I worried terribly that I had just heard my mother not win something on the radio. It was during a special contest month when the disc jockeys were pulling names out of the phone book, and if you answered them by saying "WGBA's gonna make me rich," you got a lot of money. As I got off the school bus that morning in second grade, I was positive I heard my mother lose.

"Hello?" the voice had said. And that was it. She had lost.

Hearing it from the staticky radio sitting on the school bus dashboard, I was sure it was my mother. I was wailing. I went into the school. I tried to tell them, I heard my mother lose the WGBA contest. She is probably so sad. She must need me. But no one would take me to the office to use the phone.

The flower of my mother's birthmonth was Lily of the Valley, a poisonous flower. Once I had made the connection between this poisonous flower and my mother, I was sure harm would come of it. I would sit at my desk at school and picture my mother sitting on the concrete steps of our house, reading *Woman's Day* and absently reaching into one of our concrete urns full of Lily of the Valley and eating it. You see, even when I was a little kid, I imagined that wherever I was not, the world began spinning out of control. I felt a turning

point on my honeymoon, when I let my new husband drive with a root beer barrel in his mouth. Not once did I picture his impending death; he had a root beer barrel in his mouth, which certainly could have killed him, particularly while driving, but with each second that passed the root beer barrel grew smaller and smaller. I was happy. I had in my pocket what we had been calling The Wad, about one third of our monetary wedding gifts, which over the three days of our honeymoon we spent easily on food, turnpike tolls, and gas. We spent our first night in Lancaster in a bed and breakfast run by a Mennonite couple named Marilyn and Bill. We thought that was very funny. Marilyn the Mennonite. In the bathroom medicine cabinet there was a tube of Chap-Stik so old that it was made of metal. It boasted an active ingredient called Moistu-Tane. Also, it said, try Chap-Ans for Hands.

“I want to go home,” I told my new husband.

I have always wanted to go home. I could easily sign a contract today, if someone would let me, saying I never had to spend a night away from my bed again. I wanted to go home. My husband would not let me. “What would everybody think?” he said. “They just gave us all this money because they knew we were going away!” He took the money out of the pocket of my jeans, which were lying at the foot of the bed. We were wearing the white terry robes provided by Marilyn the Mennonite. We shuffled through fifties and hundreds. Hundred dollar bills have such a congratulatory look, as though there were exclamation points on them. It seemed important to get rid of all of them. “We have to break the hundreds,” I said. “Or in a few days we’ll be wanting to buy beef jerky in a convenience store and have nothing but hundreds to do it with.”

“What are you so worried about?” my husband asked.

The bed we slept in had a headboard shaped from two large kitchen chairs stuck together. We got up the next morning and walked around the yard and house. There were two other people at the breakfast table, a young woman and her mother. They were discussing edible flowers. Crystallized violets, like you would use on a wedding cake. The husband of Marilyn the Mennonite brought us breakfast.

“I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation,” he said.

In a strange little dish was a very, very soft egg lazily in butter and milk. “That’s a coddled egg,” I said. It’s usually only something you read about.

“Yes,” he said. There was also a fruit salad, some very buttery toast, and a big bright flower on each plate.

“Please don’t put your pine cones on the table,” the man said to me. “The sap...”

I took the pine cones I had collected in the yard and moved them away. “What is that flower doing on my plate?” I asked.

“I heard you talking about edible flowers. It’s a nasturtium,” he said, and left the room.

All four of us had a nasturtium on our plates. My husband bit his. “Peppery,” he said.

“Nasturtiums *are* edible,” I said. But I didn’t know what a nasturtium looked like. “I mean, that’s what they make capers out of.” But this didn’t look like a caper.

Everyone ate their flowers. My husband started on his fruit salad. “What’s the green stuff all over this

pineapple?" he yelled to the man in the kitchen.

The man came and stood in the archway, appearing offended. "Mint," he said.

"It's not mint," my husband mumbled to me. "It's not. It's *basil* or something. That guy has no idea." And I looked at the bitten-off stamens on his plate.

I mean, the whole concept of human life is so frail, so utterly frail to begin with. The best you get, timewise, is so little. It was never until I was in love that I realized this. Eighty years at best? And so much of it gone. It sounds silly and maudlin until you actually start to care about it. The time line of your life is set up like a big department store, with advertisements that boast up to 60 percent off, but all around you only see signs for 10 and 20 percent.

I had felt it coming. Before I had done this thing, I had felt so much braver than ever before in my life. I certainly no longer cared whether or not my mother won radio contests and ate poisonous flowers. I had nothing to lose. I was this big gorgeous key lime pie, this succulent tart jewel, that he came along and did with exactly what I was *for*—cut a slice—making me more loved and less whole forever. That's one scary thing.

But there are other terrors in the world that you are helpless to: the *pop* heard just before the gas station where you are filling up explodes; the expanding of the optic nerve when you eat ice cream too fast. When will come the day when you will see him for the last time? my paranoid Choir Invisible asks. He pouts when he leaves for work, and I, chin up, say "Oh, you'll be back before you know it." And then—JINX!—I think, what

if he really *was* back—*before he knew it?* Unconscious. Ambulances, his slack cold face in my hands for the last time?

A root beer barrel in the car driving towards his honeymoon bed was the most freedom he ever got (dear, I am so sorry). And I keep thinking that love's a child, love is this child that says Let me get into your lap and squirm around and bang you on the head with this here toy doctor's kit; love's a child, and death is this two hundred and fifty bar blues song that you keep thinking is going to come to a bridge but never does.

The best part of the honeymoon was when we came back. We dropped off the rental car at the airport and took an airport limo back to the city, sharing it with some Japanese businessmen and two older English women. Our apartment was stacked with boxes we'd forgotten about. Lots of the wrapping paper had doves on it.

"We could just save them all for Christmas," my husband said, tired.

But of course we didn't. The things you *get*. Crystal candleholders with crystal bobeches, things that go in the kitchen, stemware and frames. We looked like grownups. And that night we went out and bought a Christmas tree, because we knew we had been on our honeymoon when everyone else had bought theirs.

And the next morning when I left it was dark and rainy, the dog was whining, we had lights turned on as though it was night, and it smelled like breakfast. The radio was playing swing Christmas music. All the wedding presents were still all over the floor,

unwrapped. And I had to go to work. "Leave it like this," I told him, "so I can pretend that this is where you are."

"But it is where I am."

"But it won't be if you change it."

I left, it was drizzling and dark, the Christmas lights the city pays for were lit, and I was so happy. It was really different. I was thinking about babies, other people's babies, and how most of them are born with those dark blue eyes that their mother will go to all lengths to convince themselves will stay that way. Like it would be a loss if their eyes turned brown or light. Of all the things to bother to hope for someone. If I saw a person with those dark, velvet blue eyes, I might scream. I think: but what do I know? Will I wish this? How do I know I won't wish this?