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## What Happens to Dead Babies

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## JUSTIN QUARRY

### *What Happens to Dead Babies*

This was back when guys with perms were cool and real men carried hula hoops.

Rodney came storming down the hall that morning, his curls tighter than I'd ever seen them. He stunk of chemicals. Sort of that same stink as when he'd set a hunk of sulfur on fire in chemistry instead of heating a tiny piece—the whole high school had to evacuate. He stopped now in a cloud of that stink—I forget what it was called, but it made your lungs bleed—at his locker. Something swayed to a stop at the bottom of the Super Hoop hanging on his shoulder, a ring of PVC pipe he'd spray-painted brown. The hall was empty, dead quiet because the tardy bell had rung. I waited for him to look at me or something, to hike his crotch on my pregnant stomach like he usually did, but he didn't. We met outside the cafeteria every day before homeroom, which was Home Ec, and anytime he'd just done his hair, which was once a month, he liked to have it touched first thing. Something wasn't right, though—the stink, the attitude, his forehead a flaky red—so I only stuck in two fingers.

Overcooked. Deep-fried. Crispy.

In all his days of home-perming, it was bound to happen. The hair on Rodney's head felt as coarse and brittle as the hair in his pants.

"Quit!" he barked, jerking his head. My hand went with it, jammed in his curls. He jerked again, freeing my fingers. Bouquets of hair lodged between my knuckles. His eyes watered up. He patted his head as if he were herding his woolly hair back together. "Thanks a lot," he said. "A bunch of it already come off on my pillow." He stared at himself in the magnetic mirror inside his locker. "I'll be lucky if I have any of it left by second period."

Typically Rodney liked to have a fresh perm stroked by all the girls that followed his gang of hula-hooping guys, not just me, though I was the only

one his spunk had set up shop in. So there would be all of them, those girls, fondling his hair without asking, just as I had. But even worse, there would be the rival gang of hooping guys. I figured like Rodney: one way or the other, his perm was a goner as soon as he made it to Home Ec.

Paul Poyner stumbled toward us with a duffel bag. The first time I ever saw Paul I thought he had Down's, but it turned out he just looked like it. He was always the first to class and had his iron hissing and spitting while everybody else was still looking for starch. I wondered what he was doing late, like us. "Hey, Rod—" he started to yell as he passed.

"Shut up, tater twat!"

Paul slipped through the bathroom door in defeat. From the cafeteria came the sound of trays being stacked. A lunchlady carried gallon jugs of hot sauce from the supply closet. Sometimes Rodney and I would skip class and meet inside that closet and whisper things that felt wet on my face: "Right there," "Now," "Hold on." My back against a metal rack or a box of hairnets. I wore a hairnet for him once. And once, Rodney brought a string of white beads, like gigantic pearls, he'd found in his brother's drawer—I took them home and ran them through the dishwasher before I let him put them inside me. Twice he'd forgotten condoms and so we used generic saran wrap we found in the closet. The second time, the saran wrap tore.

Now, Rodney's crotch was nowhere near my stomach. "Stupid, what happened? Leave it on too long?"

"I put the rollers in and the neutralizer on and went to do my French," he said. "I fell asleep. I didn't hear the egg timer." He rolled up his sleeve and showed me a scaly patch of skin where his head had lain.

"Rodney, put down your hoop," I said. "I've got good news."

"There's nothing you can say to me that the Super Hoop can't hear."

Even then, even before everything else that happened, I wanted him to take it off, maybe out of some sort of respect—though I had never been one for respect myself. In the moment it just seemed like the



thing to do, even if it hadn't every time I had imagined telling Rodney. Like slowing your car down to say sorry when you mow over someone's collie. "The thing inside me. It's dead. I went to the doctor yesterday, and he said it's dead. I get it out after school."

"Yes!" he said. "Yes!" Shutting his eyes, clenching air. "I can quit Big Save!" I had decided to give the thing up even before the stick turned full color. Still, Rodney's mother forced him to start working at his uncle's market. Old enough to have a baby, old enough to mist lettuce and stack beans, she thought. But now Rodney had an excuse to retire his squirt bottle. He hooted and twirled. He positioned the Super Hoop around his waist and set the fat ring in motion. It wobbled around the pumping axis of his body until it gained momentum, then settled in a steady orbit. Circled in a roaring whoosh. Whatever he'd put inside it pounded. I backed up. It clanged against a locker at full speed, broke a padlock, and slung down to Rodney's combat boots. He hiked against me and began to slide down the curve of my stomach, to lean down, to give me a kiss. But then the funniest thing: I turned my head and shoved him back.

He looked at me as if I had just pledged allegiance to the other gang. As if the bandana on my wrist had switched from turd brown to turd green. "Aren't you happy?" he asked me.

Our fortune had reversed itself miraculously. I had realized this the night before, and decided that was the line I would use when I told Rodney.

"Now it'll be like the whole thing never happened," he said. He brushed his fingers from my shoulder all the way to my wrist. "I've got it," he said. He untied the brown bandana. "I'll wear this."

"Of course I'm happy," I said.

"Quit being weird then." In the mirror, he watched himself drape the bandana over his head, knot the corners in the back. A knot small and hard, like a tiny fist.

Of course I was happy. But maybe a person could be sad, just a little, even if it was only one of her kidneys that died. Her gall bladder. Her appendix. Any of the parts Mrs. Schnaut had explained a body could do without in Biology. I followed Rodney down the hall, Super

Hoop rattling back alive, and instead tried to think of it as a kidney stone, or a blockage. A tumor. Something I needed to get rid of to survive. I tried to tell myself it was just a tumor with eyes.

The day before, I had asked the doctor what happened to dead ones.

Madame Mercer, my French teacher, tore out of the examination room to the lobby, bawling, my mother on her heels. Everyone at school knew Madame Mercer was dried up. She had pictures of her cockapoos scattered all across her classroom. Doggy sailors and doggy superheroes. Doggy firefighters. Doggy babies. She and my mother had worked out the adoption in a parent-teacher conference.

The doctor wiped the jelly off my stomach and threw the paper towel in a trash bin. I couldn't bring myself to ask if it still had a tail and gills, or if it looked more like what it was supposed to be then, its eighteenth week. I couldn't remember what Mrs. Schnaut had taught us. I remembered what she said about hearts, though. That as a fetus forms, its heart resembles the hearts of other animals. First it was a tube, like a fish's, then it divided into two chambers, like a frog's, then three like a snake's or turtle's. I figured that's what its heart was by then—a snake's or a turtle's. Too soon for four chambers. Too soon to be human.

"If you should want to make some sort of arrangements—if your mother or Phyllis would like to have a service—"

I shook my head. "But where will it go?" As if the thing had won some mystery vacation. "What happens?" I struggled to rephrase it. "To dead ones?"

"It's clinical waste," he said, coffee breath suddenly reminding me of my father, though I had not seen my father in years. "Flushed or incinerated. Like any other tissue." When my mother came back he told her that because it wasn't a risk to my body, or my wellbeing, clearly, he'd take it out tomorrow. That way he could prescribe pills and a cream that would make my body dilate on its own.

The next morning, the morning I told Rodney, Madame Mercer called to tell my mother she was making a memorial garden. Daylilies and coneflowers, irises and hosta. Things that come back every year.

She had broken ground in her backyard as soon as she had gotten home from the appointment. I imagined her in the denim jumper she'd worn that day, with a shovel and a hoe. Taking it out on the dirt. I wondered where she had gotten the money for a garden. Then I wondered where she had gotten the money to pay the doctor. She only taught part-time, Mr. Mercer was a graduate student, and together they waited tables at The Grille. One semester she sold bonus points on vocabulary quizzes to buy a microwave. It was for the classroom, she said, to heat French food for holiday parties, but we never saw it again after Armistice Day.

Not that my mother and I were any better off. She was a receptionist for a chiropractor, and most nights she sold Sears portrait packages by phone. Still, she offered to take me to a spa in the mall before the procedure. She thought I needed a distraction. I begged her to let me go to school instead. To pretend everything was normal. Because, like Rodney, I had thought now everything would be normal. There wouldn't be some thing in the world with my lips, my bones, my eyes. It would never search for the thing it came from. The thing it once lived in. The thing it looked like. I wouldn't have to dread the day it found me.

In Home Ec that day, Rodney finished his needlepoint project. HOME IS WHERE THE FART IS in big brown letters. The pattern called for smoke drifting from a chimney. Rodney stitched fart fumes wafting out the door. By the time I got to class, he already had the frame in his lap, needle diving at a shutter. Everyone in his gang was fixed on a canvas, concentrating so hard I thought I saw tears in their eyes. A legion of brown hoops stood against the wall beside our table. On the opposite side of the room green hoops lined up along the storage cabinets. The Circle Jerks, the other gang, crowded around their own table. No one picked at Rodney's hair, and the guys on our side, eight of them, wore their girls' bandanas on their heads, like Rodney.

I stopped beside him. He wouldn't look at me. My stomach was no more than a traditional hoop's width from his cheek, and he wouldn't even look at it. I dropped my backpack, swollen with textbooks. Then everyone at our table looked up. I wondered if after my hump was



gone they'd still see it, if Rodney had told them and now all they saw was a mound of dirt over a fresh grave.

"What?" Rodney said. Just then, Mitchell, second in command, slammed his frame on the table, and the Circle Jerks started cackling.

For weeks we'd had a substitute who kept her beehived head in books with covers of longhaired men, women whose clothes were falling off. Over the faint odor of Rodney I smelled a quiche in the works. Someone had convinced her to bake, though the week before we had been banned from the stoves when Mitchell had stolen a Circle Jerk's hoop, crammed it in an oven, and set the temperature on 450.

Rodney stared at me cold and said, "Stephanie gave her implants to Barrett." Barrett and Stephanie were to the Circle Jerks what Rodney and I were to our gang: head honcho and favorite girl. Instead of a used car, Stephanie had gotten new breasts for her sixteenth birthday, but when one sprung a leak she was forced to have them yanked out. It was her first day back, and when I turned around I saw the blonde tuft of her bangs, vibrating as she giggled.

"Shit," I said. Because that's the way it was between us and them. Always trying to outhoop, outperm, outdo one another. We all used to be friends, one group, one gang, hooping and perming and doing together, but then one day Rodney brought a monster hoop to school and started a war. The Super Hoop he called it. He hooped longer and harder than anybody with that thing, and then Barrett cried foul. Jealous. Said the Super Hoop was against regulation. Said that because it wasn't a standard size, Rodney wasn't hooping with that thing but doing something else. Didn't matter. Guys starting showing up with all sorts of creations: a stack of four hoops fused together; a strip of long leather fringe glued around a hoop's circumference; a hoop of braided craft wire. Other guys gave those guys nasty looks and stuck with the hoops they bought at the store. Some went with Rodney. Others went with Barrett. All our other differences stemmed from that one.

Home Ec became our battleground. Uninvolved classmates sat warily between our two tables. An occasional brave head would lift to roll its eyes. Then there was Paul Poyner, desperate to belong to

one gang or the other. Throwing himself into the line of fire. We were constantly asking Mrs. McWarren which group had the lightest muffins, the straightest stitches, the sharpest creases. Whose afghan did she pick? She had learned to stop answering when cucumbers were thrown through her windows one night after an especially competitive pickling lesson.

I went to get my own needlepoint from my cubby. I had to see Stephanie's breasts for myself. There they were, two clear lumps, jellyfish washed ashore. One wore a piece of tape where the hole must have been. Barrett batted them across the table like a cat with dead birds. The Jerks cheered, begged him to pass a tit to them.

No way our gang could top that.

I walked back with my needlepoint, pretending I hadn't seen a thing. Then Stephanie whined, "Hannah Hoopless, Hannah Hoopless." I hadn't been able to hoop since my second month.

"Spider cunt," I said, forsaking the times we'd ridden bikes, pressed together our bloody fingers to become sisters, made magic potions from our mothers' spice racks. "Pull over," I said, "you've got two flats." The chest of her spandex shirt sagged where it had once been full.

Barrett cupped her breasts—the implants—like he was trying to determine which one was heavier. His fingernails were green. That was another difference between us: the Circle Jerks painted their fingernails and pierced everything their parents would allow or couldn't see. "I love these," he told Stephanie. "I don't see Rodney with any."

Stephanie kept adjusting her shirt self-consciously. "I may not have my boobs anymore," she said, "but at least I don't have a baby."

Barrett said, "I heard sometimes, if they get really hungry, they start munching on your organs."

The Circle Jerks' earrings dangled as they laughed. One guy picked at his nipple ring through his T-shirt.

"Har har," I said, "it's dead. It won't be munching on anything."

Their expressions wilted, mouths cracking open, spilling quiet. Then Stephanie barely whispered, "Gross."

As soon as I said it, I didn't know why I had. Except to prove them wrong



at anything I could. To prove myself right or better at something—the same reason each of us did everything

In a panic, I moved toward our side of the room, passing Rodney and Stephanie who flew back in her screeching chair when my hump neared her head. Barrett grabbed my arm. Then he paused. He sniffed my hand. The hand I had stuck in Rodney's hair:

“What's that smell?” He grinned.

“Dead baby?” someone down the table said.

Then two things happened at once: Rodney rushed over, fist raised, at the sight of Barrett touching me; and Paul Poyner came to class. His fingernails were neon green, and he sported a gold stud in each ear. He was wearing a dress. A green dress, white polka dots, shoulder pads. That day he was trying to be one of them, but other days he tried to be one of us. We didn't want him, and neither did they, but he couldn't understand it wasn't a matter of trying. Take the dress—he thought if he took their painted nails and pierced ears a step further, he'd be a pioneer or something

“Guys, I've got the perfect project for our creative sewing unit!” he shouted. Both his parents were deaf, and sometimes it seemed he had forgotten the rest of the world could still hear. Occasionally he signed when he talked out of habit. He worked two jobs, one mopping the halls after school, to help support his family.

He showed the Circle Jerks a tube of green velvet. “A hula hoop cover!” He tugged a zipper running the length of it. “And see—”

“Faggot!” one Jerk yelled, standing.

“Retard!” said another.

“Hey!” said the substitute. “What's going on back there?” She put down her book.

But by then all the Circle Jerks were on their feet, chasing Paul out the door. Only Barrett hung behind, sniffing around Rodney's head, Rodney shoving him back. “Bad perm,” Barrett said. “Bad, bad perm.” And his hands, empty of breasts, pinched the air like a crab's.

By lunch, Rodney was bald.

In solidarity, one by one, our guys left the cafeteria, went to the bathroom with a pair of dull scissors, and came back shorn. Bits of

curl stuck to their sweaty faces like eyelashes.

All morning I had slumped in graffitied desks, worried. Was it then, I wondered, that Rodney was getting it—as triangles and ellipses were drawn on the blackboard? Was it as I filled out a worksheet on how the settlers ate their pets and gnawed on their belts for nourishment? Or was it just as I noticed the chimp fetus staring at me? I was in Career Orientations then, in Mrs. Schnaut's Biology room, cabinets full of almost every kind of fetus I could imagine. Those murky eyes on me, I wondered when—when had the thing inside me died?

"I was on the pot and bunch of them come under the stall," Rodney explained, his expression hard as—what's the hardest element known to man? Rodney would have said his dick. I sat down in a plastic chair across from a mural. Near our table were five enormous trashcans, two buckets for undrunk milk, a conveyor belt that towed dirty trays back to the kitchen. "There were so many Jerks in the stall I couldn't even stand," he said. "What could I do?" He looked at me as if I had the answer. Or something else he wanted.

"Where was your guard?" I asked. Typically, whenever there was a bad perm, the one with the bad perm took another guy with him wherever he went.

"I couldn't get a hall pass," Mitchell said.

Rodney kept talking, but I became fixed on the mural, the one Advanced had painted of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee shaking hands in front of an old courthouse. When it was finished, the teacher realized Lee's crotch was significantly bigger than Grant's, so she made the whole class come back to add to Grant. Then Grant's was bigger, so the class had to paint more crotch on Lee. Now they looked like they had boners to give each other as peace offerings. Even if Rodney's dick wasn't the hardest thing, it was still pretty hard, and so was everything else I had been willing to let him use on me. For example those beads. For example a spoon. I imagined Rodney poking a hole in something, tearing a cord loose. Had I hoped something would kill it?

"They couldn't all crawl out at once," Mitchell piped in, his head shooting up from his beef bites. "Why didn't you take a dump on one?"

"That's how I ruined my jacket."

“Jacket?” I said. “The jacket I got you?” To buy it, my mother had let me pose as her on the phone, selling portrait packages. It was brown nylon with black stripes circling the cuffs and collar.

“I can wash that jacket,” Rodney said, playing with my finger, like he usually did. Then his other hand wadded into a fist and pounded the table. “What I can’t just wash is the Super Hoop.”

I look under our table to see what they had done to it. Everyone’s hoop was slung over its owner’s lap. Except for the Super Hoop. Rodney’s lap was empty.

“The Super Hoop,” he said, staring at me, “it’s been kidnapped.”

The tap and slide of silverware across the cafeteria sounded like Morse code. Together all the conversations made static.

“They got Stephanie’s boobs. They got my hair. And now they have the Super Hoop. We have to get them. We got to get it back.”

Mitchell said, “Maybe if you weren’t so worried about hanging on to your hair you could have hung on to your hoop.”

This seemed to resonate with Rodney, whose eyes widened. Whose nostrils flared. “Forget perms. Perms are for fags.” He patted his knuckles against his lower lip. “From now on it’s all about the hoop.”

They all agreed with a little moan or toot. Solidarity.

Paul Poyner walked up to the table slowly, and paused. Testing the water. Back in his clothes, dried blood crusted his ears where studs had been yanked out. In front of Rodney, Paul set a tray piled high with hair, big white beads rolling around inside the compartments like in a pinball machine. The white beads Rodney slid inside me. “This is from Barrett,” Paul announced. I wondered how many people knew what I had let Rodney do, how many of them were doing the same thing to me by looking at the beads and remembering.

Someone told Paul to fuck off.

“Don’t kill the mess—”

Rodney punched the table. My tray flopped up. Paul was gone before I realized it.



“What are those?” one guy’s girl asked.

Rodney clenched a wad of curls from the entrée compartment.  
“It’s. My. Hair.”

“No shit,” said Mitchell. “But those balls.”

Rodney swallowed long and hard. “Noisemakers. The Super Hoop’s.”

I waited for him to glance at me. To acknowledge where the beads had been before they’d been inside the Hoop. But he only sat there, head bowed over the tray, probably imagining the Super Hoop tortured, in various states of dismemberment.

“Sorry,” someone finally said, all awkward, shy, like it was her first time saying a word in another language, in another country. Everyone moaned or tooted again in agreement. And suddenly I realized what they were sorry about. They gazed not at the Super Hoop’s entrails—but at me. The same way those fetus jars looked at me. The way I looked back at it. That’s what I was, I saw now—a container for a dead thing.

“That’s it,” Rodney said.

“What?” Mitchell said. “What is it?”

“They got boobs. We got a baby.”

I ran to the bathroom, sick. The beef nips I had eaten, or what Rodney said, tore my stomach up. But I couldn’t manage to puke. I just knelt over the toilet making puny noises.

By the time I came back to the table, lunch was over. The cafeteria was empty. The conveyor belt had come to a halt, and a bucket had spilled its milk. Someone had put up my tray. I grabbed my backpack, like strapping on a boulder, and headed to French. But passing the supply closet, the door swung open, and an arm hooked me in.

We left the light off. He raised up and slid down my stomach. He kissed me. I licked his ear, rubbed my cheek up his face. But my heart wasn’t in it. I felt his hands on my hips. I felt my jeans slither down. I felt nauseated again. I braced myself against a stack of milk crates. I found a can of salt to hold. I wondered if this was what it was like to live inside a body. Dark. Crowded. Organs pushing and throbbing. How could anything survive?

Rodney slurped. Something cold touched my thigh. Something stiff. The salt dropped, hissing out. My leg jerked up to block Rodney's hand. I shimmied my jeans up, stretching the elastic control top over my stomach. "I don't want to," I mumbled. "It's dead."

He tossed whatever he had in his hand, and I heard silverware clink. His breath circulated the closet in soggy currents. "We're gonna get them so good."

"What do you mean?" Though I knew exactly what he meant. I pictured it chucked back and forth across a table.

"They got Stephanie's boobs out of her," he said, the words oozing past my face, "we'll get your baby out of you."

Baby. He'd never called it that. Until now. Now that he wanted it.

I was silent. I probably wasn't even breathing.

"I mean what would you do with it if you didn't give it to us? Huh?"

"It gets flushed," I finally admitted. "Or burned."

"See," he said, "what's so great about that?"

"I don't even know if I can get it," I said, hoping there was a law saying I couldn't. Because even then I felt like I couldn't say no to Rodney. After he had chosen me. To be with me, of all those girls. Every time he kissed me, every time he grabbed my hand or gave me a certain look, I felt as if I were being chosen all over again.

"That baby's yours. Yours and mine, I mean."

I pictured it coiling down a giant toilet. Igniting in an industrial oven. I realized there were a lot worse places for it to be than cramped in my womb.

Madame Mercer was in French.

I had assumed she'd be at home, hoeing and digging hard as she could, furiously planting. Still bawling. But there she was, perched behind her desk, as usual—surrounded by pictures of her cockapoos. She smiled at me like nothing, like everything was normal, but her eyes stayed turned down in fat little frowns. I rushed to my desk

feeling like I'd robbed her, and she was just thankful I'd let her live.

Soon, Barrett swaggered in. We had all signed up for French before we split, and now we had to complete the second year of our foreign language requirement. Rodney had to sit in the front with Barrett, where Madame Mercer could keep an eye on them. Once, Barrett had grabbed Rodney's miniature French flag and ate it. Once, when we were playing French Bingo and Barrett called "Gagne!" Rodney snatched Barrett's card and rammed it into the VCR.

Now Rodney sat in his desk sidesaddle, taunting Barrett with a stare. Smirking. Barrett moved Stephanie's breasts around his chest under his green turtleneck. "Look at my titties, look at my titties," he said to Rodney, sliding the breasts up and down to the beat of his words, "don't you wish you had titties like me?"

"They're not even real," said Rodney.

"Taisez-vous, s'il vous plaît!" Madame Mercer called in a French accent that failed to mask a Southern drawl.

"Nice perm," the breasts shook at Rodney. "Looks like Barrett missed a spot."

"Perms are for pussies," a guy next to me said.

Moans and toots.

"Un peu de silence, s'il vous plaît." Madame Mercer gazed at me, and me alone, as if what I had inside me was the only thing in class. "Today let us finish reading about our families en Française. Who would like to read to us about his or her family first?"

That week we'd had to write one-page compositions about our families, or if we didn't have a family, what kind of family would we like, or if we didn't want a family, what would be so hot about being alone. One girl talked mostly about her father, stopping in the middle to ask Madame Mercer how you would say "Lou Gehrig's disease" en Française so she could explain why he hung out in bed all day. Later, a Circle Jerk bragged that his parents were the only ones of all his friends' who weren't divorced and that neither of them had even had an affair.

Toward the end of class Madame Mercer didn't have to glance at the roster to know that I was the only student who hadn't



presented. The whole period, while everyone went on about their families, she had seemed to stare at me like there it was, inside me. Her family, floating facedown.

Rodney's guys cleared their hoops out of the aisle for me. As I passed Stephanie she mouthed, "Hannah Hoopless." Something sharp swam in my stomach. I didn't dare peek above my paper. I read about my mother. In one line I had cued myself to point to a cockapoo because last year, at Parents' Night, my mom had sold a portrait package on the spot to Madame Mercer.

But before I gestured, a muffled baby's cry came from across the room. Then another. Then nearly half the class was making the noises. Barrett's half.

"Mais vous allez vous taire, oui!" Madame Mercer yelled. And then the Circle Jerks gasped and clutched their throats, keeled over. Scrunching up in fetal positions. It was then that their imitations registered with Madame Mercer.

"You bastard!" Rodney shouted, shoving his hand down Barrett's collar. Barrett bit his forearm. Rodney screamed but kept grabbing, and soon there was a muffled pop. Silicone began to seep through Barrett's turtleneck.

Stephanie cried, "My breasts! Give me my breasts!"

Barrett slugged Rodney in the chest, Rodney clutching for the other one. Standing there, feeling as though I was the one who had created this scene in front of Madame Mercer, I imagined the burst breast, slumped to Barrett's stomach, was something else. That it was something Barrett took out of Rodney's shirt. Something Barrett stole from Rodney's arms.

Both gangs rose to attention. Hoops mounted, they thrust their hips with brutal force, filling the room with dizzying motion. A rattling hum that surged to a piercing whir.

"S'il vous plaît," Madame Mercer begged, weakly. Then, even weaker, "Please." She wiped at her face in a hopeless attempt to prevent tears from falling. Then she looked at me. At me.

There wasn't enough space for fifteen hoops to spin freely. In no time hoops crashed into walls, desks, a cabinet, each other. People huddled in corners for safety.

I backed up against the dry erase board. The sharpness in my stomach seemed to strike at my insides. My kidneys, my lungs. My heart. The last hoop to swirl to a stop belonged to a Circle Jerk, Barrett declaring victory. And yet Stephanie was still yelling about her breasts. And suddenly—Madame Mercer’s eyes on me—I found myself yelling, too. To this day I can’t remember if it was *en Française* or in English. But I told them all how stupid they were. All of them. Stupide. Look at them, their stupid hoops, their stupid perms. Their stupid gapped up hair. Stephanie’s stupid breasts. Her implants. Stupid Rodney, gawking at me. There was no way I was going to let that happen. Not to anything of mine. Not to my baby.

Then Barrett took one of those beads from his pocket and tried to shove it in Rodney’s gaping mouth.

I left before the fight broke out, before Madame Mercer, as I later heard, crawled under her desk. I stormed out the door toward somewhere. But before I got to wherever I didn’t know I was going, my panties filled with what felt like a fist.

I told everyone I flushed it. The truth I saved for myself.

My appointment had been scheduled for right after school. The doctor assured my mother I would be fine. She started bawling even harder than Madame Mercer had the afternoon before, even though I, her child, was sure to live. He smacked his lips, released a long and sympathetic sigh. Coffee fumes swallowed my head. I thought of my father. His mouth. The way he kissed me on the lips when he delivered me to kindergarten. My mother sat in the waiting room while he tugged and scraped. If there was anything left, he had told us, maybe he could test it to see what had gone wrong.

But I was empty.

I stopped in my tracks at the end of the science hall, near the gym, as soon as I felt the fist slip into my panties. Petrified, I waddled to a janitor’s closet beside a glass case of dingy basketball nets and dull trophies. The little room reeked of burnt dust and sour dishwater. I leaned against a cinderblock wall and eased my way down, sliding so that my lower back hit the floor. Then the bell for sixth period rung.

I panicked and held my breath as if someone might hear it over the shouting and shuffling. Finally, with one last slam of a door, the noise was gone. There in the dark, with only a crack of the world shining through, it was easier to pretend this wasn't happening.

I allowed myself to wonder if we could stay entombed in that closet forever. Hidden from Rodney and the Circle Jerks. Hidden from Madame Mercer. The way I had assumed it would stay hidden in me if I only let it. Then came the bell, the rush, for seventh period. I pushed up onto my knees. I reached inside my pants. I slowly maneuvered the baby, slipped it past the elastic waistpanel. I lifted it in the air, as far from me as I could get it. The cord tugged something inside me, gentle as a balloon string, before my arms were even halfway extended. It was so much lighter than I expected. Light as a can of beans. Almost as light as a needlepoint frame. Slick as it was, I clung to it with the tips of my fingers, held it tight, probably too tight. The back of my hand bumped into a mop, or broom, and a wooden handle slapped the floor. I forgot my fears for myself, if only for a second, and yanked the baby to my chest, afraid that something might fall on it. It stuck a little to my shirt. I peeled it off.

I waited for school to be over. I waited for everything to magically, instantly, at the sound of a bell, be over. I knew I couldn't go back to Rodney. And anyway, I didn't want to. He and his gang were just something to belong to because I was too scared of not belonging to anyone, but even knowing this I sat in the closet terrified to belong to myself. And the baby, my baby, in my arms, dead—even then I couldn't stand to belong to it. I imagined it some alien-looking creature, curled up and frozen. Who was I if I couldn't even turn on the light and look at it?

The end of the school day came, and the building emptied. I didn't know what to do. It was as if an asteroid had hit, and there I was, safe and sound. The only living thing left on the planet.

Then a single set of footsteps broke the quiet and stopped outside. The door burst open and caught on my ankle. I yelped. I hunched over the baby and angled my chest in the other direction. "What do you want?" I said to Paul Poyner, way nicer than I intended.



"I just—it's my day to mop," he said. "Is that...?"

"What does it look like, stupid?" I muttered. I slowly peeled it off my shirt, crusted and brittle. It was barely longer than my hand, barely any wider. Its skin was downy. Bright pink. And transparent. I could see her maze of veins and capillaries, her scrawny arms and legs scrunched against her chest as if to hide where those lines were leading.

Her. It was a girl.

"I bet the nurse is still here," Paul mumbled nervously.

I shushed him.

"I'll get Rodney!"

"Don't get anyone," I said. "I don't want anyone else to know."

He hesitated, then entered the closet. He shut the door. He sloshed ammonia in a wheeled bucket and turned on a roaring faucet. He faced the wall and seemed willing to forget. He had switched on the light and now a bare bulb suspended by a cord swayed above us.

The umbilical cord sagged against my forearm. I looked at eyes that would never open. A face that brightened and shadowed as the light swung. "Help me," I said. "Please."

The faucet squawked off. "What?"

"I need something to cut this." I squirmed. I began to panic again. "I need to cut it off!"

He found a pair of shears in a cabinet. I clenched the baby with one arm, using the shears with the other. I placed her on the ground. I tucked my end of the cord into my pants. Dazed, I stared at the shelves. Bleach, brooms, Windex, Comet, dirty rags, clean rags, a broken television, kitty litter to cover vomit.

"Don't cry," Paul said, passing me a brown paper towel. I dipped my hands in the bucket and dried them. I grabbed a roll of garbage bags and bundled her inside a strip of them. The bundle kept unraveling. "I can't take her out like that."

Paul's eyes searched the closet. "Your backpack."

He offered to get it from Madame Mercer's room. When he came back, we dumped my books in a milk crate. He held the backpack open while I tucked the bundle of her inside. Together,

we carefully zipped it. Paul and I spent the next year and a half nodding at each other in halls and avoiding each other's gazes across classrooms. We never spoke again after we left that closet.

I took a side exit. I thought I was in the clear. Then I crossed the street.

One of Rodney's guys started shouting his name, and Rodney started shouting mine. I acted like I hadn't heard either of them, stepping up my pace, the pain in my gut preventing me from breaking into a run. I held the bottom of my bag against my back to keep it from slapping. Feet pounded the sidewalk behind me.

"Think you're too good for us now?" Rodney yelled, flinging me around by my shoulders. Then his eyes snagged on the splotch on my jeans. He covered his mouth.

"It's in the trash," I said, fumbling. Then considering just how close to the truth that was, I said, "I flushed it." Looking at him, I wasn't sure what he'd heard, or if he'd even heard anything. The Rodney I knew seemed to have slipped off his face. Standing there before me, if only for a second, was a boy just as scared as I was. He staggered backwards. He ran away.

Paul became one of Rodney's guys for about five hours. After I gave birth his gang went through every garbage can in the building but came up empty-handed. The next day Paul said he found it hidden in a box of toilet paper in a janitor's closet. Rodney showed the baby off, and in no time he and Barrett got sent to the principal's office, where Mrs. Schnaut identified the baby as her chimp fetus. Paul got creamed. But he never told my secret.

I kept it in my bedroom closet for days, unsure of what I wanted to do. I was constantly aware of its presence. Madame Mercer was still the only person in world who had ever wanted to be its mother. Afterward, she and I never acknowledged the baby. We hardly acknowledged each other. I had thought my mother would hear from her, that we would hear about the garden, but Madame Mercer never called my mother again, and my mother never called Madame Mercer. When the school year was over, she and her husband moved to Montana.

But the night of the last day my mother kept me home to recover,

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I begged to borrow her Cutlass. I loaded our shovel in the trunk and drove to Madame Mercer's. I waited until her porch light turned off, and then her neighbor's. It didn't take long to find the patch of perennials in her backyard, the bag of potting soil slumped over. I dug a hole in the freshly turned dirt. I covered my backpack and pressed the ground tight, and as I pressed I felt a knot tighten in stomach. I felt a trickle between my legs. Still, for a while, I stayed on my knees. A long time it seemed. Then something must have happened, someone in her house must have gotten up for some water or to check the thermostat, because her dogs started barking. And it was only then, when I heard them, that the cockapoos in her pictures seemed real to me.