

BABY TEETH

In early January, the doctor told Candace McMurray she would never be pregnant.

The obstetrician hadn't called her "barren" outright, but the word had occurred to Candace. Years of childhood antidepressants might have ravaged her ovaries, he said. Her husband, Joel, had suggested adoption, but Candace wanted her own children, not someone else's. Joel had considered the decision outlandishly selfish, though he said nothing. He shared in her disappointment, wanting children with a hunger matching hers, but he knew her sadness could easily spiral into depression. No use making it worse by arguing a point he knew he'd never win.

Candace was determined not to let the bad news affect their sex life, but despair had wormed its way back into her life and into their bed, and soon she couldn't bring herself to orgasm, no matter how persistently Joel pushed her toward it. By the end of the month, she'd realized she had entirely soured on sex.

After several nights ending with Joel's chin rested on her cold shoulder in the dark, breathing into her ear as he worked on her with the thick index fingers of his right hand, while pressing his desperate erection against the cleft of her buttocks, Joel McMurray had finally stopped trying to initiate.

That first night without contact, Candace had silently wept herself to sleep. Eventually the McMurrays fell into an easy but essentially joyless routine: eating together, reading together, sharing stories about their day, but knowing nothing of sexual or romantic intimacy. No words of love now passed between them, no kisses more sensual than a peck, for fear of stirring Joel's desire.

In the meantime, Candace had taken up scrapbooking. By June she'd filled two albums with old photos, silhouette portraits, weathered letters and envelopes, copies of birth certificates and citizenship papers, reaching far back into the McMurray family history and her own—the Leasons—but never moving forward. The past had become a rich, bright tapestry for Candace McMurray; the future was empty and cheerless. Every blank page in the scrapbook now reminded her of that terrible word: *barren*. She filled them as fast as she could.

It was late June when Candace awoke to a jolt of pain in her right breast. Two words immediate sprang to mind: *Mom* and *Cancer*. But as the pain abated, throbbing dully, she realized it had felt like teeth. Had Joel *bit* her? The thought was absurd, after so long without even a touch.

She rolled over to find him on his side, facing away from her. They'd slept that way, on either side of the bed, for months now. Candace held vague memories of their early nights together, spooning while the sweat dried on their naked flesh, or the rise and fall of his breath and the beat of his heart lulling her to sleep as she rested her head on his smooth chest. Seeing him asleep now, with his back turned as hers had been only moments before, still brought sadness.

"Joel?" she whispered into the dark. "Joel?"

He stirred. "Mmn?" He rolled onto his back. "What? What's wrong?" Still muttering, half asleep, he peered over at her, eyes puffy.

"Nothing," she said. He clearly couldn't have bit her if he'd been sleeping. A bug bite? "Go back to sleep," she said. No use keeping him up; he'd only be cranky in the morning.

He sighed heavily through his nose. "Did you hear something?"

"No," she said. She wanted him to go back to sleep. She didn't want to reveal what she'd thought. He would laugh at her, and she couldn't bear to be laughed at—not now. Half asleep, she'd imagined the feel of teeth on her areola, the sharp wetness of them, the suction drawing her nipple out to stiffen.

Felt so real.

"I thought I heard something, but it's nothing." She patted his shoulder, the first time she'd dared touch him in bed since early in February. He shrank from her touch. Not meaning to, she thought, but as if her fingers had stung him, and she withdrew further into herself from the shock of it, rolling over onto her side of the bed, her sovereign territory.

"Hon?" Joel said.

She pretended to be asleep. After a moment, she heard him sigh through his nose again, annoyed this time, the chuff of an angered beast. She curled into the fetal position, pulled the blanket in her bunched fists tight beneath her chin, an elbow grazing the bruise, bringing fresh pain.

A moment later, Joel got up to use the bathroom. She felt his side of the mattress swell in his absence, the familiar block of ugly yellow light falling over her side of the comforter as his urine splashed into the bowl. She'd have to wipe it off the seat tomorrow, mothering him like the child she'd never have.

I was born to mother, she thought. Born to be a mother. She drifted off thinking this, fast asleep when Joel returned to bed, if he'd returned at all.

* * *

Joel had already left for work by the time Candace rolled out of bed. He managed an online shopping company, while Candace transcribed medical recordings from home—not a lucrative job, but it allowed her the time and freedom here and there to work on her scrapbooks, and before them the novel she'd been writing, now long abandoned.

She'd forgotten all about the nipple incident until her shower, where under a second skin of soap bubbles the areola appeared to be bruised. She rinsed and towed off quickly, wiping away a circle of mist to examine it in the mirror. It looked like a hickey, puffed out and unnaturally large, a small purple and yellow ring with a tiny crescent of dark marks that could easily have been the teeth of a very small mouth, the bumpy little glands much more prominent than usual.

Candace frowned at it, suddenly certain there'd been something in bed with them last night. A large insect. An animal, even. Had she felt the comforter tug at her feet when she'd awakened? She thought yes. And though it was mortifying, the idea that an animal had slipped into their bed during the night scared her less than the alternative.

Her mother had had breast cancer, as had her great-aunt: neither instance had been pretty. After three rounds of chemo and a double-mastectomy, Aunt Betsy's cancer had metastasized, spreading through her blood, and soon she had withered away to nothing. Fortunately, her mother had been spared the same indignity. Beverly Leason's tumor had been benign, a mere fibroadenoma, but the fact remained: breast cancer ran in the Leason family blood.

Candace raised her arms to check for dimples and "irregularities." Aside from the bruise, they seemed normal, though she hadn't spent much time staring at her breasts in the mirror since puberty. Until her great-aunt's battle with cancer, they'd simply been there, hanging globes of fat and flesh, often an aggravation: the subject of ridicule when she'd blossomed early; having to strap them down and cover them over for business meetings and exercise; then, after Betsy's sickbed death, objects of dread. She had often considered she would have been better off without them, though Joel probably wouldn't have agreed.

She squeezed it—Joel had called the right one *Monica*, the left one *Rachel* when he was feeling frisky—looking for fluid expressed from the nipple. It remained dry. Sore, but dry. It would always be dry, much as her belly might distend some day from weight gain, but never from pregnancy.

Born to be a mother, she thought again. *What an awful phrase to worm into my head.*

Without the need to primp, she threw on a loose pair of shorts and one of Joel's old sweaters, then went downstairs to schedule an appointment for a breast exam. *Better safe than sorry*, she thought. Aunt Betsy used to say that, before the cancer had made her sorry, anyhow. They scheduled Candace for the next week.

About an hour later she had her headphones on, typing away at her desk as an obstetrician's nasal voice droned on about his patient's phantom pregnancy. (Something about the doctor's tone made Candace think he was misogynist; perhaps it was because

he'd called it a "hysterical pregnancy," and not in the *har-har* kind of way.)

Glass shattered somewhere in the house, startling her out of her chair. She flicked the headphones off her head, thoughts racing.

"Okay, calm down, Candace. Something fell," she told herself, adding "Don't get hysterical," with a halfhearted chuckle.

Five breaths, in and out. She thought of Lamaze. And the house remained silent. Thinking she must have imagined it, she put her headphones back on, and was just about seated again when another sound brought her to her feet, heart pounding.

First broken glass, now the pitter-patter of little feet.

She called out, "*Hello?*" aware of how stupid it was after she'd done it. If it was an intruder up there, she'd just acknowledged his presence and announced her rise to the second floor to investigate with one feeble word. The footfalls were too light to have been a man's, though. It could be an animal. Or, less likely, a child.

Candace took the stairs with caution, though not enough to avoid their various creaks, and saw the mess through the banister: the floor in the spare bedroom looked like the bottom of a birdcage. She ran the rest of the way, creaking be damned, found her scrapbooks strewn everywhere, torn to literal scraps. Jigsaw fragments of her dead ancestors and Joel's in sepia-toned photographs stared up at her from the ruined pages.

She let out a squeak of dismay. So many months of work, ruined in an instant.

Glimmers of aquamarine Favrite glass among the loose pages, beautiful and dangerous, had only moments before been a vase beside her scrapbooks, on the dresser where she'd stacked them. The cover of the scuttle hole to the attic, directly above where the empty vase had been gathering dust, lay slightly askew in its base.

Squatters?

Couldn't be. She'd been up there when they'd first moved in two years prior. The roof was two feet above the ceiling, maybe less, with rafters and pink fiberglass foam between. Not enough room to kneel, let alone squat.

Then what?

A nest. Rats or mice. Some kind of large bird, a murder of crows or a parliament of owls. Or raccoons—whatever more than one was