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"It is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."
—David Hume

They came again at dawn, like last time, distilling out of the washed-out gloom under the bedroom window. Or perhaps they came through the window, floating through the chilly glass and worn flowered curtains—how could you tell? They were crying again. They were always crying. Philippa thought, through her sleepy dread, *I could see if the curtains are damp. Then I could tell.*

The bandage still covered her right middle finger from last time.

They stood grouped at the foot of her bed, three rosy transparent hideous shapes that might have been old women. Or might not. Pinkish areas would swell into sketchy pseudopods suggesting a bent arm, a shawl draped over a head, a hunched back. Then the swellings would shift before she could be sure. Only the tears were constant, great rosy globes of sorrow welling and falling in arcs so beautiful that Philippa had to look away. In the morning, when it was all over, the carpet would still be soaked clear through.

no no no no no no no no no no went the part of her that never understood, the most part, and her left hand clutched at the edge of the quilt. The central blue vein sprung out sharply. on the back of her hand two liver spots, for some reason clear in the gloom, echoed brown stains on the quilt that not even her diluted bleach on a clean rag had been able to touch.

One of them stepped forward. This time it was the one on the left. Philippa never knew. Their hierarchy, if they had one, was a mystery to her. If they were angels they should have a hierarchy, shouldn't they? It was one of the reasons she had given up on the idea that they were angels.

Philippa let go the quilt and clasped her hands together to pray, but of course she couldn't do it. She never could while they were in the room. It wasn't only that fear kept her from concentrating properly. It was that she forgot what prayers were for, who they were addressed to, what the whole thing was supposed to accomplish. There was no room in this for prayer, a thing which left the edges of hope intact and a little fuzzy. You never really knew if prayers were answered or not. Here you always knew, in concrete terms: this for that. It was a bargain, a contract, a hard Yankee deal.

She reached over to switch on the bedside lamp. The first time, she had actually thought that would them vanish. Things that go bump in the night, begone the light. She hadn't known. She hadn't known anything. She had burned with terror, smoked black at the edges with it, ignited with the fear that either she was going or she wasn't. She hadn't known anything. And 416 people had died.

At the click of the lamp switch, the three glowing nebulous old women drew closer together. They always did that. They also cried harder, the rosy tears silent welling, coursing a short way down the glow, tremble minute like perfect-cut rubies come alive to breathe sorrow, breathe out pain. Then they fell.

Philippa waited.

The one who had stepped forward—although now the light was on and they had moved into a bright an huddle it was even more difficult to see where one left off and the next began—reverently laid the clipping on foot of the bed. Against the faded chintz of the quilt, inherited from Philippa's mother, the newsprint looked almost white. The rosy huddle stepped back. Tears flowed.

“Who are you?” Philippa said to the old women, but not because she expected an answer. Just for something to say. In the still room her voice sounded rusty. Well, it was rusty. You don't speak when there's nobody to speak to.

The second and third times, Philippa had torn apart the library in Carter Falls, looking for those clippings. She had read every newspaper the library carried, and then the ones you had to use the microfiche machine for, sticking her head into the strange contraption and trying to at least match the typeface to the pieces of paper in her hand. She had even thought of driving into the college library in Plattsburgh, but it had been hard enough to get into Jim's car for the first time in the eight months since the funeral and drive just to Carter Falls. The thought of the trucks on Route 3 undid her. She had no driver's license, no need to go to Carter Falls, and no answer. The clipping was nowhere. It was never anywhere. This new one wouldn't be, either, until the grocery boy delivered next week's *Time* .

About four inches square, the clipping on the bed was paper-cut sharp on two joining edges, furred on the other two, as if it had been torn from the bottom right corner of a page. But then there should be a date or page number or part of the paper's name, shouldn't there? Philippa could see without moving that there wasn't. The clipping was uncreased, unyellowed, crisp. But that made sense, since it hadn't appeared yet.

Made sense. O my god.

She could curse but not pray.

Another thing she knew she couldn't do, not until it was all over, was look at the crucifix on the wall. Just flat couldn't swivel her head that way. The whole wall—faded green-stripe wallpaper, her grandmother's bureau with the chipped green paint and newel-post mirror and hand-tatted dresser scarf, Douay Bible on the scarf beside the cut-glass bowl holding hairpins and rubber bands—was off limits, until this was over. The first time, she had even thought this made a terrible sense. If the three weird women came from the Anti-Christ, the Evil One, then of course she would be barred from looking at the crucifix while they were there . . . she had been so stupid. And so afraid.

The clipping bore only one small headline. With type that small, and coming from the bottom of a page, it must not be too important. That was a good sign. "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

Now how had *that* bit of catechism gotten through? Startled, Philippa tried again to clasp her hands for prayer. Her left ring finger, where once Jim's band had gone and where she would have worn the silver band making her a Bride of Christ, looked to her bonier and whiter than the rest. But that was just trashy fancy. It was important to keep clear what was fancy, what was not.

Philippa slid out of bed. That too was necessary; the clipping couldn't be reached otherwise, no matter how far forward she leaned. Her long flannel nightdress, the nap worn off at the elbows, wound itself around her hips. She jerked it down with a quick glance at the sobbing women, who only went on sobbing in their eerie silence.

Impatience stabbed Philippa. They weren't the ones going to do it. Some people just liked carrying on. Some like that from the parish had tried to visit her after Jim, clutching her hand and sniffing enough to turn your stomach, when they had never come near Jim during his illness. One visit was all she let them try.

She picked up the news clipping. The paper felt heavier than the ones the grocery boy delivered once a week. The type was smaller, too: serious type, and brief:

MARRAKESH—An earthquake here earlier today killed at least 34 people, including 22 children. Although officials at the Seismographic institute in Rabat say the quake measured no more than 5.8 on the Richter scale, structures it toppled include a government-sponsored orphanage which stood near its epicenter. The orphanage housed 60 children and 17 adults. Rescue crews working around the clock have PLEASE TURN TO PAGE 4A

Philippa closed her eyes. She couldn't picture the orphanage, the quake, any of it. She didn't know where Marrakesh was, although she vaguely remembered a song about it when she had been in high school, the kind of song Johnny Matthis had never sung. Was it in Asia? Africa?

Had the orphanage been white-washed, with a dome? But it was only their pretty heathen churches that had domes, wasn't it?

Twenty-two dead children.

Philippa opened her eyes at looked at the ghostly wailing women. Suddenly they reminded her of the black-clad old ladies attending 6:00 a.m. Mass at St. Stanislawls, every single morning of her childhood. Every single morning. Shuffling up the steps in heavy, black-laced shoes, dipping holy water with two gnarled fingers from the font by the carved wooden door, lighting endless candles for the dead. What had there been in those pious figures to fill a child with such horror?

“All right, then,” Philippa said, “I’m ready. Tell me.”

The figure on the right raised her sketchy arm. A line of rosy light stretched from its end to Philippa's left hand, ending at the first joint of her index finger. A faint tingle, and the glowing line vanished. The knife appeared on the quilt: the same ordinary, murderously sharp hunting knife as always, the same one Philippa could have bought at Wayne Clarke's in Carter Falls. The old women wailed without comfort, their rosy tears cascading to the floor, pooling on the carpet, pristine in falling and sodden when done. Philippa looked at the whole spectacle with sudden distaste.

“Oh, stop that racket!”

Which was funny, because there was no noise.

Twenty-two dead children: babies with their skulls crushed before the soft spots had closed, toddlers carrying . . . whatever toys toddlers carried in Marrakesh.

She picked up the knife and cut off her left index finger at the first joint.

Much later, the doorbell rang. Tuesday—the weekly grocery delivery. Philippa sat weak and sick in the old rocker with the bottom rung missing, her head thrown back against a tied-on cushion. The grocery boy wouldn't come in; he would leave the groceries on the porch and take away the check made out to Hall's Superette, as he always did.

She had not put a check out on the porch.

The bell rang again. Philippa tried to think but the pain still wouldn't let her. She sat pressing several folds of a bed sheet to the amputated joint; as the outer folds reddened she had moved onto a different section. Much of the sheet was red, and the air swelled with the rich, metallic scent of blood. But Philippa knew she would not lose enough blood to die, would not get gangrene in the amputated tissues, would not even faint from shock. So many things that never happened. She sat pressing the blood-sodden sheet to her maimed left hand with the thumb and one whole finger of the right, and listened to the doorbell ring

A schoolbus crash in Calgary, a cholera epidemic along the Indus River, a dam burst in Colorado, a political massacre in El Salvadore.

Could the grocery boy see through the dingy curtains covering the front window?

And the two she hadn't believed, the first times: the bridge collapse in Florida, the crop failure in a Chinese province she couldn't pronounce.

The curtains had a hole, just above the window sill nearest the door, the fabric had been clawed through by a cat that had run away the day after Jim's funeral. Jim's cat. If the grocery boy stooped, he could peer through the hole. Philippa tried to inch her rocker in the other direction, but the effort just made her

dizzy. it would be a few hours yet before she could eat anything, clean up the bedroom, change the quilt. She was running out of quilts.

The doorbell stopped ringing, and the knob rattled. Philippa made a small noise; from the rocker she could see that the chain was off. But the door was locked, she was sure of that, she'd locked it last night.

The door heaved twice, the first heave curving the wood gracefully inward like a the bow of a violin, the second springing it back on its hinges and bouncing it so hard against the faded wallpaper that the doorknob punched a round hole in the plaster board beneath. A hand caught the door on the rebound. It wasn't the grocery boy from Hall's Superette but Sam Hall himself, walking into the room with the deliberate, shambling step Philippa knew since high school. He wore his mechanic's coveralls, boots leaving sloppy snow on the carpet and grease at the knees in splotches like the outlines of distant countries.

Philippa glared at him, furious and embarrassed. He gazed mildly around the room and she had the idea that he missed nothing, saw it all through to the buckling bones: her mother's clock ticking heavily in the corner, the piles of newspaper furred with dust, the ashtray from Niagara Falls killed with paper clips and pennies and thread, the rounded corners of the overstuffed sofa tufted with dangling buttons, the unwashed curtains and scrupulously washed ceramic Madonna, with its beautiful draperies and foolish simper. Saw it all, as if it were the engine of a truck he were taking apart behind the Superette, removing one part after another in his slow way, running a careful thumb over each to feel its essential soundness under the necessary grease. Then he looked again at Philippa, at the bloody sheet and four healed stumps, and behind his eyes moved something that she didn't like.

"Philippa, you oughtn't be doing that to yourself here."

She meant to say furiously, "And you oughtn't be breaking and entering into people's houses, Sam Hall!" but those weren't the words that came. Instead she heard herself say, "There wasn't anything else I could do," and after that the mortifying tears—in front of Sam Hall!—rolling hot and stinging on her dry skin, spraying outward when she swiped at her dripping nose, turning pink where they fell on the bloody sheet in her hands.

They talked about it only once. Sam Hall took her to Mass on Sunday, Mass at a reasonable 10:00 a.m., and he didn't assume the \$5 he put in the collection plate was for both of them. Philippa liked that. When women she hadn't seen since the funeral rushed up afterward to exclaim over her hands and gawk at Sam, he took Philippa firmly by the elbow and guided her back towards his truck. After church came a movie in Carter Falls, a thing neither of them found funny, about people chasing and killing each other over something that fit inside a computer. The movie was redeemed by a drive by the lake on an afternoon bursting with lilacs. Then came a dinner at the Apple Tree in Carter Falls, and another one with Sam's grown daughter home from college in Plattsburgh. The daughter never mentioned Philippa's hands. Another movie, only this one was funny, another dinner out, a political picnic for John Crane, who had gone to school with Philippa and Sam and Jim and now was running for county sheriff. And all those weeks they talked about it only once, in Sam's truck, parked in Philippa's driveway just before she went inside and he started the long drive back to town.

Philippa said abruptly out of one of their long comfortable silences, "Do you believe in aliens?" The word sounded foolish there in the cab of the pick-up, so she added, "Like in the movies?"

"Nope," Sam said.

"Ghosts?"

"No."

"Angels?"

"In Bible times."

"Not now?"

"No."

Philippa nodded. "I wanted to be a nun, after Jim died. Can you imagine? I got books to study, and I wrote to the convent at Plattsburgh."

"What did they say?"

"They said they were a teaching order, and I wasn't a teacher."

Sam slapped at a mosquito above his collar. A moth lit on the windshield: ghostly pale wings translucent in the light from the porch. He said, "People do weird things sometimes. From loneliness."

He glanced at her hands. Philippa laid them defiantly on the dashboard, side by side. "It wasn't from loneliness." That was true.

He considered this. She breathed in the smell of his shirt, cigarettes and 30-weight oil and fabric softener. Finally he said, "You needed rescuing."

Rescuing! Hysterical laughter rose in her, heady as whiskey. Rescuing! Her! When it was she who had saved . . . single-handedly . . . single-handedly . . . Philippa put her palm over her mouth and leaned forward against the dashboard. As soon as she shifted, the moth flew towards the porch light.

"Philippa," Sam said, "Philippa —" She knew then it was all he would ever say, all he would ever ask, and that she didn't have to answer. It was all right if she never answered. She shifted the other way, to lean against his shoulder.

"Sometimes there just isn't any choice," she said.

"Uh huh," he agreed and laid his hand on her breast, and she heard the sudden laughter in his slow voice.

They came at dawn, three days before Philippa's wedding. The window was open, and the room smelled of a heavy rich August night too warm for dew. Three glowing nebulous figures at the foot of the bed, welling with rosy tears. Philippa woke and her spine went rigid.

The one on the left laid the newspaper clipping on the bed. The bedspread was new, a frivolous green quilted in shiny squares and edged with six inches of eyelet ruffle. Sam was painting the bedroom green. Through the outlines of the wailing women Philippa could see the outlines of the paint cans, both ghostly against the bare plaster Sam had already stripped and washed.

This time the clipping was large, more than half a page, the headline in thick black letters. Right and left edges were clean, top and bottom torn. The top, Philippa thought: where the name of the newspaper

would be. She never would find out what it was called. Against the bright shiny green of the bedspread the paper looked unnaturally white, like someone about to faint.

no no no no no no

Philippa's feet slid out of bed. The carpet had been rolled up for the painting. Bare wide-planked hardwood floor was cool enough to make her toes curl under. The newspaper felt light and dry in her hand, even lighter than paper should feel. Without turning on the light, Philippa carried the clipping across the room to the window, where there was just barely enough light to read it.

TWA JET CRASHES IN BOSTON HARBOR

FATALITIES FEARED HIGH

BOSTON—A TWA 707 jetliner failed to take-off at Logan Airport late last night and plummeted into Boston Harbor, killing at least 257 people. The plane, Flight 18 from Boston to Washington, achieved take-off speed but failed to leave the ground at the end of the runway, which ended at the Harbor. The plane sped forward and sank in the 63-degree water.

The jetliner remained two-thirds submerged in the water, enabling at least 9 passengers and airline personnel to escape through the two doors they managed to open.

“There was this roar and then a huge splash,” said Elizabeth Brattle, who witnessed the crash from the deck of her sailboat moored in the Harbor. “Waves rolled in, nearly swamping the boat. You could hear people screaming. It was horrible.”

By twenty minutes after the disaster, diving teams were on the scene to assist in the recovery. Divers are expected to remain on the scene throughout the night.

The cause of the plane's failure to lift into the air is unknown. TWA spokesperson Richard Connington expressed shock and concern but cautioned against speculation that

PLEASE TURN TO BACK OF SECTION

There was a second article, an eyewitness account from one of the passengers who escaped, and a picture of the drowning plane. Philippa didn't read the second article. The four rosy hideous women bent nearly double with wailing and grief, and their beautiful tears pooled on the wooden floor. Philippa watched them, feeling their pain, feeling all the pain and terror of the great plane reaching the end of the runway and still rolling along the ground, of the dizzying lurch into the water, the sudden-impact. Did the water come in right away? Did the lights go out? People screaming, choking in the darkness, and later that other choking and darkness, of the survivors.

Sam had taken down the crucifix when he took down the ancient dingy needlepoint worked by one of Philippa's great-aunts and the framed painting of a woodland brook which Philippa had bought at The Art Shoppe in Carter Falls. She wondered if she would have been able to see the crucifix, this time. The pink thread of light shot out from one of the crying women, Philippa couldn't see which one, and touched the first joint of her right thumb.

At the base of the thumb, just below the knuckle, was a burn blister where she had foolishly touched the

pan taking an apple pie for Sam out of the oven. Sam, eating the pie at her kitchen table. Holding the square of heated metal of the wallpaper stripper against this room, while she followed him with the scrub bucket. Holding the tips of her fingers while they watched TV and never saying anything against them, anything at all about stupidity or pride or need.

At least 257 people. "You could hear people screaming."

The knife appeared on the bed. The glowing women cried and wailed. All the sorrow of the world seemed to flow through them, the world beyond this room, the Philippa had once thought to renounce and go be a middle-aged nun because there was nothing left here anyway.

Philippa whispered, "No," and the knife vanished.

She stood shivering in a sudden breeze from the window as the silently keening women also vanished, leaving the pool of rosy tears on the scarred floor that a Sam planned to wax shining and hard and golden.

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