

Those Boiled Bones

Jay Lake

Houses dream, too. Mostly in the present progressive -- the brush of snow upon the roof, the sensual massage of hard rain, the moon's progress across the arch of the sky. Some dreams are fast and hard, nightmares to make joists groan and wiring crackle blue within dust-filled walls. A man and woman argue, doors slam, the reedy wail of an infant goes on for hours, weakening until finally silence, like the mice in the basement, returns to its rightful place.

Then there are tiny bones to be boiled clean and pounded to dust and spread with fishmeal and compost among the rose bushes in an unending palimpsest of warm life within the wriggling soil.

Starr came early, surprising us into an unplanned homebirth. Eloise went into labor late one evening with the suddenness of a lightning strike, water breaking into the sheets and shouting like a madwoman for hot chocolate and her mother's help.

I called Mother, put a kettle on the stove, called the doctor, remembered to turn on the gas, threw the overnight bag into the car, took the pinging-hot kettle off and filled it with water, and ran upstairs, turning back only to put the kettle on the burner once more.

"Walter!" Eloise screamed, shredding one of her Irish linen pillowcases. Her face was the same compressed red I imagined our emerging infant's would soon be. "You're too damned *slow*."

"I'm sorry, sweetie," I said, panting. "It'll be okay."

Her breath chuffed. "It...will...never...be...*okay*!"

The kettle screamed. I raced back downstairs ahead of her wrath as brakes squealed in the street. Metal crumpled with that weird, quiet thump. Outside, people shouted. The kettle continued to screech.

For a moment, the entire house shuddered as if it grieved.

Faced with a choice between birth and death, the doctor treated Eloise's mother where she lay in the street. A severed femoral artery was only the most immediate of Mother's worries. The doctor sent a passing pizza boy into the house to help me until the ambulance no one thought to call arrived.

Hello-my-name-is-Thad and I stood gaping in the bedroom as Eloise screeched Starr into the world, cursing like a sailor and continuing to shred the bed linen. I held the baby while

Hello-my-name-is-Thad cut the cord with Eloise's nail file to the ringing of his cell phone.

All the pizza boy had in his thermal bag was an anchovy special. I tipped Hello-my-name-is-Thad fifty dollars and we ate pizza and hot chocolate while Starr nursed and Eloise wept, until someone outside finally remembered we were in the house and sent three firemen in to get us.

The joists moaned their pain all night long though there was no wind.

The spring after Starr was born, when she was a few months old, the rose bushes in the side yard bloomed with such astonishing vigor the *Oregonian* sent over a reporter and a photographer.

"Funny house you have here, Wally," said the reporter, a woman named Diana to whom I took an instant dislike. She was large and puffy-pale with hair far too big to be real and eyes like a vodka martini -- clear, cold and bitter. "Pulled some stories from the morgue. Over the past century, there's been a suicide, a burning death and missing child."

"If houses dreamed, this one would have nightmares," the photographer added helpfully. He changed lenses and wormed in scratching-close to one of the fecund bushes.

"Thanks," I said, "but it's a happy place now. Pitter-patter of little feet and all that."

We both feigned amusement.

"So what's your secret?" she asked.

I shrugged. "Oregon weather? No cats pooping up the yard? I don't know. Eloise usually handles the garden, but it's been a busy spring with the baby and all."

"Roses grow everywhere in this town, but you've got blooms the size of Chinese chrysanthemums, thicker than daisies." Diana winked at me. "There's old women around here that would kill for your secret. So tell me, when did you purchase this property?"

Eloise's mother came to stay, *to care for the baby* everyone said, but it was more for us to care for her. She'd nearly died just as Starr was born. That experience had driven her to a point somewhere between God's kind regard and a quiet, private madness. Mother limped around the house's polished oak floors with a dog-headed cane, eyes constantly flickering into corners.

"Walter," she said, thumping the walking stick. She seemed to have aged decades since the accident. "That baby cries all the time. Why do you leave her out in the yard?"

"Mother." I sighed my way to patience. "Starr almost never cries. She's sweet." The baby was oddly quiet, in fact. As quiet as a house. And we certainly didn't leave her outside, either.

"Keeps me awake nights, crying out there beneath those awful roses." Tears stood in her eyes. "Children shouldn't cry alone."

I went to boil some water. Doors slammed upstairs. I thought I heard yelling, but when I went to

look, Eloise was sleeping, Starr was cooing in her bassinette, while Mother was still in the living room staring into corners like a cat.

It all came out in the end, thanks to Diana's newspaper story. Someone recognized the rose bushes as a rare varietal. A breeder was called. The breeder had a cousin who had once lived in the house.

The missing child had never been found, the cousin's family a good one in the days when that counted for something with the then-deferential police. Still, witnesses emerged. Serious men with shovels and trowels dug up the side yard and sifted soil. The roses were taken away, fragments of shinbone were sent off for testing, Mother had a stroke and the baby said her first words at eight months of age.

"Wake up," Starr shouted from her bassinette. All the doors slammed at once while water ran down the insides of the windowpanes.

Houses dream, too. Not just nightmares, but sometimes fantasies, for houses love those who live within. They nurture their families inside a cocoon of wood and glass and brick, swaying in the winter winds and warding off the worst of the summer heat. Wishes come true in dreams, for an hour or a season.

In the waking world the house sighs its regrets while blood roses bloom the size of Chinese chrysanthemums in the side garden, fed by those boiled bones.