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Day One: The first thing I noticed was the smell. Something sweet crept through the window screen, not the usual rotten egg reminder of the paperboard factory across the street, or the dust of the 4:10 coal train. I sniffed turned earth and perfume and pictured the color pink.

No one else stirred. Across the room, the twins were tangled together with dirty feet poking out from the tattered blanket they shared. Pete's heavy breath hung in the bunk above me. I slid out of bed and found Momma on the couch – her usual spot when Daddy was away – and baby Jake chewing on his toes in the portable crib. He cooed when he saw me, smiling and kicking out his feet. "Never a happier baby," Momma always said.

The cold air slapped me when I stepped outside. I hugged my chest to block the air slicing through my thin pajamas. The damp grass stung my bare feet and in about a minute they went numb. I supposed I could walk across hot coals now. Find the positive – another thing Momma always said. Spotty scrambled out of his doghouse and headed towards me, limping the first few steps until his old joints un-stiffened. His chain clinked across the gravel driveway, so loud in the quiet morning.

Following the scent around the house I passed Daddy's stack of truck tires. Last night's wind had shuffled the circle of mis-matched lawn chairs and toppled our bikes. The water in the rain barrel shivered and the plastic Virgin Mary stared with cold eyes. When I turned the corner to the back yard, where our bedroom window faced, I stopped dead.

I expected pink but saw blue.

Then I yelled.

"Momma! MOMMA! Come outside! Come quick!"

In a moment they all came out, sleepy-eyed with crazy bed-heads. Momma had Jake on her hip, her white robe wrapped around her tight, her matching white Isotoners stepping high through the wet grass. Pete stumbled putting on his sneakers, and the twins, Kallie and Kevin, just plowed right over.

“Look.”

I pointed to the rows of spiky blue flowers poking out of three or four inches of mulch. The line was about as long as I was tall and I was pretty tall for a ten year old.

“Where’d those come from?” Momma asked.

“And what happened to the weeds?” Pete said before he yawned.

Momma stepped closer, her forehead scrunched like a wrinkled paper bag.

“Didn’t you plant them?” I asked Momma.

She shifted Jake to her other hip and frowned. “Now Lilly, I did a fair share of drinking last night, but not enough to forget pulling weeds and planting a dozen hyacinths.”

“They’re so pretty!” Kallie said.

Both twins knelt in the dew to smell the flowers.

“Then who did?” I asked.

“Probably Mrs. Wiley. Or one of the other church ladies.”

Pete kicked at the mulch. “Why would they do it in the middle of the night? And not tell us?”

Momma straightened. “I used to do my best cooking in the middle of the night, when your daddy was away. And some people....some people aren’t comfortable with the words ‘thank you’. They like to be anonymous. So let’s go have breakfast and thank the Lord instead for these beautiful flowers.”

Day Two: This time an unfamiliar sound pulled me from my dream – something like running water, or rain snaking through the gutters. The sun already drew bright geometric patterns on the hardwood floor, so I knew it couldn’t be raining. Maybe the creek had risen. Or maybe Mr. Anonymous had returned. Remembering my frostbitten toes of the previous morning I slipped on my sneakers and went outside.

I coughed at the black column of smoke from the paperboard factory. It spiraled perfectly out of the smoke stack, arching due east and dispersing right over our roof. Pete had been convinced that Jake would have three eyes, but he was born with two perfect baby blues. When I had offered my I-told-you-so, he’d only questioned where the blue eyes had come from, seeing how everyone else had brown. “They came from God,” Momma had whispered, and then she’d cried into his blanket.

When the screen door squeaked behind me, I heard Jake call out to me. I swung my head towards the sound but kept moving forward. Suddenly, my toe hit into something hard. There on the porch sat a red plastic bin with a green lid. Jake continued to holler but my smile grew wide. Another mysterious gift! I knew in a minute the whole house would be up, so with a tickle in my stomach I quickly lifted the lid and peeked inside. “What the?” Twisting my neck I looked up at the roofline to confirm my suspicion. Yep. Those were our Christmas lights in the bin, not tangled in a ball, but wrapped neatly around a plastic frame. Taking them down had been one of

Daddy's get-to-its for months. I looked all around the porch for a note or clue but couldn't find a thing. Why would someone take down our Christmas lights? Inside, I heard voices quieting Jake. He squealed happily and I knew it must have been Kallie. That baby *loved* Kallie.

Then I heard it again: a trickling, gurgling sort of sound.

Across the street, the slimy green creek water that flowed underneath the factory and out to the Shenandoah barely moved. The sound came from behind me. I moved off the porch and around the side of the house. Then I saw it. I wanted to cry out again, but bit my lip and grinned. I wanted a moment to enjoy it for myself.

This spot alongside the house used to have the old washer that came with the house. It had died when the twins were about three and they decided to wash the bucket of nails they'd found while climbing under the porch. Daddy didn't want to pay for installation of the new one which included removal of the old one, so here it sat for almost four years. Another get-to-it that he never got to. For a while it had housed my Nature Collection: rocks, acorns, pinecones, dead flattened frogs from the road, and a variety of nuts, bolts, and bottle caps found along the railroad tracks. But before long it'd just become a place to pile miscellaneous buckets and baskets and tools.

I stood there in the morning sun and stared. The washer was gone. In its place: a shiny fountain the color of new pennies. The way the sun hit it, I thought it could be pure gold. A tipped vase poured water that overflowed from three bowls, one to the next, all the way down to a large bowl with different colored rocks to reflect the water. Beneath the bottom bowl the patch of dead grass left by the washer was camouflaged with mulch, large rocks, and a handful of daffodils. I couldn't remember seeing anything more beautiful, except maybe the blue hyacinths planted around the back of the house.

I closed my eyes and listened to the gurgling water. It seemed to be telling a story, one about a horse galloping across an open field. Galloping, galloping, and there was a girl on the horse and she felt overwhelmed and ecstatic to have so much open land before her. The wind screamed across her face and the sun fell hot on her shoulders. She looked behind her and watched a tiny white house grow smaller and smaller until it was just a speck and then it disappeared.

"Lilly?! Lilly, where are you?"

I opened my eyes.

"I'm outside, Momma."

Momma, Pete, and the twins joined me at the fountain. This time Pete carried the baby.

"Mr. Anonymous struck again," I announced.

"What on earth???" Momma's mouth and robe hung open. I could see part of her rose tattoo poking out from the low scooped neckline of her tank top.

"And they took down our Christmas lights," I said. "Something Daddy was supposed to do four months ago."

"Wow!! That's cool!" Kevin said. He and Kallie bent down and wiggled their fingers through the water.

I stepped closer to Momma and touched her sleeve. "Who do you think it is, Momma? First the flowers, now this. Who could it be?"

She stared for a long time at the fountain and I wondered if she was picturing horses and an open field, too. Finally, she said, "I don't know. Jake and Lilly, I need you to get the twins on the

school bus. I'm going over to Nanny's to use her phone. I'm going to make some calls and get to the bottom of this."

When Momma left I joined the twins and let the cool water lick my fingers. Pete, quiet until now, finally spoke.

"Daddy's gonna hit the roof when he gets home tomorrow and finds his washer missing."

"That stupid thing?" I said. "It wasn't doing anything but rusting out here for years."

"Yep," he said quietly. "But it was his rust."

Day Three: I nudged Pete's shoulder knowing that if I startled him awake he'd swing his fist down and knock off my head.

"Pete," I whispered. "Pete, wake up."

He let out a little groan.

"Pete, don't you want to see if there's anything new?"

He cracked his eyes and squinted at me in the half light. He squinted for a long time as if he wasn't sure if I was a dream or not. Finally, he said, "No," and rolled away from me.

"I wanna see."

"Me too!"

The twins followed me to the front door. As the screen squeaked open I felt that tickle in my stomach again. It moved up through my chest, to my throat, and I almost giggled. Then I held my breath as we rounded the corner.

"WOW!!"

When the twins knocked past me I knew I wasn't dreaming.

"Look, Lilly! Look!"

All of our old "lawn" chairs – one aluminum folding, two plastic molded, one pine ladder back, and three vinyl stacking – were gone. In their place: four matching wrought iron chairs with striped cushions, a tiled fire pit, and a three-seat swing with canopy. The twins swung like they had just arrived at Disney World.

Spotty had already gotten cozy in one of the chairs and panted happily when I rubbed his head. I touched the cushions just to double-check that I wasn't dreaming. Nope. Not a dream. I went to move one of the chairs but found it very heavy. Good. They can't blow away with the next storm. And they probably wouldn't turn green and stink.

Just then Momma came around from the front of the house.

"Oh, my! Oh, my! Ohmyohmyohmy!"

She came running towards me, crying, and hysterical like the next contestant on The Price is Right.

“Who’s doing this? Who’s doing this?” she cried. “Why?!” She rubbed her hands along the cushions and curved iron arms of each chair. Then she sat in each one, rearranging herself, crossing and un-crossing her legs, sort of a test drive. Pete came outside with Jake and stared in silence.

Suddenly, I heard the clanking bells of the railroad crossing. The lights flashed and in a moment, the 7:27 roared past us. The ground shook, windows rattled, and the old house moaned, but all of those wrought iron chairs stayed perfectly in place. When the train passed, I looked across the tracks and there was Daddy. He honked his truck horn and waved out the window. He parked in the strip of gravel next to the tracks. I held my breath again as he crossed the street.

Half-way across the street, his happy-to-see-us smile faded. He spun his ball cap around on his head and examined the yard. I couldn’t move. When he reached our gravel drive, only Spotty went over to greet him. The old dog smelled his crotch and paced around his legs, but when no head pat came he slinked back to the doghouse. After surveying the property, Daddy straightened his back and bellowed:

“Where the hell are my chairs?!”

The ground shook, windows rattled, and house moaned again.

Momma ran over to meet him. She looked so tiny compared to his huge, dark frame. “Now Don, don’t get all fired up. You just got home and the children – ”

“And what happened to my washer? What the hell is going on here?”

“We don’t know what’s going on,” Momma said. “It all happened in the middle of the night. The first morning it was the flowers, then the fountain, and now this.”

“And you didn’t see anyone? Or hear anything? Spotty didn’t bark?”

Pete said, “That dog wouldn’t bark if a truckload of cats and squirrels tipped over in front of him.”

“I swear, Don, I must have called a hundred people yesterday trying to figure it out. It wasn’t Mrs. Riley or anyone from the church. Aunt Martha’s been sick, it couldn’t have been her. I checked with the school and county; I even asked the Salvation Army. It’s a mystery.”

Kallie came over and tugged on Daddy’s sleeve. “Daddy, I know who it was.”

He squatted slightly with his hands on his knees to meet her eyes. “You do? Who was it?”

“It was Santa Claus!” she said with a huge smile.

“Hmm...well, that’s a good theory. Only problem is it’s not December twenty-fourth.”

I thought maybe Kallie had something with her theory.

“Maybe it’s no one,” I said. “Maybe it’s a real life miracle.”

“Miracle? It’s not a miracle. It’s criminal.” Daddy began to circle the chairs. “You see...I knew this would happen when the suburbs came creeping out here to the country. All those hoity-toities in those big new subdivisions up the road – they think they need to beautify things. Well, these chairs will do me just fine when I sit out here waiting for the mystery shopper to show up.” He plopped himself in one of the chairs and stretched out his feet on the tile rim of the fire pit.

“What are you going to do?” Momma asked, her voice quivering. “You can’t stay out here

awake all night.”

“I’m a truck driver, Lois. I once stayed awake for forty-two hours straight. I sure as hell can stay awake out here all night. And when Dudley Do-Right shows up, we’re going to have a word or two.”

Day Four: Despite the crushed cans of Red Bull littered about the yard and the pile of cigarette butts, we found Daddy the next morning sound asleep on the swing. He was decked out in his camouflage coveralls and fur-lined bomber hat, but I still feared he’d frozen to death. We tiptoed through the wet grass and surrounded him, but no one made a move to wake him. Then Jake let out a hearty giggle.

Daddy’s arms and legs flailed and the swing nearly dumped him on the ground.

“What?! What? What time is it? Damn! Did I fall asleep?”

He freed himself from the swing and investigated the yard. Half-crouched with his arms out in a defensive position, he looked like he searched for the trail of a serial killer rather than a Good Samaritan. When no clues were discovered, he stopped in the middle of the yard and straightened his back.

“You see? I knew they wouldn’t try anything with the man at home. Gutless cowards.”

“Uh...yes, they did.” Pete slowly raised his finger towards Spotty’s doghouse.

But instead of Spotty’s doghouse, a brand new one sat in its place. It had bright, clean white siding and a blue roof and even insulation on the inside. It was made out of some sort of heavy-duty plastic and I knew it wouldn’t rot and turn gray like his old one. Spotty laid there, half-in, half-out, his eyes bright, tongue wagging, a dog smile for certain.

“I’m calling the police,” Daddy said.

He marched towards his truck. Momma ran after him.

“The police?” she said. “What are you going to tell them? You can’t be arrested for planting flowers or giving someone a new doghouse.”

“No, but you can be arrested for trespassing on a man’s property. Criminal. That’s what this is.”

Momma pulled on his arm to stop him from crossing the street. “Since when is an act of kindness criminal?”

“Since I didn’t want it and I didn’t ask for it.”

Despite the chill in the air, my skin burned under my pajamas. There was a tickle in my stomach again, but this one felt more like a cockroach than a butterfly.

“But if it makes our lives a little nicer, then what’s wrong – ”

“Our lives were just fine the way they were!”

“How would you know?! You’re never here to know what’s happening in our lives! Even when you’re home, you’re not here!” Looking around, I realized the words had shot out of my mouth. My face felt flushed and my chest pounded. When I met Daddy’s eyes they seemed hard and cold, like they weren’t his eyes at all, like some Daddy robot had replaced him on his last trip.

Those eyes cut through me.

“What did you say?”

The depth of his voice chilled me. Something dark moved between us. I took half a step backwards and whispered:

“Nothing.”

Day Five: Lying awake with closed eyes, I imagined all of the things that might have magically changed overnight. New clothes. New bikes. New car! Or maybe new furniture like I saw in the JC Penney catalog – just for me, in *my* room, painted white with brass drawer pulls, a white lace canopy over the bed, a mound of pink satin pillows, and a lamp on the nightstand with pink beaded fringe. I squeezed my eyes and held my breath, but when I opened them I saw the same old room.

I knew who would be at fault if nothing else had changed.

Daddy had left for another trip, but before he did he posted No Trespassing signs all over the yard. Momma talked him out of a bear trap, but he left a big notice:

WARNING! ANY PERSON CAUGHT ALTERING THE APPEARANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WILL HAVE THE APPEARANCE OF THEIR FACE ALTERED!

He ruined it just like always.

Suddenly, a piercing scream came from the back yard. I shot up in bed and looked around.

The twins were gone!

Another scream and Pete jumped off the top bunk and ran towards the door. I threw off my sheet and raced him through the living room, knocking Momma out of the way. The screen door slammed against the house as we bolted through. Pete leapt off the porch and beat me around the house. When I reached the back yard he had stopped dead and I smashed into him.

Then I saw. The twins' screams were screams of joy.

“Oh. My. God.”

Momma stood beside us with her hands on her face.

They did it! Whoever or whatever it was had scoffed at Daddy's warnings and came through again. Kevin and Kallie bounced with sheer joy on a brand new trampoline. The old mattress they used to jump on, the one that had spots of mold from the rain and housed an entire flea circus had disappeared. No more stink. No more scratching ankles.

Tears spilled from Momma's eyes. She turned and walked away. I started to run towards the trampoline.

“Aren't you coming, Pete? Don't you want to bounce?”

“No.”

I stopped and took a few steps back towards him. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you like it? Aren’t you happy someone is helping us?”

He threw his hands up like I was the stupidest girl on earth.

“They’re not helping us! They feel sorry for us. They’re embarrassed by us. All their rich friends have to drive past us to get to their fancy big houses. They just think we’re poor white trash, hillbilly hicks.”

In about two seconds I felt this throb on the side of my face. My teeth were clenched so tight, my whole head began to ache. I thought it might take a spoon or pencil or something to pry them apart. I stared at Pete, straight in his eyes, for a long time. When I opened my mouth a little breath escaped and then I spoke slowly.

“Just because they think it, that doesn’t make it true.”

I left Pete alone there next to the hyacinth.

And then I bounced. Bounced, bounced, bounced, above the roof, above the power lines and the trees, higher than even that black smoke stack.

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Catherine Baldau was born and raised in Ohio, graduated from The Art Institute of Pittsburgh, and spent the next fourteen years circling the DC Beltway as a designer and project manager. She currently lives in haunted Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, with her husband and two daughters. A freelance writer and teacher, she is working on a novel and collection of short stories. This is her first published story.