The Packed Lunch

by Alistair Daniel

It was there when she opened the door, lying on the carpet in the middle of her son's bedroom. At first, Clair thought it was a sausage; a plastic one from the breakfast set Benjamin used to play with. He was too old for that now, of course, but objects had a habit of surfacing here, among the Lego and action figures; the flotsam of an earlier stage. She pressed the switch on the Dyson with her foot, propped the hose against the wall, and bent down to pick the object up. She was like a child herself these days, she thought. She saw something lying on the floor and picked it up, but she did so without thinking. She'd lost her curiosity, and only the gesture remained.

Her hand was inches from the surface when it occurred to her that the object was too big to be a toy and she froze – one hand on her knee, trapping the hem of her skirt – and looked again. It was about four inches long and an inch and a half in diameter; a dark, raw umber, slightly moist. One end was rounded, the other tapered almost to a point. Could it really be what she was beginning to think it was? She knelt down on the carpet and leaned closer, sniffing a sample of air. It was then that the thought struck her: *I'm on my knees, in my son's bedroom, sniffing a turd*.

Clair stood up quickly, smoothing the front of her skirt, and stepped backwards out of the room. There was a queasiness in her stomach. She closed the door, crossed the landing and went downstairs, shutting the safety gate behind her. On the way down the hall, the questions began: was Benjamin ill? Had he failed to reach the bathroom in time and, if so, why had he said nothing to her, before she drove him to school? Shame, she supposed; embarrassment and shame. She'd have to be gentle, sympathetic. There was no shame in being ill, but he should have asked her for help; he should have told her, that was all. It was the not-telling that was the problem, Clair decided; the keeping of secrets. As soon as she'd collected him from school she would sit him down and tell him so.

She went into the kitchen and lifted the phone from its stand and called the school. But as she waited for the secretary to answer, Clair began to have doubts. The school day wasn't over yet: what excuse could she give for collecting him early? *I think my son might be ill*. No, that was no good; she knew what the secretary would say: *He's been here all morning and he seems fine to us, Mrs Vaughn. What do you think the problem is?* She couldn't tell her, of course. The secretary would probably call a psychiatrist – for one of them, or both. And then there was that business with the packed lunch.

She hit "cancel" and dialled her husband's number instead. He answered at the second ring.

"I'm just going into a meeting," he said. "Everything alright?" He sounded harassed, as always.

Clair took a deep breath. "There's a turd," she said, "in our son's bedroom. In the middle of the floor."

Her husband sighed. "That bloody dog is going to get a kick," he said. "Have you called the vet?"

Clair glanced at Duchamp, curled up in his basket by the back door. It had not occurred to her that he might be responsible. Her instinct, she realised, was to blame the boy.

"I don't think it was Duchamp," she said.

"Are you suggesting it was our son?" said her husband.

"His door was shut."

"That dog can open a door."

"And close it behind him?"

"Hang on," said her husband. Clair heard him speaking to someone. There was a burst of laughter, and when he came back on the line his voice was different, jaunty It was the voice he put on when he had an audience. "What does it look like?" he said.

"What do you mean?" said Clair. "It's a turd."

"Describe it," said her husband.

Clair pursed her lips. "It looks like the Chrysler Building," she said. "In turd form."

"Has to be the dog," said her husband, firmly.

"Well he must have had an accomplice," Clair replied. "Either that or he's grown an opposable thumb."

More laughter. Was she on speakerphone? "Got to go," said her husband. "Call the vet." And the line went dead.

Clair replaced the handset. She took a tin of Arden Grange Premium from the cupboard under the sink and spooned half of it into Duchamp's bowl. She added a generous scattering of biscuits and watched as the old dog lumbered over to investigate. Duchamp was her dog; an *assemblage* of several breeds but mostly Springer Spaniel, with regal, Caroline ears that seemed designed more to muffle sound than augment it. She'd rescued him from an abandoned litter and taken him home to her bedsit in Camden, where they'd lived together, happily, for several years. She'd toilet trained him herself. Compared to Benjamin, the task had been a joy.

Duchamp sniffed the bowl and looked up at her with drooping, melancholy eyes. He was fourteen now. He had problems with his liver. But she'd taken him for a walk that morning, and scraped his coiled offering from the pavement. "It wasn't you, boy," she murmured, stroking his head as he

lapped slowly at his food. "I know it wasn't you."

From the monitor on the work surface came a gurgling sound. Clair sighed, heavily, and climbed the stairs. At the top she reached for the handle of Benjamin's door, but something made her shudder and recoil. She turned and walked briskly down the landing. In the nursery at the far end Lucy was awake, standing up in her cot. She was flicking the bells above her head with one hand and babbling to herselfShe paid no attention to her mother's arrival. Clair turned off the air purifier and opened the curtains, leaning over a stack of wooden packing crates beneath the window. The room had originally been intended for her studio and its conversion, even now, was not entirely complete. The crates were filled with junk from antique shops and skips and market stalls – objects awaiting new purpose. There was modelling clay and welding equipment and staple guns and books on conceptual art. There were experiments in perspective. Somewhere, buried at the bottom of the last crate, was a half-finished PhD.

Clair lifted Lucy out of the cot and checked her nappy. Lucy was clean. Clair carried her downstairs and sat her in the high chair and fastened a plastic bib around her neck. She opened the fridge door and took out a small pot of fromage frais and spooned it slowly into Lucy's indifferent mouth. Half the fromage frais oozed out again and dribbled onto the bib. Clair wiped up the mess and set Lucy in the play pen and turned on the TV. Dora the Explorer was going on a journey to a magical land. The idea, it seemed, was to follow your dreams.

Clair washed a stack of Benjamin's lunch boxes and set them on the sideboard to drain. She made herself a sandwich with some parma ham left over from Benjamin's packed lunch – he was very particular about his lunches – and sat alone at the breakfast table, chewing. By now, she thought, Benjamin would be suffering agonies of guilt and dread. He'd committed a terrible crime and was awaiting its discovery. Would his mother come storming into the playground, into the dining room, into his class? Would his father be waiting by the door when he came home? It was just as well that Neil had blamed Duchamp, Clair reflected. If he hadn't, Benjamin would be in for an earful. What on earth had he been thinking?

She turned to the fridge and examined the drawings stuck to the side for evidence of psychological disturbance. There were felt tip sketches of the house, of Duchamp, of tractors and spaceships, wild animals and racing cars. Everything seemed fine. The sun was a yellow circle ringed with exclamation marks. The colours were bright. There were no blots on these unfettered landscapes, no clouds on the horizon (there was no horizon line at all). But she was not an expert. Perhaps she was missing something.

She'd have to go back up there, she knew that, but this time she'd go armed. Clair opened the cupboard under the sink and searched in vain for a pair of rubber gloves. She walked to the whiteboard clamped to the door of the fridge and wrote "RUBBER GLOVES" in small, neat capitals with a red marker. Then she took a can of *Vanish* and two disposable J-cloths and a transparent Ziploc sandwich bag and a pack of antiseptic wipes and swept them all into her arms. She seized the pooper-scooper leaning in the corner of the cupboard and marched out of the kitchen and climbed the stairs. Outside Benjamin's

room she put the cleaning products down and opened the door.

The turd was still there. For some reason, this surprised her a little. She leaned against the doorframe and peered at it, glistening and insouciant, lit by a bar of sunlight from the window. Something about her theory wasn't right, she thought. Benjamin was going through a phase of terrible whingeing. His food was always too hot, or too cold. His tummy hurt. He had a toothache. He didn't want to go to school. If he'd been feeling unwell, he would have said so, loudly. Besides, the turd was lying in the middle of the floor. There was something brazen about the way it was sitting there, stark against the soft white carpet. Something angry and defiant. It was a statement, Clair decided; a challenge. She'd have to be tough. She'd have to confront him.

The doorbell rang.

Clair propped the pooper-scooper against the wall, stepped outside, and shut the bedroom door carefully behind her. She sniffed the air on the landing, and hurried down the stairs.

"Clair de Loon," said Sonia, "thank god you're in! You've saved me from an afternoon with *Cagney & Lacey*." She bustled her way inside, unwinding her scarf and shaking her auburn curls. "My sister's visiting," Sonia explained. "She's taken the twins to the park, the nutter. Thought I'd come and see how you were coping."

Clair nodded and closed the front door. In Sonia's estimation, everyone was either a "nutter" or a "loon". She liked to surround herself with insanity. It livened up the day.

They went into the kitchen, Sonia's trainers leaving mud prints on the clean, checkered tiles. She was dressed in grey tracksuit bottoms and an Airtex shirt that read "Supermum" in a friendly typeface edged with silver glitter At art college, her dungarees had been covered with bright splashes of acrylic. Now it was scrambled egg and purée: an impasto experiment in colour, texture and shade. On her left shoulder, at the height of a baby's resting head, was a three-pointed vomit stain; a little *fleur de lis* of puke.

"And how's young Lucy?" said Sonia, rushing over to the play pen with open arms. Her voice was like a bright, jolly bell – "Sonia la Cloche", Clair called her – and at the sound of it Lucy clapped her hands, jumping up and down on the mattress. She stared at Sonia with round, glassy eyes.

"No words for Sonia today?" said Sonia. "I see. The strong, silent type, are you? Keeping mum?"

"She's a woman of few words," said Clair.

"A woman of few words," echoed Sonia. "Imagine."

Clair set the kettle on the stove and turned on the gas. According to the health visitor she didn't talk to Lucy enough, but Clair didn't always see the point. Lucy had nothing interesting to say.

"I should have brought my sunglasses," said Sonia, squinting at the kitchen

walls. "I always forget how bright it is in here."

"Like the future," said Clair. On the outside, the house was just a featureless newbuild, but the interior was Clair's statement, her manifesto, her pledge to herself. She'd planned every detail, sourced the furniture, picked the tiles. The living room was decorated with found signage, the breakfast table was an Adolf Loos and the walls, in every room, were pure white. "Asylum white," Sonia called it. "Clair de Loon."

Sonia flopped into a cantilevered chair. "How's the opus?" she said.

The "opus" was Clair's long-term project; a series of *objets trouvés* loosely inspired by the work of the Italian conceptual artist, Piero Manzoni. She'd been working on it ever since Benjamin was born, but progress had been slow. In the early days she never seemed to have time, and then, just when she'd finally dispatched Benjamin to school, she discovered she was pregnant again. Clair told herself that it didn't matter, that she didn't need a studio, that she could work at the breakfast table in the afternoons when Lucy was asleep. But the truth was that the birth of Lucy was the death of her project. Something could not be born, it seemed, without something else giving way.

Of course, it ought to be possible to work. It *was* possible. Other people managed it. Yet somehow it wasn't possible for her. Part of the problem was that, here, on this vast estate, there were so few *objets* to *trouve*. In Camden, a simple walk to the tube station yielded a fresh crop of finds. But their new house was in a cul-de-sac on the edge of a planned town: a wasteland of shrivelled birthday balloons and abandoned tricycles, face down in the encroaching grass. Dogs trotted back and forth across the street, old tennis balls clamped in their jaws. Crows pecked chicken bones from the rubbish. That was all, and Clair's attempts to make something from it were unsatisfactory. These were her weakest pieces, regurgitated and second-hand.

She turned to face Sonia. She hadn't meant to say anything, but somehow it slipped out. "Benjamin's had an accident," she said.

Sonia's mouth made a cavernous O. "Is he all right?" she said.

"Yes," said Clair, quickly. "I mean, he's had an accident in his pants."

"Thank god," said Sonia, throwing herself back in the chair. "Christ, Clair, for a minute I thought it was something serious." She patted her chest. "Poor lad. Jez had a nasty tummy bug last week. Devastated the whole gang. I still feel wretched Is he very poorly?"

"He's at school," said Clair.

Sonia pulled a sympathetic face. "Ouch," she said. "Poor little soldier. How embarrassing. Listen, do you want to go and collect him? I'll get out of your hair." She pushed the chair back and offered to rise.

"No, it's all right," said Clair. "It happened this morning. Upstairs. I'm not sure

what to do about it."

Sonia held a hand to her throat. "You mean, it's still there?"

Clair nodded.

"I see," said Sonia. She paused, and seemed to swallow something distasteful. "Do you need a … hand?"

They climbed the stairs. Clair had assumed that Sonia would take it in her stride. After all, this had been her currency for more than a decade: a daily dealing in other people's turds. But Sonia's reaction surprised her.

"Ugh!" said Sonia. And then, catching herself, "oh." And finally, softly, "poor little soldier."

Clair studied the turd. It was sleek and deadly, like a fat brown torpedo. If Benjamin was a soldier, this was his declaration of war.

"Kevin dirtied his pants once," said Sonia. "He crawled into the wardrobe and hid. Took me an hour to find him."

"How old was he?"

"I don't know," said Sonia, avoiding her eye. "Four, maybe."

Clair nodded. She could see that Sonia was trying to help. But Benjamin was seven. "What should I do with it?" she said.

"There's only one thing to do with it, darling," said Sonia.

But Clair wasn't sure she agreed. Her son had planted a turd on the floor of his bedroom and gone innocently to school and, when he came home, he'd find all trace of it removed. Was that the lesson? That he could do anything he liked? That he could walk all over her and she would acquiesce, meekly, as if she'd vanished over the horizon of her life? That he could treat his mother like – well – like shit? Clair folded her arms. No. She'd leave it there. She would leave it there on the floor, exactly where he left it, and when he came back it would still be there, staring at him. His room would have started to smell. Only then – only when he'd been forced to confront what he'd done – only then would she clean up the mess.

She sniffed the air. The room did not smell. It was odd.

They went back downstairs. Lucy was banging a plastic teacup against the bars of her pen. Dora was halfway to the magical land, accompanied by a talking tree and a star. Some invisible parent had kindly made her a packed lunch.

The kettle began to shriek. Clair turned off the gas and reached into the cupboard for mugs, but Sonia shook her head. "I think we're beyond that, don't you?" She went over to the fridge and wrenched open the door. "Aha!" she said, seizing a bottle of Sancerre by the neck. "Just what the doctor

ordered! Glasses, my dear? Chop chop!"

Clair hesitated. She had Benjamin to collect, but she could get someone else to do it. She fetched two fluted wine glasses and unlocked the back door. Sonia lifted Lucy from the play pen and carried her into the garden and put her down on the lawn. Her hands seemed to move without thinking and it struck Clair, not for the first time, that some women were better suited to motherhood than others. Sonia seemed to have been born into it.

She took the glasses and the bottle to the picnic table and sat down. Duchamp lumbered over to join her. He lay at her feet and rested his chin on his paws.

"What am I going to say to him?" said Clair.

"Well," said Sonia, pouring her a generous measure, "you could find out what's bothering him. There must be something he needs to get off his chest."

"Such as?"

"I don't know," said Sonia. "You're his mother. It's a cry for help, isn't it? Or attention anyway. Isn't that Freud? I'm sure this is all Freud. Didn't we do this in second year? Professor Scaltsas? Tweedy, nasty combover, bog breath?"

Clair swilled the wine in her glass. "I don't seem to have much call for Freud these days," she said.

"Oh I think there's plenty of call," said Sonia. "Four kids? I'm up to my eyeballs in Freud. Sally is knee deep in the mirror stage."

"The mirror stage is Lacan," said Clair.

Sonia snorted and clinked her glass against Clair's. "Still the boffin, I see," she said.

Next door, the Wilson children were on the trampoline. Every second or two their heads would appear above the fence and they'd shriek and giggle and wave as they started to fall – their hair screaming from their faces, their cheeks swollen with gravity and sweets – and vanish once again behind the fence. Sonia smiled and waved back.

"I have to say," she said, "it didn't look like a small boy's stool to me. Kevin's were usually more like rabbit droppings, I seem to remember. Or cinnamon twists. But then he's always been a very neat boy."

"Neil thinks it was Duchamp," said Clair.

"Poor Duchamp," said Sonia, ruffling the dog's neck. "Not long for this world now, are you, old boy?"

"It wasn't Duchamp," said Clair.

Sonia picked up a biscuit tin standing on the table and prised open the lid.

"What do you think, Lucy?" she said.

Lucy gazed up at her, a handful of grass halfway to her open mouth.

"She hasn't formed an opinion," said Clair.

"Funny," said Sonia, plucking a Penguin from the tin, "with my lot the opinion was the first thing to develop."

An ice cream van arrived in the cul-de-sac with a nautical flourish. Every day, the van and its mad jingle would appear, drawing local children like rats. The theme from *Blue Peter* jangled in Clair's brain. The Wilson kids screamed and ran inside.

Sonia unwrapped the Penguin and dipped it into her wine. "So," she began, munching, "if it wasn't Benjy, and it wasn't Duchamp, who was it?"

"I don't know," said Clair.

Sonia rapped the table with her knuckles. "How about some detective work, Clair?" she said. "Come on! When were you last in Benjy's room?"

Clair thought about this. She might have gone into the room that morning, after she'd taken Benjamin to school, but she couldn't be sure. The first few hours of her day were pure madness. Lucy woke around six, if she was lucky. Neil was up thirty minutes later, belching his way towards the bathroom. She woke Benjamin at seven. There followed a flurry of activity: four breakfasts, one packed lunch, four coats, arguments, compromise, recrimination, revenge. She saw it in fragments: Neil searching for a tie in the top drawer, Lucy's bottle sterilising in the microwave, the kettle shrieking on the stove. And Benjamin.

Benjamin was a nose-picker. He was a nose-picker *and* eater. He loved spiders and vampires and horror. For his seventh birthday he'd requested a tarantula. Failing that, a python. Failing that, a rat. And yet, some things disgusted him. That morning, for example, he'd refused to take his packed lunch to school because a fly had landed on his sandwich while Clair was making it. He'd announced this with some triumph.

"They lay eggs," he said, pulling a sour face.

"So do I," said Clair.

She remembered driving him to school. She remembered the car door slam. She remembered the long drive home in slow traffic, Lucy strapped into the car seat, her babbling the only sound from the back, but the rest of the morning, from ten onwards, was blank.

"What we need," said Sonia, "is a list of suspects." She sprang to her feet and started doing hopscotch on the lawn: "Two, four, six, eight, who can we eliminate?" At the flower bed she stopped and turned to Clair. "What about Isla?" she said.

"The babysitter?"

"Baby*shitter*," said Sonia, "as Sean Connery would say. Doesn't she have a dodgy boyfriend? Sneaks over when you're not around?"

Isla did have a dodgy boyfriend. Clair had caught her with him one evening, *in flagrante* on the vintage Le Corbusier sofa. Clair made sure the sofa was professionally cleaned.

"She doesn't have a key," she said. "Besides, we haven't used her for weeks."

"How about the cleaner, then?" said Sonia. "Whatserface? Ludmilla?"

Clair shook her head. It was Tuesday. Ludmilla came on Thursdays.

"And what about you, young lady?" said Sonia, turning to Lucy with a fierce, squinting expression. "Have you been making a mess on your brother's floor? *That's what I think of you, bro*!"

Lucy giggled. Her tongue was bright green.

Sonia hopscotched back to the table and flopped into her seat. Her copper earrings jangled. "Well, I'm stumped," she said. "What you've got here is an immaculate turd. You should charge admission. Perhaps it's a blessing in disguise."

"Pretty good disguise," said Clair.

Sonia took a sip of her wine. "I'm afraid it has to be Duchamp, darling," she said. "There's no other explanation."

"It wasn't Duchamp," said Clair, sharply. Her fingers gripped the edge of the table. Her tone took them both by surprise.

"If you say so," said Sonia.

They were silent for a while. Clair gulped her wine. The breeze had picked up, the back fence rattled in the wind, and from the houses all around came a chorus of inconsolable screams.

Suddenly, Sonia gasped and clapped her hands. "I've got a brilliant idea!" she said. "We'll take Duchamp upstairs and see if he gives himself away. Get him to finger the culprit! Or paw."

"Duchamp's not a sniffer dog," said Clair.

"All dogs are sniffer dogs, darling," said Sonia. "It's what they do."

They went back inside. Reluctantly, Clair put Duchamp on the leash. As she led him towards the front door his tail began to wag but, when she turned and opened the safety gate, he barked and held his ground. Clair had to drag him by the collar.

"This is exciting," said Sonia, as they climbed the stairs. "Just like *Cagney & Lacey*. You be Christine and I'll be Mary Beth." She said some other things, but Clair didn't hear them.

They arrived outside Benjamin's room. Sonia waited at the threshold while Clair led Duchamp across the white carpet and removed the lead.

Duchamp glanced at the turd. He stooped and gave the air around it a cursory sniff. He looked up at Clair with sad, accusing eyes. Then he turned towards the door. For a moment Clair was afraid he was going to step in it. She had visions of shit trodden all over the house, of clustered paw prints on every pristine surface. But, without so much as another glance, Duchamp stepped over the turd and lumbered out of the room.

"See," said Clair. "I told you it wasn't him."

Sonia was looking at her strangely. There were splashes of furious crimson on her cheeks. "Yes, I see," she said. "Yes I do see."

Clair turned back to the room. She tried again to recall what she'd done that morning, but all she could think of was Benjamin, making a scene over his lunch: how he'd whimpered when she refused to make another one, how he whinged and cried and kicked her when she threw it away. How he sulked on the way to school. How he told her he hated her and slammed the car door in her face. That was all.

Sonia took a step into the room. She bent over the little huddle of cleaning products on the floor and picked up the transparent, Ziploc sandwich bag. She seized the pooper-scooper and held it out to Clair.

"Let's get this over with," she said.

Clair took the bag and the pooper-scooper from her. She got down on her knees and scooped up the turd, tipping it carefully into the bag. It was heavy – the weight of a good meal. She slid the zip across and placed the bag on the carpet to one side. Sonia passed her the can of *Vanish*, and Clair sprayed the spot where the turd had sat. There was no stain, but she scrubbed the carpet anyway. Then she got to her feet and opened the window.

"Thank you, Clair," said Sonia, when the work was done. "Thank you."

Together they headed back down the stairs: Sonia la Cloche and Clair de Loon. On the way, Sonia's phone began to jingle. She pulled it out and checked it and sighed. "Jez has come off his tricycle," she said. "No rest for the wicked."

They went into the hall. Sonia wound her scarf around her neck. "Good to see you," she said, and made to embrace Clair, but checked herself just in time. Clair was still holding the sandwich bag and inside, nestled in translucence like a strange goldfish, was the turd. "For god's sake," said Sonia, "get rid of that before Benjy sees it."

"I was thinking of burying it," said Clair.

"It's not a relative, darling," Sonia snapped. She opened the front door and paused and put a hand on Clair's arm. "I'll pop round tomorrow," she said, softly, "Clair de Loon."

Clair nodded and shut the door behind her. Tomorrow, she thought, she'd better close the blinds.

She returned to the kitchen and put the sandwich bag on the breakfast table and sat down. She emptied the wine bottle into her glass and looked at the turd. Its rich, warm hues glowed in the afternoon light. There was something strangely satisfying about the shape of it, she thought: something solid and reassuring. In its own way, it was rather beautiful.

The phone rang.

"What did the vet say?" said Neil.

"He said it wasn't Duchamp," said Clair. "He said you should leave him alone."

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "You didn't take him then," said her husband.

Clair said nothing.

Neil sighed. "This is only going to get worse," he said.

Clair hung up and drained her glass. In the play pen, Lucy had fallen asleep, the terrible, blank canvas of her face pressed against the bars. Dora's quest was long since complete. Clair carried Lucy upstairs and put her to bed in the cot. Any minute now, she thought, the phone would ring again. She should have collected Benjamin from school. But how could she? How could she bring him home when there was a turd in the house, lying on the kitchen table? What kind of a mother would do that?

She reached over the packing crates to close the curtains and stopped. She looked at the crates for a moment, then she turned and walked out of the room. A minute later she returned, clutching one of Benjamin's lunch boxes. In her other hand was the sandwich bag. She put the lunch box on the carpet and removed the lid and laid the sandwich bag carefully inside. Then she went over to the top crate and pulled out a staple gun. She stapled the top of the sandwich bag to one side of the lunch box, and stood the box upright on the other. The bag, and its contents, was now suspended from the roof of the box.

Lucy gurgled in her sleep.

Clair rummaged around inside the crate and found her toolkit. She picked up the lunch box and the toolkit and carried them across the landing. The walls of Benjamin's bedroom were a gallery of enthusiasms – posters of planets and racing cars and dinosaurs and spacemen – but his door was still untouched and pure white. Asylum white.

Clair pulled the door shut and pressed the lunch box against it and reached

for a nail. Trapping the nail against the back of the box with her thumb and forefinger, she pulled a hammer from her toolkit and swung hard. The nail slammed through the plastic and into the door. Clair swung the hammer a second time, then a third. She picked up another nail and hammered it into the box. Behind her, Lucy woke and started to cry. It was a terrible sound; plaintive and agonised, the wail of a body that had woken to find itself alone, but Clair made no move to comfort her. Instead, she reached into her pocket for a marker pen, noticing as she did so that she'd cut her finger on the nail and drawn blood. She squeezed a drop out and let it fall, watching as it splashed on the carpet. Then she leaned over the lunch box and wrote "Packed Lunch [No.2]" on Benjamin's door in neat, black letters.

Downstairs, the phone began to ring. Clair snapped the top of the pen into place and stepped back to survey her work. It wasn't much, she thought. But it was a start.

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