

BENJAMIN REED

SURPRISE ME WITH SOMETHING FAMILIAR

Hank's out front in the driveway, under his jacked-up old truck, doing something with the wheels or the brakes or something. Caroline's in the kitchen, making White Russians with her breast milk.

The perfect breast milk White Russian is 3-2-1 vodka-Kahlua-milk. Breast milk has an odd sweetness to it, so you can back off on the coffee cordial if you like. But Caroline likes 3-2-1. The denomination is a hypnotic decline, a counting down into the sugary spiraled efficiency of self-cannibalism.

Kahlua, take me away.

She walks outside and sits on the top step of the concrete porch, takes a sip and watches Hank in the driveway, his legs sticking out from under the red pickup. She knows he must have heard the screen door open and shut, but he doesn't stop working or say anything. She watches his grease-blackened hand reach out from under the truck, sees it prod the ground blindly, in search of a tool. She regards his stained jeans, his old work boots. Hank busts a knuckle and swears.

Before, she found him sexy when he worked on the truck. He'd get all dirty, grease-stained and sweaty, and she'd get so turned on she couldn't help it, like the second chapter of a book-length orgasm, pages turned by dirty thumbs in high gear. He'd try to at least wash his hands first, but she'd never let him.

Now, it's been over two months since they've had sex, *real* sex, actual *fucking*, and weeks since he's come. Well, at least while they were in the same room.

She sips her drink idly, happy to be drunk before noon. She waits for him to fix whatever's broken and wonders why he has to spend the whole weekend working on the truck. Isn't that why they bought the Honda?

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"*Goddamn* it!" Hank looks at his busted knuckle. The skin is torn free, red underneath. He mourns the scrape, meditates on carcinogens and the microns of grease that must have been sucked into his bloodstream. He can't work the brake spoon with the gloves on.

He's got the front end of the truck up on jack stands, the tires back on, spinning the left wheel, watching it turn, counting out one solid revolution before it slows and catches to a stop. Okay, that one's done. He shimmies out from under the truck, looks at his wife sitting on the porch with her legs open, her robe tied so loose the whole neighborhood can practically see right up her cooch. And she's drinking her goddamn breast milk again.

“Your tits aren’t gonna go down if you keep drainin’ ’em.”

“I know.”

“And you’re *supposed* to keep that bandage tight.”

She looks down, fingers the ace bandage that hangs limp across her chest, making her look like the world’s most half-assed mummy. The nurse told them the bandages would help stop her milk production, and give support to her sagging, distended breasts. “I know.” She’s also supposed to wear the organic cotton breast pads, but she doesn’t. She just drains when she needs to. When it’s only a dribble, she just wipes each nipple like it’s a runny nose and runs her hand down the side of her robe. Her grandma told her to put cabbage leaves in her bra.

“Aren’t they supposed to hurt like hell?”

“They do. That’s why I have that spray.”

Hank squints into the sun. “Are you using it at least?”

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The lidocaine spray numbs everything. Takes the pain out of her tits, twenty minutes at a time. She doesn’t like to use it, though. The weight isn’t real without the pain that comes with it.

A while ago, she used the spray but hadn’t realized she’d gotten some on her fingers. It was a few days ago, while Hank was at work. Later, she lay down on the bed and tried to get herself off, but the residue transferred from her fingers to the top of her vagina. Numbed her clit like it’d fallen off. She couldn’t feel a goddamn thing.

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Hank just looks at her, mutters something under his breath. Caroline swallows some more White Russian and says, “Waste not, want not.” But this time it doesn’t sound funny, not even to her.

Hank walks to the far side of the driveway, gets on his knees, slides under the truck. She thinks he must be crazy, or at least *stupid* to get under cars. When he was seventeen, a nineteen-fifty-something Buick fell off a jack stand and onto his foot, pinning his ankle between the ground and the frame of the car. He passed out twice before anybody found him. It took three guys to lift the car the inch they needed to free his poor foot. Some of his tendons (or ligaments, she can never remember which) were severed, and it was so-long for football and *sayonara* to the scholarships. The doctor said Hank would never walk without a cane, but he did, and just fine. Yet one foot ended up being larger than the other, the crushed one a little more narrow and with a deeply scarred heel. She can stab the bottom of his foot with a sewing needle and he won’t feel it. It reminds her of Oedipus. As if Hank had been exposed, left on a hill, his baby feet bound together. She always tries to touch the scar, but he won’t let her. He says when she touches the scar, even lightly, especially lightly, it feels like he’s being electrocuted.

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