Small Things

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I am pregnant. I knew this before I filled the too-small plastic cup and eyedroppered the chemicals in. Thirty seconds to one minute later, a quick swirl with the pink swizzle stick magically turned my urine blue. It looks like a cup of Ny-Quil sitting on the back of the toilet, ready to relieve my twelve major cold symptoms. I’ll save it there, for Art, as evidence. He considers himself a very logical man, and I doubt whether an unsubstantiated declaration would lower his newspaper or raise an eyebrow. The blue of my undeniable proof, however, will do both. The newspaper, slowly folded, will snap against the damask tablecloth, perhaps rattling the dishes. The eyebrows will shoot up and he’ll glare at me over the top of his reading glasses, thinking hard, mentally counting, figuring odds. He doesn’t want a baby. He bought a car, a red car, not new, costing $78,000. Because I don’t drive, he believes I can’t understand.

I decide to cook him a nice dinner. Though I am not sure, I think he married me because of my cooking and because his business associates appreciated the way I looked in the black crepe dinner dresses he had me wear. The tax situation, perhaps, but I have enough self-esteem to put that third. My neighbor Marianne says I’m a trophy wife, but she was Evelyn’s friend, and is obligated to say that. In any case, preparing a nice dinner will keep my afternoon occupied, and will provide an excuse to have the good china on the table. The carillon ringing of Evelyn’s Waterford as the water and wine glasses connect diffuses the aggression in the slap of his newspaper. Candlelight softens his glare.

I will make Chicken Madeira. This gesture relays my continuing concern for his cholesterol intake but assures him I care equally for the quality of his life, which he had feared would become impoverished after his latest heart episode. The health concern also explains the car, I think, which he drives too fast, weaving in and out through traffic on the Eisenhower, every morning and afternoon, downtown to the Board of Trade and home again to River Forest. The car has become a substitute for the sex he avoids for fear of another heart attack. I would never presume to analyze him though; I’m young, and overly emotional and never did finish college. Such are the differences between us, and he points them out readily. I leave the analysis to Paul, his counselor, who helps him cope with the stress of his life, on Tuesday afternoons, between four and five.

I run a quick inventory of the frozen food. After taking two plastic wrapped chicken breasts from the freezer, I place them in a ceramic bowl of cool water. I prefer this method of defrosting to the microwave, which I find occasionally partially cooks the meat, toughening it. I wonder if I will be here tomorrow, cooking Art his healthy dinner, and then I picture him, wearing his Ray-Bans, sitting in his fast red car, drumming his fingers on
the dash as he waits at the drive-thru window at MacDonald's, paying for his death with a five dollar bill, ordering two large fries with his Big Mac. Would it technically be suicide? I wonder.

I lean over to pull out the vegetable cutting board. I keep it in the narrow cupboard below the knife drawer, on the left side. The meat cutting board is on the right, with a divider between, so I need never worry about mixing them up. I like these things neat, the house clean. In this, at least, I am very different from Art's dead wife, Evelyn, who Marianne tells me would lie in bed much of the day reading historical romances and smoking cigarettes, even before she was undergoing chemotherapy. She would get up and shower late in the afternoon, have coffee with Marianne, and then sprinkle around some Lysol and Comet cleanser, so that when Art arrived home, the house would have that illusion of cleanness. She had a cleaning woman two days a week, so I'm certain Art never much noticed or thought about it, cloistered as he always is behind the financial section.

I take the vegetables from the crisper. Not the onions and garlic, which become bitter under refrigeration and so are kept in a wire basket drawer, near the potatoes. Marianne wonders about me. She asks about Evelyn's photos, still around the house, framed in silver, scattered on doilies end tables, on Evelyn's piano. Evelyn who was the age of my mother, but glamorous, wearing Evan Picone dresses and movie-star red lipstick. Evelyn, who like my mother, died of lung cancer. Marianne sometimes comes for coffee and once remarked on it, wondering how I can live with the ghost of Art's dead wife. I thought everyone lived with ghosts. Evelyn's is benevolent, ignored by Art and indulged by me. I wonder about her, if she was bored or unhappy, and why historical romances and not Goths, or mysteries. Art thinks I think too much.

I peel the onions and let myself cry a little. Though I am not unhappy, peeling onions is a good excuse, and crying then is a habit. I do not have a cleaning woman. This is for the same reason I want a baby. Art prefers I not work, and claims my working would cost him more in taxes than I could bring in. Not being a reader of historical romances, there is little enough for me to do, without dividing the work with a cleaning woman. I read other things; I like Jane Austen and Barbara Pym and Margaret Drabble, but I have yet to find an author compelling enough to keep me in bed all day, everyday. I fear though, without a baby, this could happen in a few years. The inclination exists. So I clean. Art occasionally notices how clean I keep the house, and he praises me for it.

I find his praise chafing. I find it bland and distracted and the sort of hollow praise my step-father might have given after he said a cutting thing. After he said, "Sarah, you think too much," as if my dullness taxed him. Sometimes, when we are awake late, Art watches Rush Limbaugh's television show in his bed. I don't particularly care for the show, but I'm usually reading anyway, with a tiny light Art bought to clip onto my book so my lamp wouldn't disturb him. Four months ago, before Art's last heart
attack, Rush reported a survey which suggested 62% of men would prefer a clean house to good sex. Art objected to the logic of the survey. I was reading an Anne Tyler novel in which a woman and her husband were taking a car trip together, confined close, but distant from each other.

"Why must everything be either/or?" he demanded, tapping my book to get my attention. "Hell, wouldn't 100% rather have both? Evelyn?" He snapped down the financial section, pushed away my book and made love to me before the dizzying uncertainty of the TV shadows. In the harsh little spotlight from my book, I could see the intensity of his concentration, willing himself to prove to me the logical fallacy of the survey perhaps Evelyn would have cared about. Ghosts, I thought, we all live with ghosts. Rush Limbaugh railed on some obscure point about feminists and housekeeping, and I slid my fingers between Art's, so he was holding my hands, rather than pinning down my wrists. Because I am emotional, not logical, either/or works for me, and I see the subtle choices, but I moaned appropriately and pretended he had proved otherwise.

I cut the vegetables into julienne slices. I like how they look, there, against the pink ceramic of the everyday dishes, in the separate, neat piles of strips: purple onions, red peppers, green peppers, white mushrooms, the little golden mound of pressed garlic. I use a heavy Silverstone casserole, and only two tablespoons of olive oil, carefully measured. The vegetables sputter and pop when I add them to the hot oil, stir, and lower the flame. The smell of sauteing garlic and onions warms the kitchen, blotting out the bleachy smell of cleanser, the antiseptic smell of Lysol, making the kitchen mine. That is the illusion Art comes home to now.

I am pleased about the baby. Perhaps more than pleased. This is the reason I married Art, to have a little security and a baby. He and Evelyn never had a baby, and when we met, when he took me to French restaurants and I wore for him red lipstick and Evan Picone dresses, he claimed he had always wanted one. For the three years we have been married, Art has always said soon, when I asked him when we would have the baby. Soon. Until nearly four months ago.

I made poached salmon and asparagus. He was two weeks home from the hospital, one week back at work, and we had dinner in the dining room. I used Evelyn's pewter bowl for a vaguely Oriental arrangement of bought pink orchids and silver pussy willows from the backyard. I lit white tapers in the pink Depression glass candlesticks that had been Art's mother's. I put up my hair, and wore red lipstick and the pearl drop earrings he likes. He sat and opened his paper, began complaining about GPU stock. I brought dinner to the table and sat down.

"Where's the hollandaise?" he asked.
"It's good this way," I told him. "And better for you."
"How do you expect me to eat this without hollandaise?" He snapped the newspaper and glared at me over the top of his glasses.
"Art. Be reasonable. There's a cup of butter and four eggs in
hollandaise."

He ate like a fussy child, sullen and picking. I decided he was not
precisely angry with me, but was angry with being 48 years old and having
to worry about another heart attack, which might be more serious, and
eating right, and exercising enough, and GPU, which he had purchased for
many of his clients' portfolios. He brightened a little when I brought in the
crustless lemon meringue and his decaf coffee; he loosened his tie and
kicked off his shoes, took off his reading glasses and rubbed at the little
indent on his nose.

“This is good, Sarah,” he said.

That was my cue. “I want to have a baby.”

He raised his eyebrows, frowning. “I bought a car today.” I could
hear his watch tick and a peculiar gurgling from the insulated coffee carafe.
I loosened the lid so the steam could escape, and the noise stopped.

“And?” I said.

“And it's an expensive car. A red Jag.” He rattled off a list of years
and numbers and letters that meant nothing to me.

I nodded. Waited. He slammed his palm against the table. Water
and wine sloshed onto the polished wood. I used my linen napkin and
began mopping it up before the alcohol clouded the finish of Evelyn's
mother's dark walnut. Cool wet slid down between the table leaves, pooling
in my lap and then soaking through my skirt and dripping down my leg
onto the carpet. I stood to go for a towel.

“Paul says you're passive-aggressive. He says you manipulate me
by doing nothing. That's why you don't drive. You think it all out and then
you never do a god damned thing but think.”

I didn't look at him. “You knew I didn't drive when you married
me.”

He snorted, that angry/amused noise men make when a woman has
disgraced herself by proving their point. My step-father used to do it, to
me, to my mother, to the teller at the bank, the check-out girl at the grocery
store. I went to the kitchen for a towel and when I returned, he had gone
upstairs. I used club soda to blot the spot, so the wine wouldn't discolor the
pale silver of his carpet.

A club soda would be good now. I pour myself a club soda, using a
heavy Old-fashioned glass, lots of ice and a lime wedge. I would prefer a
glass of Madeira, but I know this is not good for the baby. I wonder if I am
passive-aggressive, and I wonder what passive-aggressive is, exactly. I
wonder also, if it is ethical of Paul, whom I have never met, to have made
such proclamations about me. I consider briefly calling some sort of state
ethics board for counselors and asking these questions. I pull out the meat
cutting board. As I begin to slice the still slightly frozen chicken into even
julienne slice, I wonder what my not driving has to do with any of it.

I can drive now. This is a skill I will not likely ever use, as I prefer
the convenience of public transportation. Nonetheless, I paid $200 for a six
week course at Wanda's Driving Academy, just south of the el near Ridgeland in Oak Park. My driving instructor, Michael, was a graduate student at Circle by night. He wore jeans and tie-dye T-shirts under his red polyester driving academy jacket, and took the jacket off immediately once we left the parking lot. I told him my situation the first day, the part about driving.

He laughed. “So you want to drive the Jag?” I saw how he looked at me, as the dumb, acquisitive young wife. I'd seen him look me over, the wedding ring, the Coach bag, the generic, Eddie Bauer suburban housewife clothes. He rested his right hand against the cracked dash of the old Chevy Monza I drove, pointing negligently to direct me through the light morning traffic to the Forest Preserve, where he claimed there would be no traffic. He seemed perfectly relaxed with me driving, and I tried to imagine Art letting me drive, even the Saab.

“No,” I said, trying to talk and drive at the same time, hands tight at ten and two, watching forward, watching the mirrors. “I don't want to drive, I want to know how to drive.” Art would have laughed at the illogic of my answer, the illogic of paying $200 to learn to do something I had no intention of ever doing.

Michael nodded, though, and stopped laughing to study me. “Yeah, I can see that. It's sort of Zen, isn't it? Maybe you're not a Stepford wife.”

“I'm just a trainee,” I said, and he laughed again, because he thought I was joking.

“All this and a fast car, too.” I couldn't look at him because my eyes needed to be right on the road.

He began scheduling my lessons before his lunch break, so we could have two hours together, Tuesday and Thursday. We bought hot dogs and french fries and chocolate malts at Parky’s and ate in the Forest Preserve and had startling sex in the cramped back seat of Wanda’s Monza. “Like high school kids,” he told me. I did not tell him I had never done such a thing, in high school or college or even with my husband, nothing like that. I was always afraid Art would smell the french fries on me.

I have a license. I keep it in my purse, and use it at the Jewel when I write a check. Michael drove with me to Hillside, and waited in the sweaty fluorescence of the state DOT while I took the test. He waited four and a half hours, in a molded plastic left-handed chair-desk. Art would have had a heart attack, waiting that long. Waiting that long for me to do a foolish and illogical thing. Michael slouched, with his long legs stretched in front of him, and read me the most interesting graffiti from his desk top. He says I'm a very cautious driver, but that's not a bad thing, in his experience. He said if he ever had a Jag, I could drive it anytime, but until then, maybe I'd be interested in an '81 VW Rabbit. I sometimes think I should call him, but the fact that I want to makes me know I shouldn't. Another ghost, a choice. Oddly, I feel guilt only about clandestine fast food. I will try to be honest with Art about everything but the sharing of greasy french
fries in the back seat of a red-plaid upholstered Chevy. I know my hus-
band, and I know what would hurt him too much.

I take a zip-lock bag of tomato sauce from the freezer. This I
defrost in the microwave. I made it for Art, with fresh tomatoes, without
salt or sugar or oil. I mix it with some Madeira and a cup of vegetable
broth and add it all to the casserole before I cover it to simmer. I wish the
baby were more real than a tiny cup of blue urine. I have not nausea nor
swollen breasts nor unusual mood swings, three of the most common
symptoms of early pregnancy. If the world were fair, I would be afflicted
with every major symptom, but I am well and nearly guiltless. I wonder
what Art will say, if he will ask me to leave. I wonder where I would go,
and if this is the reason I kept Michael’s number. Likely he would be
angrier than Art, and with cause. I try to imagine him angry and cannot.
Confused, perhaps. “Help me understand this, Sarah.” I can hear him
saying this. I wonder then to whom he is giving driving lessons now and if
I should care and if with this though I have been less than generous to a
man who was kind to me. A man who valued me, though I never cooked for
him, or cleaned his house, or dressed in the clothing of any dead lover. I
think too much.

I tear the greens for the salad: sweet dark spinach, buttery, pale
bib, sharper endive. I add green onion, mushrooms and a few pine nuts, all
sliced thin. I put on the water for the rice and set the table in the dining
room. Late afternoon light filters through the lace curtains, making minute
prisms of the Waterford facets, shooting rainbows against the silver and
pink wallpaper, the ceiling, the walnut breakfront.

I hear Art come in through the garage. His car is as quiet as he
claims; I heard only the garage door opener activate, then grind closed. He
doesn’t greet me, but goes straight to the bathroom to wash. I put the
silver on the table and turn to the kitchen. Art stands in the doorway
behind me, the newspaper under one arm, holding up the cup of blue urine
like he’s toasting me with it. “What’s this?”

I had planned this differently. I wanted him sitting down, eating
chicken Madeira, understanding that I care for him, that I worry about
him. “I’m pregnant,” I say. He walks to the table and sets down the cup,
sets down his newspaper. He sets down himself and rubs the bridge of his
nose, as if he’s very tired.

“Who’s the father?” He says it in the same tone he uses when he
asks what’s for dinner. For I moment, I think perhaps that was what he
asked. Because I hadn’t considered the question he did ask, I answer
instead the anticipated question. “Chicken Madeira,” I say, and he nods. I
expect him to pick up the newspaper, but he does not. He looks around the
room like he’s never been in it, then feels the front of his shirt for his
glasses. The gesture ages him. “Let me take this,” I say and take the cup
of urine as if I’m clearing his plate for dessert and coffee. I remember I did
not make dessert, and in my mind I think though the contents of the
refrigerator and cupboards. Pears and Brie, just a little Brie, I decide, and pour my proof down the toilet, drop the cup into the wicker waste basket, and wash my hands. I remember to take the cheese from the refrigerator to let it soften.

I bring dinner to the table: a glass platter, mounded with rice, ringed with the chicken, and the pewter bowl of greens, with vinaigrette dressing. Art is reading his newspaper. I sit, and put modest portions before him. He studies his plate for a long moment.

"It smells good," Art tells me. He puts down the paper and loosens his tie. He spreads his napkin across his lap. "I don't always say that, do I? I notice, though, what you do."

I do not expect this. His praise feels like a pat on the head, by my step-father's ghost-hand. In my mind, with my eyes closed, I can see the gold cuff-links, even, and hear the distracted suggestion to go off and play now. I did not. I stayed, after my mother died, after he was sick. I took care of him, not because he was all I had, but because I was all he had.

Art eats his chicken, his salad, his rice, and looks up. "How do you feel? Not sick?"

"Good," I tell him. "I feel good."

"Sometimes women feel sick. Evelyn lost a baby, when we were young, and she was sick."

"I feel good," I repeat, and I do. We eat quietly, slowly. The rainbows are gone, but the room is lit pink from the setting sun. "I forgot dessert," I say to apologize. "But I remembered we had pears. I thought perhaps you'd like some pears and Brie. A little Brie is fine, I think." I stand to clear the dishes.

"Good. Yes. I'd like that. You're always thinking, aren't you?" He murmurs it and glances down at the newspaper.

"Because I don't drive," I say, and I turn my back to him, and go to the kitchen. He doesn't complain of my logic; he is silent. I wonder if I have lied, but I think not; I do not drive, but I know I can. I think my baby will be a girl. I wonder if when I look at her I will think of the tree-filtered sunlight of the Forest Preserve, or grease-scented hands on my skin, or my driver's license, or the generosity of a good man, now a ghost.

The pears are soft. The Brie is nearly warm enough, close to runny. I find my paring knife in the right side of the knife drawer and peel the bitter skin from the ripe pear, slice the fruit. The juice runs between my fingers, and I rinse my hands in the sink before I cut a small portion of the cheese. I pour Art half a glass of the sweet Madeira. It is not good for him, but it is such a small thing.