

Straight Home

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Six cars pulled through the intersection, one after the other over the course of an hour, but none of them was hers. Barefoot, Bart waited on the slat bench outside his front door, picking away at the curls of varnish and eyeing the stop sign at the end of the block, two houses down. Natalie had never been one to stay late at church, never been one to linger over some Relief Society assignment or to dawdle in the foyer with girlfriends before heading to the car. No, she'd always come straight home.

A Suburban slurred through the intersection, its windows and side panels splattered by rain from a storm that had yet to burst over this side of town.

That's what Bart had expected from his wife today—that she'd be home by now. He thought she'd finish with the bishop as fast as humanly possible, close his office door on the way out, and drive home.

Bart took measure of the sky. Dark clouds gathered like a street gang.

Not that Natalie would want to talk it all out with him. She wouldn't. But he'd force the issue. He'd gotten rid of the kids.

From the east flew an arrowhead of mallards, skewed on the left side as though their formation needed a little grinding down.

She should be home. They needed to talk. He'd arranged everything.

No, he thought, he needed to talk—she needed to listen. Those weren't the terms Dr. Cohen used, but they were what he meant, Bart was sure of it.

The flock beat on, traversing the gray turmoil. Bart paid particular attention to the fifth duck in the left line, the one that stood out. He pulled for instinct to veer it inward and measure it up with the others. Instead, the flock—the duck—flapped on out of sync, and Bart returned to staring at the corner.

Sometimes, it was true, Natalie disappeared during the week. He didn't know where she went or what she did. Her alone time, he generously called it. But she'd never taken off on a Sunday.

He let his head thud against the stucco wall and felt the pain three inches below the vertex of his skull. No matter how hard he stared at that red, octagonal sign, its message didn't change.

He shouldn't have deceived Natalie that morning, never should have claimed that the president of the elders' quorum had scheduled a meeting with him before the sacrament meeting. "We'll need to take separate cars," he had told his wife as she stood in front of the wide-screen TV, working a hairbrush through Christy's blond curls. "I have to meet with Tanner."

In truth, President Tanner was probably still eating waffles with his family, but Bart took off anyway, leaving Natalie to bring the kids in their late model Ford Taurus, the blue one. He had made a promise to Dr. Cohen and he'd have to follow through.

When he arrived, three other early birds had lined up on the rust-colored couch like crows on a fence, so Bart lingered outside the clerk's office. As soon as Bishop Avery walked out of ward council, Bart separated him from the herd of well-dressed congregants and corralled him against the nearby exit, the glass door no one used. He asked the bishop to please meet with Natalie today.

Avery refused, explaining that the stake presidency would be here today for temple recommend interviews. The sign-up sheet was full and he had to meet with nearly everyone on it first. "Now if you'll excuse me . . ." he said politely, trying to navigate around Bart.

But Bart grabbed his arm, wrinkled his rayon sleeve, and, in a hushed voice, spat out what the psychologist suspected about Natalie.

The bishop blinked, looked deeply into Bart's eyes, and then looked away. Yes, he said, he'd meet with her. First thing. Right after the block of meetings ended. "But I can't give her more than the standard fifteen minutes. Not today. You'll be there?"

Bart clasped the bishop's hand and shook it. "Just do your best," he said, "I don't expect a miracle."

In truth, Bart didn't expect anything. He didn't believe an appointment of any duration would make any difference whatso-

ever. A rope to jump, a pledge to keep, a way to say it wasn't his fault: I tried, Dr. Cohen, but she won't talk to anyone, not even our clergy. And so, while the sacrament was passed, Bart had slipped Natalie a note, penned on the back of the Church bulletin.

"The bishop asked to see you after church."

After the final meeting, he prompted Brennan and Christy to kiss Mommy good-bye and herded them into their other Taurus, the green one. On the ten-minute drive home, he used a cell phone to call the Beckers. After explaining that Natalie had a migraine and that he had a critical deadline to meet today, after promising the kids wouldn't be there more than two hours—two and a half tops—he dropped them off.

At first, he had paced the house, carefully practicing what he might say in response to what she might say about being ambushed by Bishop Avery. When he began talking in circles, he distracted himself by putting up the dishes, dusting the blinds, stirring the split pea soup in the crock pot, replacing the toilet float in the kids' bathroom and finally wandering outside so that he could recoil the hose. But the moment he had smelled the storm, he sat down under the darkening sky and began counting the cars that were not hers.

He should have touched base with the Beckers long before he detected the familiar rattle of her car. He leaned forward, lengthening his torso and retracting his legs beneath the bench. He watched the little blue car, water trickling off, slowly forge through the intersection and onto their block. The two wipers fanned the windshield, though the one on the driver's side left the glass badly smeared.

Bart pushed himself to his feet. Feeling lightheaded, he steadied himself against the wall, his palm inadvertently touching the wound in the stucco where Brennan had successfully destroyed a mud dauber with his baseball bat. Then he stepped from the porch onto the walk. An upswipe of wind pushed the tart smell of stubborn, fall marigolds at him. He strained to see Natalie as she drove past.

A handful of dead maple leaves skidded across the lawn, which lay dormant except for the weeds.

Natalie had her hand on the rear-view mirror. At least there had not been an accident.

He pivoted as her car crawled up the driveway, disappearing behind the red-tipped photinia he'd trimmed three times that summer. The sudden grating sound of metal gears testified that the garage door was opening. He waited, heard the car door slam, and waited some more.

He waited because, early in their marriage, during those lingering years before their firstborn arrived, she had waited for him. He'd drive up after work and find her sitting on the bench, her head resting against the stucco wall. Some days she'd stand on the path, arms folded. Never forearm over forearm, but wrist clutching wrist in that way of hers. A sure sign that she missed him. Or so he thought.

The clanking noise, the door descending.

Each of those days he had found Natalie waiting, he had responded in precisely the same manner. He had deposited his briefcase in the garage beside the kitchen door and headed on foot back down the driveway and across the grass, which always needed mowing. He'd shroud her with his arms and squeeze her tightly. She'd mutter into his armpit, "Tough day?" or "Glad to be home?" Always a question.

The garage door groaned as its lip smacked the concrete.

And so today he hoped that his wife might remember, might do as he did and appear from behind that bush, skirt the house, and tramp across the lawn, take him in her arms, hug him. All he wished for was the chance to touch her as he used to.

As he waited alongside the marigolds, he heard through the cheap, fiberglass door the sound of her heels tap-tapping. Turning, he looked through the window in time to see her moving across the laminate floor which he had laid last summer to make her happy. She disappeared into their bedroom.

A sorrow like thick, curdled milk spread through his stomach.

He opened the front door and followed her, Dr. Cohen's advice on a slow simmer in his mind. He knew that he wouldn't, that he couldn't, that he shouldn't, ask Natalie about her conversation with Bishop Avery.

He found her in the master bathroom, standing beside the

bathtub, right where it connects to the shower stall. She unzipped her fawn-colored skirt, the one she'd bought to match his Sunday suit. When he came in, she turned away and gave him her back. She wore her hair in the usual way, clipped up.

She moved deep inside the walk-in closet. He gave her a moment, then ambled after her and positioned himself near the dresser.

Her back to him, she wiggled inside her skirt, listing left and then right. When it dropped to her ankles, she stood before him in her temple garments which, of late, had come to fit her so tightly that the silky white fabric stretched bluish across the pitted areas of her buttocks.

As he watched her bend and retrieve the skirt, his breath turned heavy, humid, and his groin suffered that old, familiar tug. He hated the way his body betrayed him, the way it reacted like an animal when all he wanted was to cherish her.

"Where are the kids?" she asked. She held the skirt in one hand and began shuffling clothes on the rod as she searched for an empty hanger with clips.

"At the Beckers'," he replied, noticing that her wedding band was not on her finger. His eyes darted to the dresser where he discovered it already placed beside the photo of the kids, that one taken at the lake. "I dropped them off on the way home."

"I bet Brennan was beside himself," she said. "Getting to go to his friend's house on the Sabbath."

The remark felt like a slap, and Bart slumped against the door jamb. He hadn't expected Natalie to divulge anything about her meeting with Bishop Avery, but it shocked him, the way she could so flawlessly behave as though their interview hadn't happened and focus on chastising him for not keeping the Fourth Commandment.

"I think he was pretty happy, yeah," Bart said, watching the hem of Natalie's pink blouse lift higher as she reached up for a hanger, revealing the full slope of her bottom. The hem descended as she tucked the hanger under her chin and clipped the skirt into position.

"The Becker mom," Bart said. "What's her first name again?"

"DeeDee." Natalie hung up the skirt, kept her back to him. The hem rose and fell again.

“Yeah, DeeDee,” he repeated. “She seemed a little unsure when I asked if she’d take Christy, too. But Katie’s family is out of town.”

Natalie didn’t respond. Instead, she busied her hands on the other side of her body. Though Bart couldn’t see her fingers in action, he presumed them to be about the work of unbuttoning her blouse.

He wanted this moment to be like a Hollywood film, with him as leading man. He’d go to her, take those buttons in his own hands and undo them, reverently, one at a time. Feel her loving him with her eyes, sense her inviting him closer with parted lips.

But he did nothing, said nothing, made no move.

A few seconds later, she pulled her blouse from her shoulders, exposing the garment camisole and the bra she wore over it. She fisted her blouse and tossed it into the hamper.

He peered at the blotchy patch of skin at the base of her neck, at the pair of small, circular welts which stared back at him. During their two-month courtship, she had always worn her hair down, and he hadn’t gathered the courage to investigate this hidden, erogenous area with his touch or his kiss. He simply hadn’t known.

Bart’s eyes fluttered open and he luxuriated on the bed in the bungalow, naked beneath the sheet, watching what had seemed to be a million diamond speckles of dust swirling in a beam of morning light. He breathed deeply the cool, salt air, listened as the surf rolled onto the sand, and let his eyes roam around the cottage on the rim of Maui. A thatched roof overhead and silk sheets beneath him; rattan furniture smothered in tropical prints; a full bar stocked with sparkling cider, and, in the corner, a plasma television, unplugged. Bart’s parents had spared no expense for this once in a lifetime event—his honeymoon.

Content to a degree he hadn’t known possible, he turned on his side, his head resting in the crook of his arm. Beside him slept a treasure he loved more than life.

“Natalie?” he whispered.

His bride lay sprawled on her stomach, her face turned toward the alarm clock. The white bed sheet covered only her lower legs.

Her back shone pink and white from a sunburn that had sneaked up on her last week as she slept on the balcony of her apartment in Plano, Texas. A giant petal, he thought, and he touched her. Three fingertips in the dimple above her buttocks. Slowly, he brushed his hand up her spine. She moaned and her body elongated as if his touch somehow possessed a magical effect.

“Good morning, Angel.”

She groaned again, but didn’t move.

It was right for her to be tired, Bart reminded himself. After all, in the past thirty-six hours they had married in the Dallas temple, hosted a reception for 250 people—and they had danced with nearly all of them, including fat Uncle Ephraim with his sweaty scalp and palsied Cousin Dolores, nearly ninety. The next day, they had boarded a plane and flown through the night. He had no inkling what the clock read when those Hawaiian girls placed leis about his neck, but he knew it wasn’t time for bed because the sun hovered overhead.

He had found the car rental counter and driven Natalie to their hotel. Without unpacking, the newlyweds fell into bed. Later, they slept.

This morning, Bart was keenly aware that it was Sunday. That meant that he and his bride could lounge in the suite all day if they wanted. He moved his body closer to hers and swelled with joy at the memory of joining with her, completely, for the first time yesterday.

“It’s morning, Beautiful.” He leaned against her, pressed himself into her hip. For the first time, he pushed her long hair aside and kissed the base of her neck. He pulled back, surprised to feel an uneven, rough patch of skin against his lips.

Natalie brushed past him. “I need to take a shower.”

Bart didn’t move.

He heard the reverberating ping of the shower door opening, then closing. The pipes inside the wall hummed.

Water spurted in three blasts. He looked again at the photograph of the kids, his two silly-billy goats, their hair disheveled, their bodies dripping with lake water. He picked up the pewter frame, ran his eyes across the “Families Are Forever” banner etched into its base and then settled his gaze back on the image of

his children. Brennan stood knee-deep in the mucky lake, grinning into the camera. Behind him, up to her waist, his younger sister flashed a peace sign with her left hand. Beyond them both, the lake stretched on. There in the distance, the dead, blackened branch of a submerged tree extended out of the water like an arm reaching from the grave for his children. He remembered a heron's nest in its twiggy fingertips, but he couldn't make it out in the snapshot. Why Natalie had chosen to frame that particular photograph escaped Bart.

Something landed softly on Bart's bare foot. Looking down, he found Natalie's white bra, each cup a smooth, molded curve.

The ocean rumbled outside the bungalow. Bart had never seen lesions like those at the base of Natalie's neck. Two little circles of raised skin, pink and white and all pinched together, sitting side-by-side like eyes. But not real eyes. Cartoon eyes. Mottled Orphan Annie eyes, right there between her shoulders. Each the size of a pencil eraser, no larger, no smaller. Bart pressed two fingertips into them.

She startled and arched her back as if she'd been shocked.

He yanked his hand away. She flipped over onto her elbows, her gray eyes storming.

"I'm sorry," he said. His hand, palm open, hovered above her exposed chest.

Her eyes raked across his expression, seemingly desperate.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

Her mouth parted and her eyes blinked.

"Are you okay? I hurt you."

She lowered herself, pressed her head into the pillow, and gazed up at the palm leaves strapped to the ceiling.

"Natalie?"

"I'm fine," she said.

"I'm so sorry." He touched her arm.

She responded by wrapping her fingers around his forearm. "You couldn't hurt me." She smiled. "Don't worry. It's nothing." She squeezed his deltoid. "I'm the one who's sorry."

His hand came down gently, cupped her marshmallow breast. "I never want to hurt you."

“Then don’t.” She pulled him down toward her and, as she did, there came to her lips a hint of a smile.

He rolled atop her, his legs between hers.

“It’s just a stupid birthmark,” she whispered and wrapped her legs around him.

The press of his groin against that patch of hair . . .

Her breath at his ear. . . “They can be sensitive.”

He rocked himself against her. “Oh God,” he said. “I love you.”

From where he stood near the mouth of the closet, Bart had a clear line of sight to Natalie. She stood in her garments in front of the open shower door. Behind her, the only window in the master bathroom speckled silently with droplets. The rainstorm had arrived.

With her right hand extended into the stream, she waited for the water to heat up, an event that, in this house, could easily take five minutes. Her nipples, though muted by the fabric, pointed right at him. They seemed an invitation, but he knew better.

He replaced the photo of the children on the dresser.

He walked away from the closet and again glanced toward the window. Lightning flashed and was gone. Rain continued to strike the glass soundlessly.

He moved around his wife, who still didn’t look at him, and settled on the edge of the bathtub. Thunder grumbled in the distance.

He watched her as she tested the water, saw the way her back formed a wall against him, and wondered how long she would despise him for figuring it out, for doling out secrets she would never have divulged.

“Natalie,” he said.

She did not turn, did not glance back or grunt an acknowledgement. Her shoulder held still, as if she’d forgotten to breathe, and Bart understood that, at that moment, Natalie wanted him to stop existing.

But he couldn’t accommodate her, wouldn’t walk away. He had something to say even if she did not. And so he said it, plain and simple, because he’d never been good at making speeches.

“I won’t lose them.”

It was nearly imperceptible, but these days he was watching more closely, so he saw it, her reaction, the way she stiffened across the shoulders as if he had just worked the crank that tightened her tendons against the muscle.

“Brennan and Christy,” he said. “I won’t lose my children.”

Dr. Cohen rented space two evenings a week down at the Methodist church. His office was nothing more than an enclosed waiting room outside the children’s Sunday School wing, but it was sufficient. There were several padded chairs and two couches, plus a mural of Noah and his animals, painted in bright colors. The room made Bart comfortable on some nights, uncomfortable on others.

It had been an accident, really, that he’d mentioned the birthmarks at all. He’d just been sitting there, eyeing the purple and green leopards on the gunwale and waiting for Dr. Cohen to set the alarm on his watch.

“Natalie has these birthmarks,” Bart had said absently, “pairs of them. Sets.”

The doctor took his hand from his watch and looked up at Bart.

“On her back,” he continued. “And on the inside of one of her thighs, up real high. Behind her knee cap.” He leaned over in his chair and touched the back side of his knee. “Right here, where it bends.”

The doctor entwined his fingers over his abdomen. “Strange,” he said, “to have all those birthmarks.”

Bart grinned with one side of his mouth. “I call them her other ‘eyes.’”

“That’s an interesting thing to say.”

He surveyed the teats on a milk cow that posed, head held high, on the gangway. “Well, really, they don’t look like eyes.” He tipped his head. “It’s just that the first ones I saw were on her back, so I made a joke about them.”

“Your wife has eyes on her back.”

Bart smirked. “That’s pretty much what I said.”

“And how did she react to your joke?”

He shrugged. For the first time, he noticed a tiny pair of ants, painted in black, on the pinnacle of the A in ARK.

The psychologist let the silence sit.

Bart hated the way Dr. Cohen liked to keep quiet and wait for him to speak. He shifted in his chair. Even though he'd been careful not to choose the seat with the bad spring, this one didn't feel much better, not when silence landed like lead in his lap. "Really, they don't look like eyes at all," Bart repeated, then glanced at Dr. Cohen.

Dr. Cohen's glasses set low on the end of his nose. "Then what do they look like?"

Bart shook his head and grimaced, hoping to suggest the answer didn't matter. But he spoke up anyway. "They're round."

Dr. Cohen waited.

"Maybe the circumference of a pencil. And they all set pretty close to each other."

Dr. Cohen remained stony faced, which made Bart nervous.

"Did I mention the two on the sole of her foot?" He lifted his right leg. "It's like, so she can see what, *who*, she's stepping on." He tapped himself on the chest and chortled.

Dr. Cohen's eyes held steady.

"Okay. All right. What *do* they look like." Bart leaned back in his chair and took each elbow in the opposing hand. "They're ugly, that's for sure." He chortled. "They're raised up. Little red and white welts."

Dr. Cohen drew his next breath very slowly. Bart felt the change in the air immediately. He released his elbows, gripped the arms of his chair, and watched the good doctor, waited.

The man sat back, exhaling long and loud. He uncrossed his legs and clipped his pen to the pad on his lap. "By any chance," the therapist began, "when Natalie was a child . . ." He leaned toward Bart. "I'm just asking you to consider the possibility, you understand. But did she ever live with—or was she ever exposed to—someone who smoked?"

Bart stared.

"Cigarettes in particular?"

For years, Bart had sensed a thin shadow roping through his subconscious. Suddenly, with Dr. Cohen's inquiry, that rope rose up like a cobra, looked him in the eye, and bared its fangs. He

couldn't breathe. The parade of animals behind Dr. Cohen's head vanished. Bart stared into the man's glasses, which now sat squarely on the bridge of his nose. Burns.

Natalie's father had left them when she was a toddler. She had no memory of him, and her mother wouldn't speak of him. Bart knew that Natalie's mother had never been a smoker, and he doubted that her father had been either, since their marriage had begun in a Mormon temple.

But there had been other men after her father. Many "uncles," Natalie had said, and some had been live-ins. He'd seen the pictures in the family photo album, had been shown them by her mother when Natalie slept. His stomach knotted. He couldn't remember a single face.

Which of those men—how many of them—had been smokers?

He thought of his own little Christy, wading up to her chin in a man-made lake. He blinked, felt as though his own head had slipped beneath the surface.

Dr. Cohen's voice came thick and wet. "If she's been molested, you know she'll need help."

Natalie withdrew her hand from the shower's stream, and the eyes on her back moved closer together. She turned on one heel like a slow-churning turbine and faced him. With the curve of her cheek taut, she held her lower lip between her teeth.

Bart glanced at the window. He noticed how the drops now spread, egg-like, against the glass. The sight put him in mind of the flock of ducks, and he imagined them grounded, clinging to the edge of a flooded pond, their soggy feathers as gray as the sky.

"LDS Social Services has counseling." He knew better than to tell her that Dr. Cohen had advised it. "It's free. Bishop Avery can arrange everything."

Her eyes shut and he could see the little bumps, her irises, flicking around behind the lids.

"I'll stop with Cohen," he said, "You're right. We can't afford him, I know."

Her head raised slightly.

He said, "You can go. I can go. We both can go. The counselors are all Mormon."

Her chin sank to her chest, then rolled sideways until the vertebrae in her neck pop, pop, popped. She opened her eyes.

"I need to wash up," she said. She hooked her thumbs inside the waistband of her garment bottoms, and slid them down.

Bart looked down at his toes, saw them pale against the clay tile. He shouldn't have been so direct.

Her undergarments puddled around her ankles. A burst of wind rattled the window and every sinew in Bart's body cautioned him. Every nerve went on alert. But his eyes wandered toward her feet anyway. She stepped out, one foot and then the other, her pink-painted toenails pointed, her slender ankles flexed.

A howl, the wind . . . and finally the rain gabbled against the pane, loud, incessant, as if it had always been there, always would be.

He lifted his eyes, moving his gaze up the arc of her calves and along the full curve of her thighs to that tawny wedge of hair.

She criss-crossed her arms, crowding her breasts until each heaped over the lace neckline of the upper garment. She clutched the lower hem of her camisole, all the while looking down on him.

Bart whispered, "I don't deserve this."

Slowly, leisurely, she lifted the camisole, drawing the symbol of protection first across the flesh of her belly, then off her breasts, and lastly over her head. She paused, statuesque, both hands upraised. In one hand, she dangled the sheer garment top. When she released it, it slithered down her backside and onto the tile. She lowered her hands to the back of her head and released her hair, longer now than when they had met. Her breasts wobbled, but did not touch. The clip clattered against the floor.

Bart moved not a muscle and yet his body responded.

Without another word, she stepped into the steaming shower and pulled the door closed. As the glass darkened with droplets of deflected water, she gazed at him through it.

"Natalie," he said, her name rushing out on his breath.

She backed into the stream as if she hadn't heard him. Water cascaded down her body, running in rivulets off her nipples.

The muscles in Bart's face fell slack. "Why can't you see me?"

She reached for the shampoo bottle that sat in the corner of the stall, and her breasts swung out.

“Why won’t you hear me?”

Straightening, she tipped some into her palm and began to lather.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Say something,” he pleaded, his voice louder, but hardly loud.

She tipped her head back, and white bubbles foamed down her neck, then canalled between her shoulder blades, sheeting over the cigarette burns. He watched the soapy froth slip toward the drain. As it traveled down her body, something rose in him, rigid and ugly, and brought him to his feet. He wanted to hit something, throw something, smash and destroy, but he bullied down the inclination by tightening every muscle in his arms and legs.

He wanted to shout at her, “Where were you? What were you doing? You weren’t with the bishop. Not that long!” Instead he clicked his tongue and then pulled open the shower door. He couldn’t believe there’d be another man. The door trembled, but his hand—that he kept steady.

A thin cloud of steam floated a honeysuckle scent into his face. Natalie wiped her hands across her eyes, clearing the water. Streaks of diluted lather clung to her temples. Outside the window, silent lightning repeated, and the rain now pummeled with authority.

His fingers tightened against the chrome. Water ricocheted and wet him. He loosened his grip, slackened his jaw as he exhaled, closed his eyes, and said, “Baby, just tell me.” He looked at her.

Water bounced off her, and her expression closed up like a wildflower in a child’s hand.

He leaned his head against the chrome. He lifted his voice. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

A thin strip of water channeled lazily over her abdomen, forming a narrow stream that seemed to twist as it ran through the velvety, blonde hairs on her lower torso. She stared at him.

“I know you can hear me.”

She wiped her face clear once again. Water pounded her shoulder. When she eventually spoke, her words lolled out.

"I think . . ." she started, and he nodded even though she hadn't asked a question. "I think," she began again, "that you don't love me anymore."

Bart's lungs deflated as if each had been stabbed. He banged his head against the chrome edge. "If I didn't love you," he said, rolling his head until he looked in her direction, "I wouldn't keep trying." He shut his eyes, then opened them slowly. "I'd stop taking care of you. I'd disappear."

He lifted his head from the chrome and held the edge of the shower door in his hand. "You know I love you." His knees trembled. "The kids."

She blinked. A thin sluice of remaining froth slipped from above her ear onto her cheek.

His eyes caressed her, moving from the crown of her wet head down to the breasts with which she had suckled their children, then on to the abdomen that had swelled, and to the region that had delivered. Finally, he took in the legs that once upon a time had wrapped around him and made him believe she had wanted him.

"Look at you . . ." he said, then grew silent. The rain on the window tapped, weaker now. He whispered, "I'm invisible."

She extended her neck, raised her chin, and let the shower spray pelt the back of her head. Running her hands down her hair, she squeezed out any remaining shampoo residue and pressed the strands flat against the eyes which had been burned into her by a monster.

"Just once," he said, barely above a whisper. "Can't you say 'thank you'?"

Her head snapped up and she looked at him, long and hard, and he wished he could gather back those words, that there was some way to erase this moment and make it not about him.

She stepped out of the stream, her hands crossed above her breasts, and she looked at him as if she had finally figured him out. He tried to look away, but her gaze held his, wouldn't let go. He thought, *I should run*, but he didn't.

He hated that this was happening, that he was groveling again. His voice quivered. "I can't lose them."

First her eyebrows twitched and then her eyelids batted. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it. A faint smile grew as though she had absorbed some fact. “You know,” she said, one hand sliding onto her breast, across her areola, and down to her side, “you really are a very sexy man.”

Bart stumbled back, leaving the shower door ajar. Silent rain ran in small, play rivers down the window, then fell toward the ground and disappeared. He dropped onto the edge of the tub. “Natalie,” he said, feeling her name like a stone in his side.

With the spout still running, she stepped out of the shower, dripping and glistening under the electric light. Water pooled on the tile as she came toward him. She placed her left hand, wet, atop the right shoulder of his best Sunday shirt. Several droplets of water landed in his lap as she swung her right leg over both of his, sank down and straddled him, soaking his pant legs. Her nipples grew pert in the cool air.

He shivered as she rested her forehead against his, as the water from her bangs dripped onto his cheek, then onto his chest, sopping his shirt. He groaned as she breathed in, as her breasts drew nearer his mouth. Tiny dots, pin pricks, rose all along her curves.

He inhaled her scent deeply—her body, the honeysuckle shampoo—and then blew it out and tipped his head up until their noses met. His eyes naturally closed. He willed his hands around her back instead of where months of longing directed them. He laced his fingers behind her.

She kissed him, a peck on the cheekbone, the kiss a little girl would give her father; but it tore through Bart like a hot wind on an island beach. He ran his left hand up her spine until he felt her two little eyes right there between her shoulder blades. He covered them with his middle and ring fingers and pressed, just as he had so long ago.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He gazed at her beautiful, imperfect face. A damp curl formed from a lock over her left eye. He reached up and smoothed it away.

She curved her back, making herself smaller in his lap. He felt her hips and buttocks roll as she whimpered, “I’ve been a very

naughty girl.” Her breath came hot and sour, across his mouth. “I just get scared you don’t love me.”

He wondered at the way a child, two children, had emerged from this body, so slight.

“I don’t always do things right,” she went on. “You know how I am. Take care of me.” The kiss Bart received this time was long and deep and nearly knocked him into the tub.

“And thank you,” she breathed out, “for everything.”

“My pleasure,” he murmured. “The gratitude which swept through him wiped away Dr. Cohen’s counsel like so much dross. Bart’s hands moved to her breasts and she lengthened her torso like a cat stretching up for a bird. “Natalie,” he whispered, “I love you so much.” He took his wife by her hand, led her to the bed, and was satisfied.