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## By a Thread

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## BY A THREAD

The first time I called the Domestic Abuse Hotline, pretending to be concerned about a neighbor lady, the volunteer on the other end told me that the worst thing to do is tell her to leave Him.

“Why?” I asked.

“Abusers take away your identity.”

She didn’t mean *my* identity. She meant the more general *you*, like when Julia Child says, then you take your chicken and place it ever so gently in the pan, breast side up.

“An abused woman sees herself as he sees her. She cannot imagine surviving without him telling her who she is.”

After I hung up the phone, I sat on the floor, next to my bucket of mop water, and wept.

That was the day I started to record my life, so I could see who I was. We had just moved into the house, bringing along His promises to fix things up. I went through the boxes and dug out the movie camera we got when Isaac was born. I set it on the kitchen table under the window, pressed the button that made the little red light come on and went back to cleaning the kitchen. When I cleaned I lost myself completely. The smell of bleach calmed my nerves, burned my nostrils and kept me safe, as if a perfectly clean floor made it good as new. After I finished the video of me scrubbing the floor, I move on to the baseboards and the walls. I carried the camera into other rooms too, so that by the end of the day, I had footage of me washing dishes, wiping down the banister, making beds and dusting shelves onto which we would unpack our books.

I wanted to look at myself from a point of view other than His. I thought maybe, I could help the woman I had become save herself.

Isaac laughed and sang-spoke, “Four and twenty blackbirds, baked in a pie.”

“Not blackbirds. *Blackberries*,” I corrected, laughing with him.

Isaac Noah Stephenson, as his birth certificate read, is my son. It took

us days to settle on a name, until finally, the nurse came in my room and said if we wanted to be discharged, we had better decide what to call our little boy. In fact, I found out later, we could have left him unnamed for up to a year. That's what the other moms told me, the same women who were appalled when they found out we had Isaac circumcised. It is strange how vulnerable we are. I had been so certain of myself before the birth, and here I was, only a few days later, being bullied into names and medical procedures.

It's not that I disliked the name Isaac. I just wasn't as sure of it as He was. I was sure I wanted to breastfeed. I was sure that I wanted to have John Denver music playing in the delivery room. I was sure that I wanted my first meal after he was born to be vanilla ice cream, the good kind with dark flecks of seed, but He brought me chocolate from the cafeteria.

"I wanted vanilla," I said, trying not to sound disappointed.

"But chocolate tastes better."

"To you maybe, but not to me."

"Well, it's too late now. I already got it."

I ate the chocolate. How long before that became my favorite flavor, before it was the only kind in the freezer, the kind I bought for Isaac's first birthday, when my whole family came and stayed with us?

Looking back, I wonder if anything about life is our choice. As sure as I was about vanilla ice cream, that is how sure I was that I wanted a baby, that I was ready to be a mother. What I know now is that life is as random as having two strangers decide what your name is and what your body will look like for the rest of your life, like they are casting roles and you get picked to play So-and-so.

And so, Isaac Noah Stephenson it was.

"Isaac, hand me that rolling pin."

The pie was for my husband. He worked at a salvage yard, though he was more involved in the tearing down of old barns and outbuildings, on farms that were being turned into subdivisions and strip malls, taking the parts and turning them into something new.

"What about worm pie, Mommy? Can we make that?"

"You mean like the dirt pie we have on your birthday?"

"No, Worm Pie, with real worms, like the ones that come up out of the ground when it rains."

All boy, I thought, but I did not say it. "Sure, Isaac. Let me get my pie in the oven and then we'll get yours started."

Chances were good that he would forget that promise and become

interested in something else by that time. If not, what harm would there be in digging up a few worms, getting muddy, stomping in puddles? Those kind of messes can be cleaned up.

Isaac circled the kitchen island while I rolled out the crust, turning back to the stovetop to stir the cooling berries, then back to smoothing the crust, crimping the edges into ruffles. I poured the contents of the pot over the pastry. Isaac came round my side of the island as I was bisecting the pie with the first strip of lattice crust.

“Uh-oh, Mommy. You spilled.”

I looked down at my feet. Bright purple splatters, like a Rorschach blot, on Noah’s freshly laid white tile. It had missed my foot by less than an inch.

“I’m glad it didn’t land on your pretty toenails, Mommy. That would have burned you cause it’s hot, right?”

“That’s right, Sweetie,” I said, though I would have taken that pain.

“Hot like what’s in a witch’s pot, huh?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Boil, Boil, Toil and Trouble, is that right, Mommy?”

“Yes, that’s right,” I said.

I set the pot back down on the burner, careful not to drip anymore, though a few bruised berries clung to the side. I grabbed a thick yellow sponge from the sink and knelt down to wipe up the mess. The inky mixture shifted from floor to sponge, but a purple stain stayed put.

Tossing the sponge back into the sink, I opened the cabinet and pulled out a spray bottle of cleaner with bleach.

Bleach can clean up any mess, I thought, even blood.

Isaac continued to circle the island, widening his arc around me and the fresh stain. I spritzed cleaner onto the tile and watched it settle into the grout, using the bottom corner of my old stained apron to blot at it.

The dark lines remained, maybe even grew brighter.

“I’ll let it soak for a few minutes,” I said out loud, to myself. Isaac had enlarged his circle into the dining room and was coming back to make a full figure eight. I unscrewed the cap, lifted the spray nozzle from the bottle, and poured a thin stream of cleaner onto the floor. It puddled, bubbles forming at its edges, and then seeped in. “What if I can’t get the stain up?”

The phone rang.

“Honey, let it go,” I called to Isaac.

But he already had it in his hands, putting it up to his ear and mouth.

"Hello?"

I could hear His cheery voice.

"Hi, Daddy. Guess what? Me and Mommy are making worm pie!"

He sounds impressed, then asks if I am there.

"Yes, she can talk. She is cleaning up a little mess."

Isaac delivered the phone to where I knelt beside the sink.

"Hello?"

"You aren't really making worm pie, I hope."

"Of course not," I said. "Blackberry. Your favorite."

"Okay. Good. He has an imagination, that kid. And sometimes you... you know."

"Don't worry," I told Him, running my fingers across the slickened blue spot.

"I'll be home in an hour. I'm knocking off a little early, so I can seal that kitchen tile before dinner."

"Right now?"

"Gotta get it done before anything ruins it."

I stared into the black spot, which stared back without flinching.

"Babe, you there?"

"I'm here," I said. "I better get going though, if I'm going to be out of the way when you get here."

"That's my girl."

I ended the call. My knee had started to shake by then, bumping the cabinet door against the frame with a clat-clat-clat, tapping out a message in Morse Code. The rhythm matched my heartbeat.

If He had not yet sealed the floor, then the stain was permanent. Nothing could get rid of it, no amount of bleach or scrubbing. I had cleaned the whole house, mopped every floor, dusted the furniture and the baseboards, made the beds, vacuumed and swept and mopped, except in the kitchen, which I had saved for last, until after I slid the pie into the oven.

Now, all that was left was damage control.

First, I had to get Isaac down for his nap. He had plopped himself onto the couch to watch cartoons. The sound was turned down; figures ran and chased and punched each other in silence. His eyelids were heavy as he fought off sleep.

"Isaac, let's get you to bed, and when you wake up, we can dig for worms."

I scooped his small body, binding him to me, the way mothers do: one arm over his legs, the other under with a hand resting on his back. His legs had gotten so long this summer. His feet dangled past my edges instead of curled around my body the way they did when he was small. We walked up the carpeted steps. When I laid him down, he cried out, for just a moment or two, before he closed his eyes and pulled himself into a fetal position.

When I stood up, I saw the video camera on top of his bureau, where I had last recorded myself. I picked it up, turned it so I could look into the little screen at the back, where I viewed a miniature version of myself, rocking Isaac to sleep, turned sideways in the chair to keep the pressure off my bruised ribs. A small version of me sat rocking and rocking, too small for me to make out if she was still crying, but if she was, it too was silent, like Isaac's muted cartoons.

The camera had not filmed what happened in our bedroom, Him shoving me out of bed, telling me to find another place to sleep.

I turned off the camera and set it gently back on the shelf. I returned to the kitchen, my mind spinning with ways to get out of this.

The afternoon sun was shining through the windows when I heard His boots crunching across the driveway gravel. Twenty-seven steps from the tailgate of His truck, carrying His toolbox.

Thud, thud, thud up the three wooden steps He built off the back door.

Stomp, stomp, one for each boot to knock the dirt off His soles.

Then He would bend over, undo the leather laces, loosening their grip on His ankles, then stand back up and use the toe of His left foot to push down the heel of the right boot, freeing His foot.

He would do the same with the other boot.

His key slid into the lock, a low grind of metal on metal before the Master lock turned to allow His entrance into the house.

The door opened and He entered, pushing it closed with a socked foot and setting His tool belt down. The hammer claw caught on the arm of the wooden bench and dangled there.

"Baby, you here?"

He was loud, but not yelling.

"Babe?"

He took a step into the kitchen but did not see me, the marbled-topped island between us.

"I'm here," I answered, without standing up.

He smiled, I bet, baring his teeth a little.

*You* weren't there, and there was no camera to show you, but if there was, you would see the sun streaming in through the panes of glass that He measured and fitted down both sides of the door. He stands between those rays, a silhouette, while I appear illuminated, the window light reflecting off the floor and into wisps of my pale hair.

I'd spent the last hour bleaching and scrubbing, soaking the stain, hoping to lighten the dark place. I contemplated white paint, and, for a only a moment, considered blaming Isaac.

Maybe this upsets you, makes you question what kind of mother I am.

You don't know what He is capable of. Maybe you think I am over-reacting, the way I thought my mother did when she set a glass of water on the new dining room table one afternoon and hid the ring with a table runner, playing dumb when my father found it, acting like she had no idea how it got there.

And really, up to this point, you have not seen any signs that he hits me, or pinches that soft place at the back of my neck while we are waving good-bye to my family at the front door. He has his arm around me. That's all you would see.

Perhaps He doesn't kick me moments after the door shuts, and tell me to get my fat ass upstairs and clean up the mess they left. They probably screwed in that bed, he screams. Your mother is a whore just like you, He might add, kicking me again. You wouldn't see the bruise, black as that stain on the kitchen floor.

But if you were watching now, you would see me bracing for the pain, the memory of the last time still fresh and ripe as those berries. Or wrapping my arms around my body to protect a second baby that I do not even want, because if He finds out, He will want the baby, and I might remember how gentle He was while I carried Isaac, never once raising a fist or foot to me. And I might forget how He walked into the nursery, watched me lay newborn Isaac in the bed before shoving me down and pushing into me right there on the floor, while I tried not to scream and wake the baby. I might forget how He got up on his knees and buckled Himself back up, while I stayed curled up, knees to chest, gripping the wooden leg of the crib.

*You* didn't see any of this. You want to put these pages down, because you don't want to believe this was happening without anyone knowing. But you do believe me, and you are afraid. Compare your fear to mine. Resist the urge to turn away. Feel the fear of what is coming, and imagine that my fear must be ten times, maybe a hundred times bigger, because I will feel the pain while you will walk away unharmed.

I would walk away too if I could. I can only survive the next hour by slipping outside of myself and watching what happens as if I am watching myself recorded on a camera. I pretend that I am as distant as you.

He walks down the hall to the bathroom, the unfinished bathroom which he always blames her for. He leaves the door open. She hears the sound of His piss in her clean toilet water.

He walks back, entering the kitchen on sock feet.

He rounds the island, sees the pie on the counter, sticks His finger in, breaking the lattice strips she has woven in and out across the top. He licks his finger.

He stops when He sees her kneeling on the floor, her back to him.

He sees her arms moving back and forth, piston-like, working at something.

He comes closer, peers over her shoulder to see the purple lines, dark canals between the three tiles, which she has been able to reduce to a grayish tone.

Finger still in His mouth, He does not move.

His jaw muscles tighten. It appears He may bite off His own digit.

Shit, Goddam it, that tile was special order, from a customer who changed her mind and decided on blue. He's not even sure He can get it anymore. She stays in her place, her eyes darting back and forth, deciding whether to move and make Him chase her or prostrate herself, let Him see her on her knees, working at the stain. She stays knelt on the hard floor, bends almost into child's pose.

"Please, wait, let me explain, I've been trying to get it up all afternoon, after you said you hadn't sealed it yet," she says.

"So this is my fault?"

"No, no, I didn't mean that. I'm trying to tell you how it happened."

"You lied to me?"

"No. No."

"You didn't say anything about this when I called. If you had told me then, I could have come right home. Now this has penetrated all the way



through. There's nothing I can do to fix it. Nothing except to start over, rip the whole damn thing up."

He reaches for her shirt and pulls her up to standing by the neck of it. Then he shoves her back down.

"Get out of my kitchen," He says, although He still has hold of her shirt.

He kicks her buttocks, so her lower half pushes forward while the fabric of her shirt pulls at her airway and His hand keeps her head close enough that His breathing rustles the hairs at the back of her neck.

He puts His left hand against the small of her back, so she cannot turn around, and pushes her forward. Her hip bone knocks into one corner of the marble countertop. At the doorway, He lets go of her neck and shoves her onto the hallway floor, where she spills into the pool of sunlight.

She stays there, for now. He turns back to His floor. He takes a steak knife from the drawer. My imaginary camera stays on her, but you can hear Him scraping the knife into the grout, gently, bit by bit, so He can lift the tile out of its place. Right now, He cares more about the tile than about punishing her. He can get to her later.

I hear him muttering to himself on the other side of the island. I pull myself upright. I have to do something to keep myself in my body. I don't want to disappear again.

I don't want to die. I don't want to leave my little boy.

I put my hand to my throat, breathe in and out, let my hand rise and fall with the intake of air. The skin hurts, but I am grateful for this. I want to feel this pain. It is mine.

I stand up and look into the kitchen. I won't let him do this to her anymore. She can not take much more. I have to help her. I will not watch him hurt her again. I will wrap myself around and lasso her to me.

I moved toward the doorway, leaned my arm on the wooden frame. My bare feet moved across the tile until I was close enough to see his head on the other side. He was talking to himself, muttering words I could not hear. Still, as the sound of his voice, I felt the thread that kept me there spooling out, losing its tension. The steak knife was on the counter, beside my empty bottle of bleach. I made myself pick up the knife. I held it in my hand; he stood up.

"I told you to stay out of my kitchen."

The sound of his voice threatened to unravel me. I had to stay right there, so I put my hand down and put it to the skin of my forearm, pulled it across. Blood rose up, a thin red line, rising up until it overflowed and ran down my arm and dripped onto the counter.

“What the hell are you doing?”

He took a step toward me. I could tell he was worried about what I would do.

I pushed the knife in again, deeper this time, and the blood ran faster. I turned from the island, like a castaway on a flimsy raft, my arm reaching out to him. One fat drop filled up until it pulled away from my skin. It splattered onto his white tile.

He looked at it, unsure of what to do.

I made one last cut, turning my hand over and running the knife across my palm. I straightened my arm, let the blood fall to the floor, squeezing my hand into a fist. The blood forced itself out from between my fingers, running to the tips, faster now, spilling onto his bleached tiles, falling one on top of another, so close together that the drops of blood merged and became larger.

He did not move. I stayed there too, the thread that held me to myself growing tighter and stronger.