



HUSH

JAN LAPERLE

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JAN LAPERLE

SUNDRESS PUBLICATIONS

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for Bunny

BRIGHT MORNING

Emily and Richard had been trying for a baby for many, many years, until the couple had lost all hope. They had come to make love only after a fight – the one tradition in their relationship they maintained. The fight had been over household chores. When Emily and Richard were first married, the two split the chores fifty-fifty. Richard had been doing less and less, so Emily nagged, and Richard's reply was: you are home three percent of the time more than I. Under her breath Emily shortened his name: Dick. Dick, Dick, Dick. A simple slip into the bed always produced resolve. But this particular fight produced even more: results. Emily became pregnant.

Months after conception, the couple drove together to the doctor's for the ultrasound. A boy or a girl, Emily and Richard hollered at the lady technician, but the lady did not reply, she just kept pounding her fists against the expensive equipment. What showed on the screen was not a baby at all, but a dishwasher. A tiny dishwasher with immature racks, so small only a set of child's tea dishes could fit, and a short spout for a water spray, which to Emily looked like the beginnings of a penis.

Richard cried a little bit in the corner, his face in the shadows. But Emily was simply delighted – a baby, a dishwasher, it didn't matter to her, she would be a mother soon. Richard demanded an explanation from the doctor and the doctor explained it clearly: the couple had, during conception, concentrated simultaneously on the exact same thing. The doctor explained how common it was, but without example, and while he talked the two replayed in their minds the fight and the lovemaking where

they had both imagined the other dishwashing naked. Emily was content with the explanation, rubbing the sweet edges of her little machine, but Richard was furious. He stormed out of the office into the parking lot. Emily found him under a tree, his baldhead reflecting the afternoon sunshine.

Emily had to quit her job at the Packin' Go, as her duties required too much lift and carry. After many interviews, Emily got a job on the outskirts of town, as a night monkey guard. Emily grew to love her new job, the long, quiet drive to work, the sweet animals in their cages. She fed all twenty monkeys each night and let them play in the clean, white rooms. She named them and told them about her baby, how he grew, and she let the monkeys put their big hands on her little square belly.

At home Richard talked less and less. Emily left for work earlier and earlier. One night she noticed there were only nineteen monkeys. She asked the custodian. The custodian must have seen her sweet naïveté, but he told her the truth anyway, about the medical tests, the experimentations, the deaths. Emily was sickened. That night she held the monkeys tight and made it her simple resolve to do something.

She went to Richard for help, and as if he was waiting for the last straw, he hollered out through his round head the truth, how he wanted her to get rid of her little dishwasher, to kill it. Emily was dumbfounded. She grabbed a few things and made for the door. On the long, dusty road to her monkeys, she cried and hollered and punched her little fists against the steering wheel. All the commotion sent her straight into labor. In the clean, white room of the animal testing center, the custodian pulled from Emily's belly a sweet little dishwasher. Emily cried. The monkeys clattered in their cages. Emily loaded the monkeys into her car, all nineteen of them around the dishwasher in his

car seat, and she drove off then toward the south and into the night, a night that predicted two inches of snow, but she knew there would be more, and she was right. The next day the town was covered, clean and white, as white as the rooms where the monkeys used to play.

There's no real and perfect happily-ever-after in a runaway story for a woman with nineteen monkeys and a baby dishwasher, but that didn't matter to Emily. She was warm and leaking sweet milk, and the roads were clear and the morning bright.

PURPLE HEART

During the twentieth year of their marriage, Lonnie Lee Oliver found his wife hanging from a rope in their barn. He had come in for a rake, from watching a spring calf frolic in a far field, and he had felt a little frisky himself. A narrow plane of sunlight caught the barn dust just right, and Lonnie had noticed how that slat of light and dust split his wife into two pieces. One, he thought, for him, and the other piece was sent to a place where everyone goes, all the soldiers he had known, all his friends. He was a veteran, a purple heart hung from his neck, and when he worked in the fields the metal grew warm and wet. He wore it to protect himself from heartache, and he had often believed in it, as he had had to.

On each side of Lonnie's and his wife's wedding bed was a lamp carved in the shape of a woman. The lamp-women were beautiful, one had blond curls along her back and arms, the other brown, and they both had gowns made for sleeping that pushed up right against their brown bodies. When Lonnie found his wife in the barn, he thought she had looked like the blonde lamp – cold, still, and beautiful. In bed that night, he hadn't the heart to turn the lamps off, or, rather, the strength to reach up against their bodies to turn their switches.

In the following months Lonnie worked less and less in the fields. The bushes and weeds spread across everything, pulling down fences and covering tractors and cars. The cows and the chickens roamed freely. The grasses grew tall and wild. The barn fell, board-by-board. Inside, Lonnie wrote sad postcards. He napped on his side. He stared with such longing at the lamps

that by winter they both had names – Evelynne and Sarah – and, at times, he thought he saw their gowns sway a little behind his breath.

A sad cow came to his bedroom window, gravitating to his sadness as sad things do. The cow had lost a calf to the weeds that had grown so wild and vicious over the wet summer. Lonnie opened the window and slit the poor cow's neck, and the two groaned together as her life slipped through the cut. Lonnie ate cow all winter. During the heaviest of snows he stayed in the bedroom with his lamps. An old friend, a widower, had told him long before that the first year was the hardest, and when he looked out one January morning and the land was so perfectly white and untouched he thought he had come to terms with the year that had almost passed.

But his wife had always loved Valentine's with a strange and ecstatic passion, and the day was quickly coming. Not even his purple heart could help him, and he braced himself against this day as it came on, holding himself to the bedposts as if he were bracing against a summer storm, as if he were a woman at the end of her pregnancy. He screamed and the windowpanes shook. He screamed and the snows around his house melted. He screamed and the last boards of the barn fell to the ground. His purple heart was warm and sweaty. At last he tired, his breathing steadied, and the lamp-women at last softened beneath the bulbs, and they stepped down, Evelynne on one side, Sarah on the other, and they rested their cheeks on either side of his medal. Lonnie Lee Oliver was content then, as he had given himself over to something he did not understand, as the calf had done to the weeds, as, maybe, his wife had done in the barn, and as the land had done to the winter.

THE GOOD WAITRESS

Right after Rhonda's boyfriend, the plumber, left her, her toilet went haywire. It leaked all over the floor, and made noises that woke her and her apartment neighbors all through the night. It took three or four flushes to get anything down, and the porcelain lid cracked in half when Rhonda set her little foot upon it to paint her nails pink.

Everyday she tried deeply to look prettier. A list in her purse had on it: hair dye, tooth whitening kit, mascara. But something inside her made her feel strange, and her instincts told her it was something fatal. She visited her doctor, but was too scared to return the phone call from the nurse who said in a message, "we found something."

Rhonda worked as a waitress. She wore her apron tight, and knew all the regulars by name. The old men hung their canes from the table edge. The women patted their noses with powder. The tips and the food were good, and the newspapers that were left behind on the tables and chairs were always filled with good news about the town. Rhonda's side work at the restaurant was cutting peppers, and only then would she let herself think about the plumber. Only then would she breathe deeply and cry. Once, she breathed in so hard she inhaled a pepper seed.

Everything seemed good except the health of Rhonda and her toilet. The sicknesses that left her body hadn't an exit, so, at last, she called the plumber. The small, odd romance that took place when the plumber returned involved holding hands, a rub on the back. The plumber convinced Rhonda to return

the call from the nurse.

The nurse held Rhonda's hand, and Rhonda thought that that was good. She was scared. Her ponytail pulled at her head. She waited with the nurse for the doctor, and, at last, he came with the x-ray. He hung it against the light. The nurse and the doctor and Rhonda stood and looked at the innards of Rhonda's mid-section where a plant grew, and upon the plant what looked like to Rhonda the beginnings of peppers.

The plumber visited Rhonda after the operation, but she was too tired to talk. She slept well: the toilet was as quiet as the wall. So the plumber just stayed for a while. He brought her books and sat by the window. On the window ledge behind him was the pepper plant, and from each of the pepper's stems, two peppers grew – two grown together like twins, like lovers.

ROSES FOR THE BEDROOM, DAISIES FOR THE KITCHEN

Frank Ball was a lucky man, luckier than others, some used to say, and he was also very small: short, thin, little. When Frank played his French horn at various rest homes around the city, the old ladies and old men could not even see Frank behind his big, shiny instrument. Those in the audience with glasses pushed them tight upon their cracked noses, others clacked their teeth, until, at last, they settled, deep into the couch cushions, fluffed like hens and roosters with their little eyes closed, just listening to the sweet horn blow. Only one with a very sharp eye could make out the top of Frank's very bald head, which gleamed, shinier, even, than his horn.

The French horn was Frank's favorite horn, but he could play them all, all instruments, every one. Frank knew languages, too, four hundred of them, and he had read every book in every library in the city and surrounding towns. Frank's head was filled with ideas, and he shared these ideas with his wife, Helen, who was also very small. The two had gravitated to each other thirty years earlier at a banquet, as two with similarities do, and that had been enough to keep them together so long. But, over the years, Frank became so consumed with his ideas, he began, less and less, to share these ideas with Helen. Though Helen was very small, her loneliness filled their little house from the bottom to the chimney-top like a teapot filled with tea. Each night she would fill the basement furnace with firewood, and only then did she let herself cry. Her little sad screams would travel up the chimney and float off over the city lights, and the people in the city would go to bed sad and weary, and never know why.

One afternoon in the summer, Frank sat on the porch watching his neighbors work in their yards. He thought about all sorts of things, but, mostly, he watched how his neighbors went into and out of their sheds to get buckets and hoses, rakes and lawn mowers. He was hit then with another idea. He ran inside and told his wife he would purchase another head. Like a shed, he explained, to put his thoughts into so he'd have more room for her.

And so Frank went off into the city and found himself a head, which was attached, pleasantly enough, behind the other, very much like a shed behind a house. He returned home to Helen who was so unhappy about this sudden change in Frank, she ran immediately to the furnace to cry, such a cry that even the children playing summer games in the city parks, stilled by the strange melancholy creeping over them, asked to go indoors. But, after several days, she began to notice something in Frank she had not seen in many, many years. With all his ideas stored away in the second head, his first was free, and it glowed with that old beautiful love. He talked to her of simple things, and they began, again, to make love. He set roses for her in the bedroom, daisies in the kitchen, and their love blossomed so big Helen was always laughing, and thus, the city blossomed all over with flowers. Flowers right up through the streets, and lovers turned to each other, and the lonely ones found another.

But Frank Ball kept reading and learning, and, after several months, his head was filled back up with ideas. He began, again, to spend the days staring with both heads into the skies, and not looking at all at Helen. Helen suggested another head. Frank went back to the city and bought another, and every season after, Frank had to buy yet another head. The seasons passed and their bodies grew older and more uncomfortable. Frank, even more than Helen, as his heads filled his small body almost entirely. Helen began to feel sorry for Frank, for his discomfort,

his sleeplessness, so she went one morning to talk to him, to tell him what she thought he should do about all his heads. He was standing in the living room clacking all of his teeth like he often did when all the ideas in all of his heads were going at once, but with so many heads the sound was deafening. All those teeth were shaking the house, the neighbors' houses, and all the buildings in the city and surrounding towns. Helen was so scared of her husband then as he vibrated around and around the living room that she went to her knees and cried, and cried, she couldn't stop crying, and Frank, with his one clear head was trying so hard to console her, but his voice just couldn't get through.

MOUSTACHE

Hazel woke very early every morning to shave her upper lip. The routine reminded her of her father who had died in a terrible war, dirty as a rat, but with an upper lip smooth as river rock. Her lip hair grew quickly, like dandelions – their yellow heads popping here, there, and everywhere before Hazel could even cut the engine of her little black mower. She shaved so early (and again at lunchtime) that her husband, a businessman from the city, never knew a thing about her bushy upper lip.

One tragic event is how Hazel would have described it long ago; then her life had been programmed by the passion of routine. It came on a morning when she was simply too tired to make it to the razor and cream before her husband. He rose from his pillow with a fart and a hoot and two eyes silly as daytime moons: their last intimate moment was the look he gave her fur, and the small touch to see if it was really an illusion of the half-light. One shallow excuse of a cheating man is as good as any other; by noon he was living with the busty woman down the street.

Hazel cried into her feather pillow so long and so deep she lifted her head with a face full of feathers, stuck here, there, and everywhere. Her sad passion and sleepy morning were two symptoms she wouldn't recognize for months: in her grew a girl, pretty as a morning glory stretching its stem toward the watering can. Hazel tended to the yard and watched her husband down the street unload his suitcases from the small trunk of his fancy automobile. Still with feathers, she dug her face into the dirt until the robins looked from their nests, wondering when the sad woman would fill their birdbath. Her husband, entering his new

living room, thought only of the fresh smells and smooth skin of his talkative, new lover (he was fond of the pleasurable way he found to keep her from her tireless chat).

These were not unusual events in pretty neighborhoods. Though it seems this image doesn't fit: Hazel baking her husband's favorite cookies, leaving them on the porch at night where inside her husband was falling asleep so easily against the rump of a new love. He woke rested and drove to the city where he worked, his tie tight as a noose. His new lover, in slinky robe, found the sweet treats on the porch and ate each and every one. What the new lover did not know was that baked inside each cookie was one of Hazel's moustache hairs that had fallen from her lip as she stirred the batter vigorously. The hair like a seed blossomed inside the new lady lover and the next morning she woke, looking a lot like Hazel, with a lip hairy as the lawn. Hazel's husband, for a second time in a week, woke to a woman with more hair on her lip than his own. Not understanding the complexities of love and commitment, he again loaded his suitcases into the shallow trunk. He drove to work, weary and confused.

The moustache hairs from Hazel were not the only seeds sprouting inside this new lover, who now found herself alone again. The two women were at their wits end, because of their hormones, because of Hazel's husband, and because their lips grew hair there faster and longer, wiry and weird. The two women wondered where Hazel's husband went. They lifted the blinds to look. They stood in the yard off and on throughout the day. They went to the street to take a look. Hazel took a look at the lonely woman and the lonely woman took a look at Hazel who was lonely too. Hazel's husband's recent lover began to talk, as was her habit, and to talk and talk and talk which sent her wild hairs this way and that and Hazel, on the other side of the street

nodded in agreement, yes, yes, yes, all afternoon, sending her lip hairs flying madly, too. In time the two women's lip hairs became dangerously tangled, hooked together: a net. Hazel's husband, off to the country to his new lover, drove his pretty car right into the middle of the mess of the two women.

This was not an unusual event in a pretty neighborhood. Though it seems this image doesn't fit: Hazel's husband, so terribly disgusted by all that womanly lip hair, stepped on the gas pedal ferociously. The two women, one on each side of the car, flew behind him. With their lip hairs tight against the front bumper, they flew like kites, or balloons. Hazel's husband drove fast, and the velocity felt for the women like freedom: they smiled. They waved to each other. They waved to the houses and the people in their yards. They waved to the far fields, the animals behind the trees. They waved goodbye to Hazel's husband – vigorous and beautiful waves, childlike.

The moment the women stepped into motherhood, they thought nothing of the missing husband. They didn't bother with razor and cream. Their lip hairs held the babies like extra arms. When they tied the two moustaches together, the two women had a bed there, a place to rock their babies while they visited, or, rather while the one woman talked and Hazel listened. When they heard the fancy car pull in, loud now with a rusted muffler, they simply pretended to sleep. Hazel's husband looked in at these women and these two pretty babies and he could have been thinking about all that love in the room, and the warmth, but he was overcome by all that lip hair. He could have stayed. But he closed the door with a click, rumbled away, and this made the two women smile.

KNOTWEED

For Theresa Sneed, the hardest part about living inside the walls was not being able to sing. Her voice was prettier than the springtime wildflowers at the edges of the countryside, and keeping quiet was much more difficult, even, than stifling the cries of her little son at her breast. Theresa lived in the walls for two years. Her husband, Sam Sneed, woke every morning and loaded himself onto the bus, never hearing the birds sing, and always wondering where his wife had gone.

When Theresa first disappeared the authorities looked everywhere, at the houses of relatives, local hotels, but after a few months they moved on to cases with more immediacy. Theresa entered the walls through a hole Sam had made long before with his hairy arm, a hole that had been covered with a photograph of their wedding day. She stayed in the walls, snuck through the house, but never dared the yard where the knotweed grew. For the first few years Sam cut those weeds every week, sprayed poison down their hollow throats, and the weeds shriveled a little, but always grew back. After a while Sam gave up, and the weeds grew to be as big as the oak that had been standing in their yard for over a hundred years. Sam and Theresa's fights had been like those weeds.

The plan to live inside the walls was, at first, a temporary solution for Theresa. She'd slip out the hole during the day, a soft worm for a bit of food, with her son in tow, the two of them looking in the window-light as white as two sad hens. They paled each day during their long hiatus from those terrible fights that had once occurred as regular as the moon. Outside the walls,

she sometimes sang a little bit with her dry lips against a loaf of bread, but she was scared. When the little boy was sick she would sing into his soft ear in a voice as quiet as the spiders spinning their webs above her.

At night in her dreams Theresa's voice escaped as loud as the train whistle blow against the mountainsides. One night, after hundreds and hundreds of times suppressing itself, her voice slid from her dream as she slept. Her song woke the spiders, her song woke her son, and it entered Sam's ears as he slept. The next day Sam noticed things: a butter knife in the sink, the scent of his wife that he had thought was long gone, the birds in the trees singing. At work thoughts of his wife were so distracting his boss sent him home early, and when he entered their house before noon and found her in the kitchen, thin as hair, and his little son sipping water at the table, he thought he had simply gone mad.

A day or so passed before the news reporters came, and when they came they videotaped Theresa singing. In the background their son, white as the snow falling on the tall weeds in the yard, smiled into the camera. Sam came home each night and paid attention to things, held Theresa's hand at the dinner table, and the two of them talked quietly. The news to others was surprising, but to those who had lost someone they loved, it was bewildering. Theresa's story grew in them like knotweed, her smiling face in the newspapers made them frantic and mad: they tore at their walls. Homes were destroyed, and the news reporters came and snapped pictures of the fallen walls. Without time to talk to everyone involved, the authorities blamed the destruction on tornadoes, then quickly moved on to other news, other news that seemed more immediate.

SWING SHIFT

To the north, there was a river, it sparkled brighter than any, but the couple had never seen it. They were swing shift workers; they hardly noticed the changing of the leaves. For fifteen years the couple had punched in before dinnertime and slept through each and every sunrise. At work their boss wouldn't have bothered to fire the workers for their bad habit: in the restrooms, a little white powder on the lids of the tanks. Their faces, paler than the dusting under their sad noses. But the one couple, they weren't sad anymore. Something in them was about to burst, beautifully like the mums in the flowerpots, the flowerpots the couple never saw.

The husband and the wife were skinny as new trees. On their way home from work one night, a half past midnight, they drove past a couch on the side of the road. A couch like kittens nobody wants. The two like poles held up the ends of that worn bit of furniture and strapped it to their car-top. They drove home under the weight of it, dragged it into their gray room and sat upon it; they kissed in the light of the television. They slept deeply.

Their garments held no more color than their new find, nor their walls, their décor, and outside the empty trees looked frightening. The woman, as if waking from the inevitability of fate, felt astonished by such redundancy. The husband noticed when she noticed. And, surprised by this, he sent her into the streets alone to search for something. What she found there was color: fabric, bright beautiful fabric. And, in her off hours, with thick needle and thread, she dressed their new couch in the deep greens, blues, and reds of summer. Their couch then looked like a great

blossoming in the middle of that terrible room.

After punch out, the couple began to take long rides in the night, to look for couches. They sniffed their little drugs to stay awake. They worked together and covered couch after couch. Sewed curtains, too. This new work was like a light in them, a night-light wrapped in a dim room. One day the couple sold a couch to a neighbor.

The next day the husband looked at his wife, so faded, so thin, like a newspaper in the sun. At work, when they announced they were quitting, the other swing shift workers looked disappointed (they whispered to each other). They discouraged the couple, but one day the couple left, and the other workers, as if hung from the ceiling, swayed inside the dark windows, watching as the couple walked across the parking lot before first break. The workers wanted the couple to look back. They wanted the couple to look less pretty, less pleased, less bright.

ONCE EMBRACED, THE GIRL WITH LEAVES FOR ARMS DISAPPEARS

Willow's mother and father were in the yard raking leaves beneath the maple and pecan trees the afternoon she was born. The weeping willow across the street had not yet begun to lose its leaves. Her mother's belly was as round as the leaf pile beside her, and just as she pulled her work glove from her hand to wipe the sweat from her brow, Willow began to make her way into the pretty fall sunshine, where the shadows were long and soft, like the limbs of the tree across the street. Willow was born right there in the leaf pile, there where her mother was crying from pain, and her father, who had been praying for a baby boy, was crying a loud, manly cry. Willow, coming in upon such sadness, took the name of the tree across the street, the tree that hadn't yet lost its leaves. Even then she tried to run from those cries, but her little bent legs were soft as worms.

As a girl Willow ran in the yard, around and around the house, so quickly she created a wind that followed behind her and blew into the corners of the house like the winds of winter that howl and moan and beg to come indoors. Willow grew lean and independent. As a teenager she ran over the country roads swiftly, gracefully. If those along the road happened to see her passing, they couldn't help but turn to each other to ask what it was she was running from. Her mother and father loved Willow so deeply, and they wanted so terribly to hold her, but trying to hold her was like trying to hold the wind.

Word of this running girl spread over the hillsides and across towns and fancy people came to Willow and asked her to run for them which seemed, for Willow, an easy way to make a living,

as that seemed to be the only hobby that interested her. People loved the idea of a graceful woman runner named after a pretty tree that was always the last to lose its leaves. Some people watched her on the television. Businessmen from running shoe manufacturers paid her big money to wear their brands. At this point in Willow's life she was running the fastest, and her pocketbook was heavy with cash. Willow's mother and father discussed her future with her, asked her about becoming a wife, and maybe, someday, a mother. Willow had only one goal, and that was to run faster; the fear of those things her mother and father wanted for her only made her legs move quicker. Pretty men watched her from the sidelines. They asked about her, but never caught her.

By the time other women Willow's age were settling and slowing down into the beautiful steadiness of becoming wives and mothers, Willow was still as youthful and fast as was a teenager. At this time, the magazines Willow's mother and father kept in the bathroom were filled with articles about Willow, and they began to fill also with articles about running without shoes, which seemed to Willow very natural. Back then, those along the road saw her running across the grasses and dirt with feet bare as the earth.

What the researchers of barefoot running failed to disclose (or never discovered) was that a runner without the barrier of rubber and nylon will absorb the energies sent from the soil beneath. So when Willow ran past the sad people along the road she returned home to her mother and father a little bit sad, too, and her mother and father turned to each other slowly, as they were very old then, and thought to each other that their daughter was lonely since she was growing old all alone. They tried with their cracking voices to talk to her and to sooth her, but it sounded to Willow like the wind. The people in the houses

along the country roads where Willow ran were sometimes very happy and sometimes very sad as that is the way it is with people, but these were things Willow had never known. Her pretty bare feet as they pounded along the roads took it all in and the feeling of being alive entered Willow again and again and again as if for the very first time.

Upon returning from a run is when Willow felt the worst, so she slowly began to run less and less. She stayed at home with her mother and father who wanted so deeply to hold Willow, but they were so old, and their limbs were as soft as worms. Willow loved her mother and father so much and when they fell from their lives during the season she was born when the leaves had begun to cover the grasses, Willow simply could not bear to sit in the empty rooms of the only house she had ever lived. She entered the yard where the leafless maple and pecan stood. She stood there and watched the willow across the street and she waited and waited for the fall of the first leaf.

Those on the road that drove past Willow understood her then (familiar as they were with standing still and waiting). Had they slowed long enough they would have seen parts of her falling. Those along the road did not travel in the winter, so they did not have to worry about how cold Willow looked standing so still in the snow. In the spring they passed full of hope and joy. Surely they would have stopped had they seen the old woman, but they did not see her, as her drooping limbs were covered with pretty green leaves.

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