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Tenderloin

Jenny Dunning

The cookbook lies open on the granite countertop. “Tenderloin,” she reads, “the pampered inner muscle at the small of the back.” Pinching the soft flesh behind her own waist, she is again, for a moment, inside her body; she feels so light today, as if she might float away. Close the book. With all the meals she’s prepared—the family suppers, formal dinners for Roland’s clients, the holiday feasts for twenty, twenty-five, his entire family—there should be no need to consult a recipe. Sear first, to seal in the juices. She sets the oven to four hundred degrees and lights the burner beneath the cast-iron skillet, the one thing she refused to discard from her life before Roland swept her into his and instituted his sanitized version of domesticity (he objected to her not washing it with soap). As the pan heats, she considers the sauce. Shallots, she decides. None of the more pungent alliums. Only the mellow shallot. Perhaps sautéed with *duxelles*, the mushrooms minced tiny with the liquid squeezed from them.

Send Haley to pick oregano and basil from the sunny pots on the patio. No, Haley’s not here. Haley and Eli both are with Roland’s mother Vivian. “You’ll want some time to yourself, dear,” Vivian had said—the dear part of the lace she trimmed their relationship with, though little love was lost between the two—and hustled them into her leather-upholstered sedan. “Don’t give us a thought. We’ll be fine.” Vivian has an old-fashioned view of children: they should be seen but not heard. Usually, Roland took them for Sunday afternoon visits. Uncomfortable with the way Vivian pulls and fusses at their clothes and continually wipes their hands with washcloths, Leah found excuses not to go. Once, when Vivian took them to the Children’s Theater, Haley didn’t make it to the restroom in time. But now Haley is seven, and Eli five. Leah hardly knows who they are any more. Her own life is half spent.



She had worn the navy dress with the quarter sleeves and the buttons at the neck, the top fitting trimly around her slim waist like a short jacket, the skirt hem modest at mid-calf. Instead of the showy pearls, a hand-dyed scarf, blended greens beneath a batiked blue trellis. The scarf hid her small breasts that, lately, Roland complained were more girlish than womanly; she needed to eat more. In wave after wave, the sympathizers approached her. "Oh, darling. You poor thing," one said, patting her shoulder energetically. Another reminisced: "Honey, I was in your boat. Two children. Their father hung on three days after the explosion. Korean War. You'll make out all right, though," she went on, wagging Leah's arm the whole time, "we do what we have to do, we women." The next hugged her, oblivious to her brittleness, and said, "He was a good man, darling. You can take solace in that. A good man."

Their touch made her draw back. They didn't know. These were the old lady Chamber of Commerce volunteers, women he humored and flattered by treating them like they were still young. His gift was to be whoever people wanted him to be, a different person for every occasion. Was that what you called charisma? It's what got him elected Chamber president, what made him a man-about-town. But he wasn't good, and she wasn't like them; he had suckered her into living the wrong life. He had charmed her as he charmed them, only showing his true self after their marriage when she was already pregnant.

The men came too, with their wives. They squeezed her palms, lay their hands on her arm. These weren't the men Roland entertained at their home, the brokerage clients who complimented the meals she prepared and later, loosened up from Roland's single malt scotch, slipped their hands beneath her skirt, squeezed the inside of her thigh and, in the hallway, pressed their erections against her belly.

Like a banquet laid out for guests, the casket sat at the back of the room, table height, the blue satin of the lining plump

and fresh, the raised lid its frame. Haley wouldn't leave his side. Ahead of time, the funeral director had taken Leah and the children on a tour, showed them the room full of new caskets and the collection of swords mounted on the walls of what he called the consolation room, explained they could come here if they wanted during the viewing hours. On the table he left partly-crayoned Sunday school coloring books—line drawings of Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus at the last supper, Jesus on the cross and then, Jesus ascending through geometric shards of would-be light, these already colored in waxy, garish tones; Leah flipped through the pages as he explained to the children that in death the body was just an empty shell left behind. She should have stopped him, offered them her concept of good or bad karma extending to eternity. But she felt only a circumstantial connection to these children that as babies she never put down. The pregnancies created a hollow within her, a space she could not fill, this need to be needed that grew more insistent as they became separate selves, their touch no more than a brief pressure against her hand. She stood there turning the pages. Then, in the so-called chapel—a large, sparsely furnished room—he told the children they could touch the body, that it wouldn't hurt anything. All through the viewing, Haley, in the gauzy pink dress she insisted on wearing with her blonde hair pulled to the side in a lace-covered barrette, stood sentinel at his head, her hand against the ceramic cold of his cheek. Curious, Leah touched him herself, but turned away, unwilling to step between Haley and her father. When Vivian cajoled her granddaughter to say hello to all the nice people who had come to say goodbye to her daddy, Leah snapped, "Let her be." Vivian had never thought Leah good enough for her son—too thin, too quiet, he'd be able to run rough-shod over her, and what was it her father does for a living? She had not attended their wedding, had called Leah a whore once on the phone, a night her speech was slurred from too many martinis. Only after several years had they come around to a tenuous peace, brokered by the children. When Vivian was hospitalized, something to do with her

thyroid, Leah had even taken the children to visit. Now, Vivian jumped back at Leah's uncharacteristic remark, but left Haley alone.

The pan heating, she goes to pick the herbs herself, out through the French doors of the house behind the gate that swings shut like a cage door, kitchen scissors in hand. The August air is heavy with night coming, the chance storm. In the dimming light, the blue house looks gray. What kind of house is this, this walled monument? What kind of life has she led here? She should never have married, nor had children. To cultivate plants would have been enough, the nurturing touch that passes between her fingers and the green tissues. She imagines: light flecked through age-clouded windows, filtered by the multi-shaped layers of leaves, the room a Victorian glass cathedral; heavy-limbed, hundred-year-old trees buttressed by vines, epiphytes crowding the branches and strange flowers bushing below, the whole a weaving together of tropical life that surges roofward, as though the northern winter weren't just beyond the glass; the space, incongruously, an aviary as well—the birds not exotic-plumed species, but rather drab sparrows that sought warmth through a broken pane and could not find their way free. Here Leah would traipse across stone footpaths to prune and shape, feed and water, her hose a fountain spray. But, on her Southern patio, she has only these few herb pots to tend. With one finger inserted into the loose grains of soil, she reaches for the nearby watering can, floods the pots until the water percolates through and bubbles out the bottom. Now she crops the herbs, her small, sustainable harvest and, in the kitchen again, rinses the leaves, lays them on the counter to dry.

She dribbles oil into the heated pan, then turns to the chunk of flesh resting on the butcher paper before her. A vegetarian since her teens, not out of political or health convictions so much as a repugnance to taking flesh inside her body, she is accustomed to preparing meat for others. It is something she

does without allowing herself disgust; but now, she tells herself, this will be the last time. Season. She dashes salt across the meat, then grinds pepper from the wooden mill taller than her forearm. He gave it to her. Roland. He would have her stand tableside, offering the spice like a servant. How often she imagined hitting him over the head with it. She stabs the tenderloin with a fork, flips it over, seasons the backside. Water flicked in hot oil flashes to steam. Leah lifts the meat, feels the weight, the freshness of it in her hands; blood, thin as wine, pools below. As she sets it in the pan, the oil hisses at the intrusion and sends up a spray of sizzling droplets, but she barely registers the pricks against her arm.

For a time, when the guests flowed relentlessly toward her, stalled her with their sympathies and stories (the idea occurred to her that they were here to mourn parts of their own lost lives, nothing at all to do with Roland), Leah lost track of Eli. As people dispersed, she found him: stretched out rigid on the sofa. She didn't need to ask to guess he was in his own casket, the stiff yellow brocade his imagined final bed. Enough was enough. Twining through the hangers-on, she went first to Haley, pulled her hand from the corpse, warmed it between her own two, pushed hard against the flesh so that her blood might flow in the child as it once had. "Come, time to go," she said. Bundling Haley's slight frame before her, she approached the sofa where Eli lay. She reached for her son, fully a mother for that instant, lifted the resistant form to the breast that had nurtured his pliant baby body, held his face in the crook of her shoulder so that he might smell her milky skin.

They left, walking hand in hand, three across. The older part of town centers around a square green, the funeral home on the north side, St. Mark's Episcopal Church on the east. Their progress seemingly haphazard, Leah and the children passed the church where already people lapped at the doors, turned down Main Street and pulled up short at the ice cream

parlor. "Come on," she said when the children, looking back toward the church, hesitated at the door. They ducked as they entered, perhaps to avoid Vivian's imagined oh-no-you-don't as she plucked them by the collar. Leah heard Roland's voice as well: "What the hell do you think you're doing here?" When the door fell shut, the sugary smell overwhelmed her; her stomach cramped.

Eli's face was so serious as he stood before the heavy-set man in the white apron. "My daddy's getting heaven ready for us."

Leah pictured Roland making beds in a sunny room, arranging a vase of flowers on the nightstand, the disparity of the image amusing in the moment before her anger reasserted itself: surely he would go to hell if there were such a place.

The man was staring at her. "Whatever they want," she said.

"Chocolate sauce *and* sprinkles?"

That would have been Haley. "Anything." For a moment the store went wavy and dark, then resolidified.

Haley ordered bubble gum ice cream with chocolate sauce and rainbow sprinkles. When her mother didn't protest, she added gummy worms.

Unimaginable. Leah couldn't think of eating.

"The little boy?"

She prodded Eli with a pat on his shoulder.

Looking at her rather than the man, Eli said, "Cookie dough. And Oreo's." Then asked, "Can I have a cone?"

While the children ate, Leah sipped water from a paper cup. She ignored the mess of Eli's ice cream melting down the sides of the cone and dripping out the bottom. It was Haley who, playing the mother, blotted the cream globs from the Tasmanian Devil on his clip-on tie and brushed cookie crumbs off his lap. Leah was replaying the faces at the viewing, wondering if anyone had known she had filed for divorce a week earlier. He had said she would never make it on her own; he would see to it that she didn't.

Eli rubbed his mouth on his sleeve and asked, "Where did they get the man that looked like Daddy, that man in the box?"

Leah rotates the meat, using the fork and a wooden spoon, oblivious to the splattering oil. While the peripheral flesh crusts deep brown, she strips silky skin from the shallots. He wasn't good, only a good actor. Those people didn't know the Roland she knew, the Roland behind the gate, within the walls. The man who couldn't be outwardly ruffled but would go through the house in the middle of the night turning on the lights, the music, the televisions so that she would have to settle the screaming children. The shallots set out on the wooden cutting board, the one he specified only be used for vegetables because bacteria might lodge in the scratches (his voice again, grilling her, *when was the last time you bleached this?*), she reaches for the chopping knife. Under the heel of her palm, the knife's mincing rhythm chips at the small bulbs. She despises his voice that speaks from within her. She must excise it.

Charry meat smells fill the kitchen. Her hunger is inside out—the odor both draws and repulses her. Again, she turns the tenderloin so the last remaining section of raw flesh contacts the heated surface. More chopping, the rhythm soothes. Scrape the shallots onto a small plate. Now the herbs, their pungent flavor released to the air: tiny green specks hilled beside the shallots.

Innumerable times she had imagined his death: his car veering off the road as he raced to some meeting in another city, or returned home after too many drinks; the improbable plane crash. Always, herself blameless. She wipes the debris-mottled mushrooms with a damp towel. Chops them also, collects them in a cloth and wrings the moisture from them. Her gut cramps again. She couldn't eat in the ice cream parlor, sweet as death—he smelled like nothing in the casket, faintly chemical. Nor later, at the reception, all the little cakes and cookies, the plates of

crustless sandwiches, which had appeared from who knew where. Only the routine of herself in the kitchen, the familiarity of tasks, grounds her. Now she lifts the tenderloin, so heavy her wrists dip and strain, onto the broiler pan. Setting the pan into the oven, her grip almost gives way. She swoons at the rush of heated air that escapes from the oven's gaping mouth. But then, closing the door, she regains some strength. *Stupid bitch*, she hears him call her—in front of his friends, the children—*stupid bitch*.

The sauce again. She mounds the shallots, mushrooms, oregano, basil in the pan where tiny browns of meat pop in the oil. Too hot—she adjusts the flame, then stirs with the wooden spoon. Quickly, the shallots grow translucent, the herbs limp. Heat is no more than the speeding up of time. And what is death? Leah believes in no god, no medieval layers of afterlife. The only judgment is regret, the impossibility of undoing what has been done or of regaining lost years. She scoops flour into her palm, lets it snow from meshed fingers onto the sauté. She stirs the roux. From a bag in the freezer, she takes several ice cubes of rich vegetable stock. Her kitchen is well-provisioned, as if advance preparation could protect her. She adds them to the pan singly, stirs to incorporate them with the sauce, then sets the pan aside.

She sorts through the foodstuffs on the shelves of the refrigerator, in the drawers, looking for something to accompany the meat course. There is a little potato gratin readymade in a lidded glass dish. When had she prepared that? Two days before, could it be only then? She had made it for him, the two of them going on with things as if the dissolution of their marriage were not underway, as if she were not to move to a house on the other side of town with the children—a house on a quiet street of similar houses, the yards flowing into each other without barriers, not even picket fences. It had been easier for her to go on as usual, him asserting that she wouldn't go through with it and her, as for so long now, letting the anger gestate. She extracts the casserole, places it in the oven beside the roast. Then,

rifling through the vegetable drawer, she selects a sack of green beans.

The cold water streaming over her hands as she rinses the beans shocks her a bit, reminds her she is still muscle and veins, nerve and sensation. She glances up. To the left of the sink, finely ground carbon steel knives gleam dully from their magnetic rack. When they designed this kitchen during the first year of their marriage, when she was still awed by Roland's assumed expertise, he had instructed her on the importance of the working triangle: supplies and implements, sink and stove, should be at arm's reach from a central pivot. But after all, he had not been able to plan it out, not the part she would play in his life, no more than his death. She can see him still, his slumped body at the kitchen table. Water continues to rush from the faucet. "Gran says something's not right with you." Was that how Haley put it at the ice cream parlor? Perhaps Vivian would sue for legal custody of the children; the thought hovers but evokes no response. Leah reaches for a paring knife and trims the stems from the beans, several at a time, cuts against her thumb, presses the edge into her skin, and, feeling nothing, pushes harder. Red mixes with the flow of water. It is so easy to penetrate flesh. Then, with her thumb bandaged in a paper towel, she fills a pan, lights the burner to boil the water.

The service had already begun when Leah arrived with the children. Pulling them so their feet skimmed the marble floor, she made her way up the aisle to their reserved front-row seats. The robed priest was chanting, his song the voice of centuries: "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself..." Leah had deferred the arrangements to Vivian, but here, in the midst of the old-fashioned liturgy, Vivian's choice seemed ridiculous. Roland had believed in nothing but himself. If he occasionally attended church services, it was only to garner political support. At the front pew, Leah pushed Eli ahead of herself and pulled Haley behind. They brushed past Vivian,

who reached out in passing to retuck Eli's shirt, then to straighten the bow on Haley's dress.

Aware of the demand for an explanation in Vivian's gaze, she stared straight out at the priest, at the sway of his white robe visible beyond the lectern. "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God..." A lone shaft of sunlight illuminated a rectangle of marble floor beside him.

Next to her, Eli squirmed. "The top's down. Is the man still in there?"

Leah shifted her focus to the coffin heaped with flowers in the center of the platform. "Hush," she said, laying her hand over his in his lap. The congregation was sing-songing the psalm, their tones rising at the line-ends; Haley sang along with made-up words, a birdsong that diverged from the congregation when the phrases ascended. Leah could only make out fragments of text: "My tears have been my meat day and night..." and, "Where is now thy God?"

Again, the priest's voice filled the sanctuary. A passage from Revelation: "The Lamb... They shall hunger no more..." Leah couldn't make herself attend. The words flew like swallows between the pitched, dark-wood rafters of the hall. Leah would be the words, would draw in flight the calligraphed forms.

Then drumming, close in. But no. That was only both children's feet hitting the pew base. She stretched her arms across their legs to still them.

So familiar were the words now, they carried only rhythm, no meaning. Of course, Vivian would have specified a communion service. Leah pictured an antediluvian stone altar. Standing, placing herself behind Eli, she steered the children toward the rail. They knelt in a row and Leah's hands formed a cup to accept the wafer. Haley shook her head no; she protested when the priest marked the sign of the cross on her brow. Eli spat his out, wiped it on his pant leg.

The meal sits before her on the cream-colored plate with

gold rim—the beans in sheaves tied with carrot twine, the bubble-crusted gratin spooned alongside, the meat sliced and sauced, the dun of the sauce pooled with the meat's running pink. Wine too, a fruity red, translucent in the fluted crystal goblet. A cloth napkin, gold-handled silverware. Take, eat. But she doesn't know if she can, or if this will be enough. If she ceases the effort required to remain in this chair, at this table, she will transform into a bird. A white bird, the kind whose feathers were once sought out for hats.