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Cup of Trembling

Hyrum LaTurner

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You have to drag them 500 feet from any thoroughfare,” he says, drops his head and winks, whispering, “but really we don’t care where you put ’em, just so long as no one can see ’em in the mornin’.”

I nod.

He continues, “The guy before just drug ’em over a hill, or if they were still in good shape, he took ’em home and made jerky. Sometimes they just git swiped, hit in the head or somethin’ by a rearview mirror seems like. And the thing is, it’s good eatin’. Don’t sound like much, but,” he rubs his stomach and licks his lips, “hmm-mmm.”

We turn and start walking to my truck. He fingers the bed, smiles, hooks his thumb in his front pocket, beneath his belly, “How long you had this ’un?”

“Two years.”

“Uh-yeah? Good shape.”

“Yeah. I like to work on it.”

“Won’t be long, though. This job is hard on trucks.”

A woman resembling a basset hound barks from the office.

“Gotta run,” he says; “the old ball-and-chain is on one!”

He gets to the office, turns sharply and yells across the lot, “Just from 123 to 210! Don’t go another foot!” I smile and get in the truck. It’s going to be a long night.
I'm washing the blood out of the truck as the sun slips silent fingers over the purple mountains. I wonder how I'll get the blood out from under my fingernails before my wife sees it. She gets sick so easily, especially lately. One look at my hands is liable to send her running. She surprises me as the screen door bangs shut. I shove my hands into my pockets as she hugs me. “You must be tired,” she says eating a cracker. “I would make you breakfast but . . .” she breaks off and pats her stomach with a wry smile.

“Don’t worry. I’ll just eat cereal.”

“There’s bacon in the freezer. I can thaw it.”

“No. I think I’m going to be a vegan.”

She laughs, “That’ll be the day.”

I back up the truck and scan for headlights. I run to the middle of the highway, grab it forcefully by the nape of the neck, turn my back to the truck and begin dragging. *Only about an hour to go I think. I’ll get home early. I won’t wash the truck today . . . It’s heavy.* Halfway across the road I see headlights peering over a hill. I drop it in time to get out of the way, but the truck runs right over it. Bones crunch. Flesh flecks me in the face. I can already feel the blood drying on my cheek as I reach for the shovel. There isn’t much left. There’ll be blood all over the highway in the morning. *At least I don’t have to drag it into the truck.*

I’m cleaning up what remains when my beeper goes off. I look down and see it’s from home. I run to the truck and grab the cellular.

“Is she alright?” The nurse just looks at me and frowns. I look down at my hands.

“Oh, road-kill cleanup.” I run to the bathroom. I begin frantically washing my hands. *More soap, more soap.* I scrub past my elbows, awkwardly running them beneath the water in the shallow basin. There’s blood under my fingernails, but there’s no time. I look in the mirror and fill the basin up with water, again.

“Stupid truck,” I mutter, scrubbing my face. A red silken thread
curls beautifully through the water. Blood drips from my chin. I grab a handful of paper towels.

They rush me to room 212. Her face is turned from the door. She’s wearing one of those gowns; I can barely see the green poking out from beneath the hospital blanket.

"Is that you?" she asks as I walk into the room. Her voice cracks, "I can tell by the boots."

I look down at my feet. "How are you?"

"Have they told you?"

"What?"

She starts crying.

I walk around the bed. Her hands are pressed hard against her face. Her shoulders rise and fall.

"What?" I whisper, putting my hands on hers and pulling them away from her face. "What’s wrong?"

Silence.

"It’s dead," she blurts between convulsions.

"The baby?"

She pulls her hands from mine and covers her face again. I’m numb and barely hear her sobs. "The baby," I say, falling to the small chair as the side of the bed.

Later the nurse comes in. She smiles. My wife is not crying anymore, but we have not said anything. Her eyes are red. I hear them talking, but don’t know what is being said. It’s just noise.

We go home.

My wife has this dead mass in her stomach for three days. We don’t talk about it. Not a word. She catches me holding the little booties she bought to tell me she was pregnant. I look up only to see her whirl. I try to say something, but just drop the shoes and fall back, sinking deeper into the couch.
Just as I come home from a rough night she meets me at the door.

"It's time," she says.

"Let me wash up. I'll be right there."

She gets in the truck and waits for me. I go into the bathroom and wash my hands and arms and face. I think about showering and changing, but decide against it.

They check us in. We go to our room and my wife climbs up into the bed. A nurse comes in and asks how we're doing. I nod. My wife grimaces. She's having a contraction. I wonder why she has to feel the pain. I wonder if she is feeling the same pain she would if the baby were alive.

The nurse comes back a few minutes later and hooks up the monitor. She waits a few minutes but doesn't even bother to ask any questions. She's read the history.

"Looks like you're about three minutes apart. Let's have a look," she says after looking at the print-out.

She looks up from between my wife's legs. "You're at a six," she smiles. "We'll be done with this in a couple hours."

She pulls the latex glove from off her hand and I can't help but notice the blood. I'm surprised. She's almost out of the room when my wife reaches out, "Nurse! Nurse!" She turns around in the doorway.

"Yes?"

"It hurts."

"Oh! I'm sorry. Would you like something?"

"An epidural."

"Sure, honey. Let me get the doctor. I don't know why I didn't think to ask. Of course you're in pain. I'm sorry. So sorry."

She spins and hurries out of the room.

We wait an hour.
Finally a doctor comes in. He puts his hand on her knee, “Let’s have a look.” My wife only nods; she’s in the middle of another contraction. Her knuckles turn white round the bars of the bed. The doctor bends down between her legs.

“How far apart are the contractions?” he asks.

I think he’s not addressing anyone in particular so I answer, “About every two minutes or less.”

He looks at me and turns to the nurse, who is standing by the monitor. She nods.

“She wanted an epidural over an hour ago,” I say.

“Really?” He looks at the nurse. She smiles nervously and starts to say something, but stops with her mouth half open. “Well, it’s too late now,” he mutters, glaring at the nurse. “This’ll be over before it would take. I’ll give you some morphine. That’s all I can do.”

He walks from the room. The nurse runs after him.

A different nurse comes back a minute later. She puts a latex strap on my wife’s arm and taps her veins. “What nice veins,” she smiles. “I wish all our patients had such beautiful veins.” She puts a needle into my wife’s arm and hooks her up to a small beeping machine on wheels.

“Just push this button when you need more. It’ll take a minute,” she says warmly.

My wife does not respond. She’s having a contraction. She starts pushing the button as soon as the nurse is gone.

An hour later the doctor returns, wheeling a cart with a sanitized green bundle on top. He puts an apron over his crisp white shirt, carefully tucking his tie into his pants. He’s wearing a nice pair of leather oxfords with a loose paper covering. I wonder if he ever gets blood on his shoes.

“What do you get squeamish?” he asks, looking at me. I wag my head, wanting to show him my fingernails.

Minutes later she’s pushing. Her face is red and I’m counting: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Her face turns deep red. Eight.
I can see the lines beneath her eyes. Her mouth is a flat crease. Her chin quivers. Nine. Ten. She exhales.

“Almost done, you’re doing a great job,” the doctor says. He pulls a long pair of forceps from the cart. They look like golf clubs.

“One more good push and this will all be over.” He pauses a moment and looks at me. He’s trying to show that he understands. I look at my wife.

“Whenever you’re ready,” he says.

She nods her head and takes a deep breath. One. The doctor reaches in with the forceps. There is a sucking sound. Two. I close my eyes. Three. But it’s not your fault. It just happens. It’s God! Four. Why didn’t they come in here and give her an epidural? Damn nurse. Five. I open my eyes. The doctor’s face is a little red. I can see sweat soaking through his cap. He’s actually pulling hard. Six. I see blood splash across the doctor’s apron. Seven. I hear a dull thud on the floor. My wife’s face is deep red, her knuckles dead white. Sweat rolls down her face. Eight. The doctor swings something from between my wife’s legs into a plastic bag held open by a nurse at his side. They’re fast, like they’ve practiced for this kind of thing. Nine. The doctor stands up. He begins to untie his apron. Ten. My wife exhales.

They clean up fast, without a word. The forceps clank on the cart. They’re dripping with blood. I wonder who will clean them up. I look at my wife. She turns away. She is shaking. The doctor finishes cleaning up and starts to walk from the room. He looks at me as he reaches the door, “I’m sorry.”

I nod, looking at his clean shoes.

After a while I leave my wife and go to the desk.

“I’ve had three,” the nurse (the damn nurse) is saying, “and they didn’t hurt at all. And that was . . .” she turns and sees me coming. She looks down at the desk and fumbles with some papers.

“I want to see it,” I say taking a deep breath.

“What?” the receptionist says.

“I want to see my baby.”
I look into the plastic bag. *It doesn’t look much like a baby. More like a carcass, like the inside of a deer’s stomach.* “What are you going to do with it?” I ask.

“We were going to send someone in to talk with you about that,” the aid says. “We just thought it might be best to wait a bit.”

He’s a small, nervous man with a neat black mustache. He adjusts his glasses, coughs, and tries to smile. I reach into the bag and pull it out. He turns his head. With effort I can make out her face. She would have been a girl.

“I want to bury it.” He doesn’t answer, but turns to walk away. I won’t tell my wife I saw it yet. Better just to let it die, for now.

When I get back to the room she is asleep.

A nurse looks at me and says, “We gave her some medication. She’s had a rough day.”

“Yeah,” I say. “She’s had a rough few months. Will she be out long?”

“Probably all night.”

I spend half the night roaming the halls.

Finally the little man catches up to me. He has a clipboard with a few papers. I begin signing.

“We would like you to consider donating it for research,” he says.

“No,” I whisper, looking down at the blood on my palm. “I’m going to bury it.”

I check in on my wife once again, see that she is sound asleep, and decide to go for a drive. At mile marker 123 I pull the truck over. I get out and look around. I wonder how many deer, skunks and other animals are already dead on the road. I get back in the truck and keep on driving. I’m lost in thought and don’t see the big doe standing on the side of the road until it is too late. Her eyes flash in my headlights and she suddenly jumps in front of me. I slam on the brakes. The doe flips over my hood, slams into the roof and slides out of the bed onto the road. I slam my hand down on the steering wheel, pulling the truck to the side of the road.
“Stupid animals!” I whisper, getting out of the truck and walking around to the deer.

She lays motionless in the road. I know there is blood on the truck without seeing it. I can smell it. I stand over the doe for a minute, looking at her swollen belly. She flinches.

Oh, I think, she's still alive! What should I do? She's pregnant. I get the flashlight from the cab and shine it on her face. There is a pool of blood collecting beneath her. I touch her stomach. Her fur is long but coarse. Her stomach ripples beneath my touch.


I reach down and lift her head out of the pooling blood. Blood drips between my fingers, down my forearm and off my elbow to my hip and leg. Her head is heavier than I was expecting. I look into her eyes, hoping to see a sign of life—a spark, anything to give me hope. But there is no reaction. Just a pair of dull, dilated eyes. She suddenly exhales. That’s it. It's over.

I bend down and rest my forehead on hers and start crying. I cradle her head in my arms, kneeling in blood. “Hush little baby, don't say a word...” I sing.

When it's over I stand up and grab her by the nape of the neck and drag her off the side of the road and over the hill. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight hundred feet. I drop her and head back to the truck.

I grab the shovel and return to the deer.

I'm sitting in the chair when my wife wakes up. She looks at me. I have blood and dirt all over me. I can smell it. I can feel it, dried and caked on my hands and face. I didn't clean up. She looks at me, puzzled.

“How do you feel?” I ask.

She wags her head, slowly. “I'm thirsty.”

I leave the room to get her a glass of water. As I turn the corner, I hear a faint whisper, “God, God. Why me? Why have you left me?”
I watch her take a sip. She swallows, grimacing. She holds the cup away from her mouth a moment. I move toward her, hoping to kiss her, to tell her it's not her fault, tell her it's not God, that this is not how God feels, to give her my peace, but I pause and sit back in the chair, suddenly feeling very small.

I realize the cup is trembling.