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B A B Y L O O A C R O S S M Y T W I N K L I N G F L O O R

by Stephenie Swindle Clark



Redbank's porch faces my porch, and I have seen him tumble-rumble the twenty-two steps that lead off of it. It was the summer I learned to drive and I was like I always was, sitting in the yellow chair with a hat and some water. It was sunshine and a radio on upper dial stations. A radio that played all June, all July, all August, blown in from somewhere. And for this radio, the sun, my yellow chair and water, Redbank's spill passed easily. And I helped him up. I shook him. I said, "Can you hear me? What do I look like?" I said, "Your knees, your chin and this by your ribs—what is it that goes on in your head?" And I took my back-pocket comb and combed. I tied his shoes. I said, "All this smells of dirt clods being thrown against the sidewalk—to scare away animals and small children—kerwanga!" Just like that. Redbank was eight.

My father, John Joseph, when he was tired and mad, in bed watching game shows, I bargained. "John Joseph, what do you want with that despicable green-thingy Volkswagen? You don't drive it like I'd like to drive it," I said. "Give it and I'll clean your house. I'll pick tomatoes—all summer, I tell you. And then you hand over the keys with no backstabbing, no wishy-washy, John Joseph."

"Razor-backed, blood-gushing daggers," he said. "You do this to me. But the keys I'll give you. You're a Virginia deal maker."

"Damn, damn, I'll make sure you can see it when you smile in that kitchen floor, my twinkling floor."

So I swept. I mopped. I made Vienna sausages into French stew. I sorted laundry. I made piles for boys' and mens'. Underwear I kicked into the corner. And I pre-spotted. I folded, pressed, steamed, groceried, fed the baby and kept him away from the garbage cans. "Tasty, tasty," I would tell him when I took the butter wrappers from his mouth. I set his Star Wars playpen in the kitchen there by me. I would put him there and he would murmur and be pleased at how he could adjust his legs, his arms, spit at his toys.

The pretend bay windows in our kitchen went from floor to ceiling. They showed our porch, our garden, our fence. And then, Redbank's garden and Redbank's porch. For the first three weeks of summer Redbank sat, like a sailor, in white underwear, and watched me from his porch while I shook the kitchen rugs, swept and hefted, stood with my hands across my waist; I would carry things from room to room and stop to rest and think and look at the baby with my hands at my waist. Before napping, the baby would stand and whirl holding fiercely, so fiercely to the edge of his pen.

John Joseph handed over the keys when he really did see his face in the linoleum. "I got my driver's license," I told him. And

he sucked air through the hole he had drilled in his thumbnail. He looked at my twinkling floor. "Here's ten bucks," he said. "Good one." And I got in my car and drove. I drove everywhere. I went through high school and college and I said, "You want a ride? Do you?" I was a good driver. And I am still. I drive like fire. And today I say, "Yeah, I'll give you a ride," and I say, "I'm with child. Yes, I am." And I shake my body like hollandaise and Jello. I smack my gut and say, "It's St. Santa right here in your own living room. What do you want? What do you want?" And then I laugh into my hands. I'm twenty-seven and it's November. As you would expect, there's very little snow.

When I've closed the store and called my ever-vigilant-doctor-man Matheson, been to the cleaners and fed the cats, I sit down to make a list. I have baby things in one column, food in another. Sweet day, I love a good grocery trip. I have the crib and the blankets. I have the big things. What I'll get is the sterile soap and a soft brush for head scrubbing. Q-tips and the pointy funnel thing to clear the nose for cold and flu season. Diapers. Powder. I'll get it all. My breasts, like cotton candy, are achy-achy.

I move my cart into the aisle flow and follow two women I know. Cosmetics, dairy, baking, household items, meat. One is Reba Jules and the other Jerilyn Wokler, and they are silk. Silky, silky, high-waisted control-tops. I reach down deep inside me—past my gullet—and glide with them as best I can.

Reba says to Jerilyn, "Jerilyn, attractive pants make the woman."

"I'll say," says Jerilyn. "I had that woman make them—Joe Silver's mother, I had her make them for me."

"Tailored," says Reba.

"I'll say," says Jerilyn.

They skate and they roll—a figure eight without thinking. And me, my stomach's on the tile. I'm loafing. I'm dilly-dallying.

But they go. They race forward, their heads touching, and I watch them move. They stop at the cranberry juice and reach for quarts. They move on to the peas. And they are thin. Reba is thin. Jerilyn is thin. Their hair minds them. They met in college. They walk Monday, Wednesday, and Friday in purple tights. I've seen them.

I take my purse and throw it sliding to their feet. It hits Reba's heel, spins ninety degrees, and I shuffle off to Buffalo.

"Sorry," I say and heave over. I put my bottom in their faces. I get up and I'm breathing hard. My face is red. I'm puffing.

They breathe in like small mosquitoes.

I offer my hand, "Hello, Reba, Jerilyn. Won't you stop by my anti-Indian and African store. We're changing our look. And," I circle my hand at my stomach, "Babyloo will want to get a look at you each."

"Hello," they say.

"Hi, Susan, how are you?" says Jerilyn.

"Here I am," I say.

"Well we were just talking about you, talking about your wonderful store. We love your store. We think it's a wonderful store."

"Yes we do," says Reba. "It is."

"Stop by," I say. "We'll talk. There's a place in the mall that delivers Mexican. We could eat. You could see my baby."

"Yes," says Jerilyn.

"Any day now?" says Reba.

"I'm going to keep a crib in the back. You'll be able to come back and see. I'll have everything I need, back there as well as at home. Two sets."

"Two sets," says Jerilyn.

"We look forward to seeing you," says Reba.

"Goodbye," I say and they move away. They take their carts and go, and I watch their hips. I watch and I wish for their well-shaped forearms, Reba's switchoy trumpet skirt, their good noses—I think and think about the line of their noses.

I'm taking sacks from the trunk to the cement to the kitchen. The cats are walking the counters like tigers. I put away the baby and grocery things and the cats start dancing. "Ole," I say and they fight. They love each other. They turn circles on the counter, off the counter, down the stairs if I had any. They tip the garbage can and drink from the faucets—very mincingly as though they had just done their hair, gloves on their hands and a light colored dress.

I know that Redbank came off his porch a morning the baby would not nap. He walked down the twenty-two steps, through his garden, our garden, and sat across from me on the porch. I had come out to see if the sun and the radio would make the baby sleep. Redbank poked at his eye and I jiggled the baby. He pinched his nose and he honked it. I kept with my jiggling. He said, "Hi, baby." And he did not look at me. "Hi, baby," he said and let the baby grip at his fingers and eat them. "This is a cute baby," he said to my chair, my hat, my glass of water.

"Yes," I said.

"Yes," he said and got off his chair. He went back to his porch and sat there and called, "Hi, baby. Hi," until the baby finally slept and I rolled him up and went inside. The radio played till dark.

To go to bed and be warm is to have one cat on my chest, the other on my stomach. If the baby starts to jostle, the stomach cat sits up. And it's the beacon of all truth. The covers swoosh

down from his ears and head and he sits still—except his ears—to feel the baby beneath his feet. His ears crane and stretch. We all listen. We are all so tired.

November—it is cold again, suddenly now—21st, 1982. The baby comes in one week. I put my letters to answer in my second white desk drawer. When I open the drawer to find hidden things and only find letters, I know it's time to write back. But not today I can tell you. Peter called. He thought I had had the baby. "Not yet," I told him. "Not nine months yet."

"You feeling okay?" he said.

"I'm feeling okay. You called—and it's nice."

"I am nice. Are you big?"

"I'm fat."

"How do you feel?"

"I'm tired. I'm bloated. My prenatal blush has lit the sofa on fire. I lounge in flames. Surely blisters any time now."

"Whiney, whiney. I didn't think you'd have it, this live baby."

I blew into the phone.

And he listened.

I wrap a scarf around my head, a coat around my stomach. Peter opens the door and I smell fish. He takes my coat and grips his hands around my stomach. He makes a pumping iron face and keeps gripping. "You could really whack someone with this. Ever jostle in a crowd?"

"No, I only cut loose with cats. We turn out every last light and dance it in the dark."

"Rock 'n' roll?" he says.

"Swing-time, big band," I say.

He turns and hangs my coat and scarf on a sculptured metal tree. I flick the tree with a fingernail and listen to it ring.

“Need help with your housekeeping?” I say. “I know all about it.”

“Dead wrong,” he says. “I am completely hard-water-deposit free. Bathroom and kitchen.”

“I’m going to look,” I say.

“And, Susan,” he says, “What do you know about this baby?” He walks into the kitchen to look into pots.

I sink into the couch and look at my knees. “What are we eating besides fish?” I yell.

Peter has dogs. They come in to see me, but I don’t quite reach their heads, caught as I am in the groovy couch. They walk over and climb on a furry bean bag, standing and looking at me until the bag sinks to their liking. The decor hasn’t been changed since August ’73. Because it was me who painted the super graphics on July 4th. Me who said everything felt like orange, brown, and rust. Me who papered the east wall in a forest mural (the imagination of water and rocks and trees and humming things) and chose the toe-snuggling wool rug toss. We wished only for the possibility of an E P A approved wood-burning stove.

Peter clinkaty-clink-clinks in the kitchen and I say, “Here poochie poochie.” I pat my legs. “Here—come here and see me.”

It was that early afternoon time of day that Redbank fell down the stairs and I try to tell Peter. “He was gleaming in his underwear,” I yell into the kitchen. “He was waving. He said, ‘Where have you got that baby?’” And then he went; he spilled, tumbled, split right open and greeted each step with a forced, broken breathlessness. Oohwee, I was scared.

Peter comes in with TV trays. He comes in with the food and the dogs start bouncing and grinning. “Skipper, Mack—sit,” he tells them. And they sit. They have tight little chests and proud

little heads. Peter says, "How 'bout those 49ers?" And we both sit right up and eat.

After the fish, after the brussel sprouts and bread, there is four-layered gelatin parfait with fruit cocktail accents.

"You know, Redbank wasn't really even hurt," I say.

"Is that a fact?" he says.

"You know, my dog . . ." I say.

"I don't remember a dog," he says.

"That little thing loved me. I used to take him up the canyon and walk."

"If you take these dogs and walk—if you scratch Skipper and scratch Mack—they'll follow you hell-near anywhere," he says.

"I took mine up mostly in fall. The sun was still warm. I wore shorts and a tank and the car keys around my neck."

"The dog died, huh?"

"No, he drowned," I say.

"Drowned?" he says. "I never take my dogs near water," he says.

"There was water all over the canyon. He loved it. I didn't worry. He came back with a wet chest and jumped for the radio antenna. I had a green flag on it."

"Yeah," he says. "Well," he says. He scrubs Mack and Skipper down the back and over the stomach, spansks their bottoms. He takes our TV trays and plates all at once. A magician. He turns the music on.

I get my coat myself.

"What a time we've had today," he says. "Come again and again."

"I think so," I say. "I'll come and walk your dogs. I'll come with Babyloo in a backpack and we'll go up the canyon and find water—a pool with a pleasant clearness."

“Pollution,” he says.

“Pleasant clearness,” I say. I say, “The dogs will strut up and down its banks for the pleasure of seeing their fine muscles swivel and wrap each bone. They are fine dogs and for all their time spent admiring the lines of their back and stomach I will have fallen asleep nursing Babyloo. I will wake up to a splash—one dog ankle-deep and the other giving me a hello from the bank. And before I know where or what, their heels will fly up and they will whir to bottom, stirring up this and that, and the pool will no longer be clear with the stroked back of the bristly pooch and the caressed whitish pooch stuck so very well to the bottom.”

Peter has me by the wrists, palms up. He’s cocking his head. But he’s listening.

“But,” I say, “it is only that I will bring them back with wet chests. I would throw Babyloo in and they would swim back up from the bottom and drag the baby by the knees and ankles carefully to shore. They would come to me for praise and I would give it.”

Peter drops my wrists. He pushes me. He opens the door and walks outside.

The baby will come, I know. Late maybe, but it really will. It’ll come and I’ll know insides are ripping, are falling apart. I’ll think: I’m bleeding and count each knocking fist. This baby will want my life for sure thing. It will want my days and my nights, my bedsheets, my shoes and my socks. And I’ll give them. It can have them. I’ll give them. I am falling down stairs. My cats flip through a quiet apartment. We are all so tired.

I wash the baby’s head with the sterile soap and soft brush. No more cradle crap. I touch Q-tips to its ears and nose. I sack it in a sleeper and cover it with a striped blanket. It sleeps just fine. The cats jump and perch on either edge of the crib. They

hang their bodies low. They wave their paws. They hold still and they fix their eyes on what I have made. I pick up my cats by the scruff of their necks.