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After This I'm Dead

Marilyn Thompson

I'm slicing carrots. A Wednesday in June, 6:00 p.m. It is perfect summer, sultry summer. At 6:00 I can see the sun still bright on the grass. Jay is reading the *Times* after a day at the lab, and waiting for dinner. Tim and Sheila are playing in the sprinklers in the back yard, and near them I can see Ann, the baby, tasting a dahlia.

I watch and slice. Now Tim picks up the hand nozzle and sprays Sheila to make her scream. She is seven, he blasts her flat chest with the fine cold spray, and she screams *no! no!* loving it. Giddy with delight she runs a few feet, stops and turns her belly toward him again, a dare. Tim is nine, he says matter-of-factly *you're asking for it Sheila*, aims at her navel. She shrieks like a magpie and Tim shouts *I know you want me to!*

Now I open a beer for Jay, get a glass from the cupboard and take him the beer and the glass. It will not be dark tonight until nearly 9:00. I'll get more ice, and after dinner we'll play volleyball with the children. I can feel the evening, that rich, thick expanse of time, waiting for us. I can feel how easily we're going to sink into it, down toward dark and sleep.

Sometimes I can't believe how much sewage goes down the pipes of this house. Tim and Sheila forget to flush and when I go into the bathroom there is a bowlful already waiting. Nearly every time I go into the bathroom for anything, to brush my teeth or hair or to use the toilet myself, the bowl is full. Jay is off to the lab and the children to school, and I am sure I've heard the toilet flush twice or three times, and yet the bowl is full.

So I flush. *There* I think, and pick up my hairbrush. But sometimes the toilet does not flush completely. Some of it floats back up with the fresh water. A nest egg. Should we get a plumber to check the pipes? Looking down, I imagine the sewage flowing under the streets of this city. The gallons per second. The sheer volume of our lives.

Jay stands above the toilet, watching his pee descend. But this does not really interest him. He is thinking of something else, something practical, an equation or is it time to change the oil. He believes his dreams are without meaning.

I am thirty-four. When Ann was born I panicked. Yes—a moment of terror. *This is my last baby*, I told myself, *this is the last time*. When labor began I was suddenly angry—not at the pain but with this thought I could not forget, *this is the last ecstasy, after this I'm dead*.

But then the pains were fierce, they made me forget. They took my breath away and I hugged my knees, moaning and thrashing against the flat table. I was the pain, I moved for it, I screamed its screams. I went wild, I let it throw me against the white wall. The doctor was matter-of-fact, doing his job. Bored but authoritative. Push, he yelled at me, you've got to push.

At the end I felt triumphant joy. I thought *just let this go on forever*. And that is what I think at the climax of love. Every time Jay and I make love, as I go over the edge I think *just let this last forever, nothing else matters*.

I don't tell Jay anything about this. When Tim was born I tried to tell Jay what it felt like, what it was like. But he's forgotten what I said. And what does he think when we make love? Once I asked him point-blank but he skirted the answer, or he was confused, he thought I meant something else. He buttons the cuffs of his sleeves and bends to tie his laces. He keeps his eyes on the laces and his reply, whatever it is, might refer to anything—to politics, the cost of living, the Series.

When I see he's misunderstood my question I let it drop. It is a private matter I suppose. Jay loves me, he loves us and he is kind, but he is private and he is thinking about his work. From across the dining table I can see his eyes turned inward to some private work.

The supermarket. It is early, just 9:00 a.m., and I am the first shopper. I go to the frozen fowl case to pick out a roasting hen. Right now the store is perfect—no one has broken a jar of pickles or left a package of ground beef beside the cornflakes—but by evening this place will be a shambles. Children ride the carts and throw fruit over the side and cans fall off shelves and there will be little paper cups everywhere from the sample cola. Glass jars topple and break, apple-sauce or mayonnaise. At 5:00 p.m., at 6:00, you step on grapes, and the store is seamy and the women shopping are rude.

Sometimes I dream about this supermarket. I dream the sun is setting and it is twilight in the store. I make my way through the slick mess of mustard and glass, and the paper cups blow like leaves across the tile. I get to the meat case, and when no one is looking I bend over the meat case as over a huge cradle, and quickly I choose a whole ham the size of a baby and I run.

That is my dream. Though I have three children of my own. Though there is

nothing another baby could give me that I don't already have. I lift the ham to my breast, I wrap my coat around it, and I run.

Saturday, a balmy day. We wander the zoo. Jay pushes Ann in the stroller, and Tim and Sheila run ahead of us past the gnus, past the elands, the okapis, past the sable antelope. The warm air is gentle on my skin, I stop to watch the gazelles. I stand and stare at their sleek, graceful bodies.

Now their quivering nostrils and their eyes hold still and they are calm. Some lie down. Others stand and graze, the young staying close to their mother's haunch. A peaceful scene. A peaceful scene, but then I remember that these animals are wild, that anything unusual, a smell or a sharp sound, would strike them like lightning, strike them and send them leaping the fence. Or leaping and not making it, their fear dashing them against the steel mesh. They're not animals, they're bundles of quivering ganglia held together by bone. Only that bone frame holds the red filigree of nerves in place.

Jay is thirty-eight, nothing surprises him. He doesn't blink at anything. Every morning he takes a fresh shirt from the closet and puts it on and then he kisses me and goes off to the lab. There he looks at charts and graphs, he thinks about neutrinos and pi mesons, he does long, deft calculations on the backs of envelopes.

I have been there, to the laboratory. Things are easy there. It is quiet except for the fine humming of the air conditioners. There are shelves of hardbound books in subdued colors, there are stacks of white paper in baskets, paper motionless and available.

Jay has everything he needs, he knows what to do with everything he has. He is intelligent, kind, reasonable and patient, polite and good company. And with the children he can be very funny, a clown. Whatever the moment calls for.

One day he asks me if I'd like another baby. It is August, stifling and still three weeks before our vacation. Every day I take Tim and Sheila and sometimes Ann and go to the pool. It's pleasant, the water cool on my skin, and I swim and then lie on my stomach and watch the children or doze. Again and again Tim pushes Sheila into the water, or Tim and his friends push each other into the water, and once or twice when his friends aren't looking, Tim lets Sheila push him over the edge, over the edge into the perfect, sky blue pool.

Then Jay asks me if I want another baby. I understand this, he is checking, inquiring about my welfare. He is saying do you want a new dress, do you want to take the children and visit your mother, do you need an electric hairbrush, would you like to invite someone to dinner, are your sandals wearing out, what do you want for your birthday, maybe we should have the living room painted, why don't we get a sitter and go out tonight, would you like to enroll in a modern dance class, a fur coat, a bean bag chair, a side of beef, another baby?

No. There is no one else I want to sleep with.

I dream I am mayor of our city. Gravely decisive, I bang the gavel on the polished oak table. Around me the city fathers, the legal-sized pages of their edicts, blank, white. I continue to pound with the gavel. Now the table becomes a great roundsteak, bloody and laced with fat. Around me Jay and the children, their empty plates blank, white.

No, there is no one else I want to sleep with.

Once when I was eight, pulling my sled uphill on a slick, closed street, I looked up and saw a boy coming downhill toward me. I didn't know him very well and now I can't remember his name but I had seen him once before, in a dime store I think, with his mother. He went to another school in another part of town, and so I only saw him again months later, Christmas vacation, sledding. He remembered me, I remembered him. That was all.

Summer came and somewhere in that summer I hear mother's voice telling father they found this boy in his parents' garage hanging by the neck from a beam. *How terrible, how sad* I hear mother's and father's voices intoning inside that summer. But I am eight and I don't think how terrible, how sad. I don't think anything. I skip rope on the front porch in the sunshine one hundred times and then fifty times more. I care only for myself, I care only for skipping rope.

Now a long time, like a hundred years, has passed and I have children of my own, ages nine, seven and one-and-a-half, and now, now I think of him. Now I think of him, cannot stop thinking.

I belong to the A.A.U.W., I am chairwoman of the Committee on Educational Reform. We survey students, faculty and staff at major universities and then based on these findings we make recommendations to the State Board of Higher Education.

Also the P.T.A. I am in charge of contacting new members of the community and inviting them to join. Tonight a coffee to welcome new members, and I pick up Shirley Carmack, new wife and mother in town, her husband Bryce a new assistant in the division where Jay works.

It's September, the end of summer. The lawns are parched and the sprinklers whirling, but any night now may come the first frost. The end of summer, and I'm afraid that tonight I'm a bad hostess, guide, friend. Beside me in the passenger's seat Shirley is asking, and from the driver's seat I am answering, I am giving the right, sufficient answers in a friendly way—but in a superficial way because tonight my heart is not with the answers. Tonight I am a bad hostess, I do not love Shirley Carmack and the P.T.A.

When I stop for a light I can hear sprinklers whirring. I can hear crickets begin. But though the ground is still warm it is already dark at 7:30, and the papers are predicting the first frost. I suspect tonight is the last night of this particular summer, and I do not want this particular summer to end.

I am thirty-four, I have everything I want and I should know better, but like a child faced with bedtime I am suddenly defiant. I don't want to go to bed right now. I don't want to put away the summer dresses, the soft, thin blouses, the bathing suits and the smell of damp they never quite lose. I don't want to dig up the dahlias, to close the windows and take down the screens. I don't want to lock the tennis racquets in their frames and tighten the screws.

But that's unreasonable, childish. All right, tonight I am unreasonable, childish. Or maybe tonight I'm drunk. Drunk on pleasure and terror. Recklessly, unbecomingly, unabashedly drunk.

Every night before I go to bed I check the children. Slowly my eyes become accustomed to the dark and I tiptoe into each of their rooms. I stare at their bodies heavy and dumb with sleep, I hear their breathing. Their sleep is astonishing—a gentle thoughtlessness. They lie back in the great maw as though it were grass.

Here is something I will not tell Jay.

It is morning. Jay is gone to the lab, Tim and Sheila to school, and Ann is asleep. I go into the bathroom to use the toilet, I go through the doorway, passing the sink, and quick in the mirror above the sink I catch a glimpse of myself and I panic.

I panic and panic until I can't take any more and I break away from the mirror and sink and crouch down on the bathroom floor. I think maybe Ann will cry and I'll have to go and pick her up, but she doesn't cry.

After awhile—how long? Five minutes? Ten minutes? After a time I stand up, I calm down. I think *all right, all right*.