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LAURA FARMER

Christmas Eve

The last time I was in Iowa it was Christmas, my pops was sick, and I got a rash. A bad one, too. It started with a big spot on my side, like a goose egg, and spread—these fingerprint-sized red spots that would peel like little sunburns and turn bright pink when I got out of the shower. They didn't itch and they didn't go away. I don't usually go to doctors, but I didn't want to stay home, either. Pops kept crying. I went to the clinic.

The nurse comes in while I'm sitting on the table, crinkling that paper and rubbing my belly. I'm a little nervous. She asks what the problem is and I show her my stomach. It looks like measles, like my skin's peeling off. She arches her head back, then zooms in for a closer look.

"Have you had chicken pox?" She pokes one of them.

"Yep. Well, a long time ago," I say.

She leaves and the doctor comes in; a tall, broad-shouldered man with a mustache. He looks at his clipboard, then at me, and shakes my hand. Firm. Friendly.

"I'm Doctor Kenzler. You Maynard's daughter?"

"Yep."

"We're all real sorry to hear about him. How's he doing?"

"Fine."

"Well, good good. That's good to hear. Now, what can I do for you?"

He tells me I've got Ps—Rosa. "It's pretty common," he says. "Nothing to worry about. We don't really know what causes it, but it'll clear up in a few weeks. Are you on any medication?"

"Birth control," I say.

"Well," he winks. "This can be your birth control for awhile." He actually winked.

I call Hank from the lobby and tell him to come pick me up.

"Why are you at the clinic? Is it your dad?"

"Just get over here."

When we're pulling out, and I'm making room for my feet in all the receipts and Long John Silver's bags, he says, "Is that your car?"

"I'll get it later," I say. "Let's just go."

Hank starts driving around. We haven't seen each other in a year, since I moved to Milwaukee. He slows down in front of the graffiti rock so I can see what's new, goes past the bread factory with the windows down, and takes the curve too fast behind Buzz's bar. He knows my favorite bends in the road. I think about saying something, but I don't want to ruin a good thing.

We end up downtown. Lou's is closed, most stuff is closed, because it's Christmas Eve. We should be home, helping our families cook, or shovel, but instead we're looking for a place to hide.

Hank and I met in high school, when I was fifteen and he was older. We didn't go to school together, but were in this community program for at-risk high schoolers that took us on museum field trips and nature walks and the occasional lecture about drugs and pregnancy. Kids from a bunch of small towns were in it, including Hank, including me, and that's how we started. We were romantic then, and everything revolved around driving. Through cemeteries, down gravel roads, to the drive-in, to his house, to my house—twenty miles of fields apart—we were in his car. When the program was over it was summer and when the summer was over, so were we. But we kept calling and he kept driving to my folks' house. It's been years, and he still drives the same car.

We end up in The Blue Room, on the corner of 2nd and Main. The picture window's tinted and filled with ratty stuffed animals, like you'd win at a carnival. A blue light shines behind making it look like they're underwater.

Even though it's two in the afternoon, the bar stools are all taken. There are even girls in one of the booths. Marge, behind the bar, is dressed up like Mrs. Claus and she's got the place looking like a drunken workshop—tinsel and Christmas lights sagging from the wood paneling, and a fake Christmas tree rolled in popcorn and cranberries propped up against the back wall. Marge nods at us and pours two PBRs. Two stools open up and we straddle over. There's a Christmas movie starring Susan Lucci on the bar TV but we can barely hear it.

Hank gets up and gets some popcorn from the back popper. It's too salty. It's perfect.

"So," he raises his frothy mug. "Merry Christmas."

"Cheers." The mugs are thick and clunk together, sounding more like shoes dropping than something delicate.

"So how's your dad doing?"

"I don't know," I take another drink. "He still can't talk."

"Yeah?"

"He just lays there. At least he's at the house."

"So what are they. . ."

"I don't know," I pause. "What else is going on?"

He drinks his beer and wipes his upper lip. "I might start working for the cabinet factory over in Waterloo."

"That'd beat killing hogs."

"God, tell me about it. I just smell, all the time. Can you?" He smells the back of his hand, then the palm. "I haven't worked in two days and I still smell like hog blood. Smell."

His hand is boney, with red, swollen knuckles. It smells salty, and a little sweet, like blood.

"You get many dates, smelling like that?"

"Oh yeah," he laughs. "Oh, yeah."

By the time we finish drinking, it's starting to get dark and the street lamps are on. The air smells smoky, like chimneys, and the sky is red and swelling with snow. Hank takes my arm over the icy patches and holds on until we get to the car, like we're old and feeble, or in love. He starts the car. I can see my breath.

"So why were you at the doctor today?"

"I've got this rash, it's nothing serious." I unzip my coat and pull up my shirt. He turns on the dome light.

"Whoa," he says, poking one of the circles. "What is it?"

"Something Rosa," I say. "It's not contagious."

"So you'll be okay?" He runs his frozen finger where one of the spots is peeling. I tighten my stomach.

"Sure." I say.

"Rosa." He keeps moving his finger. "That's a pretty name."

"Yeah," I say, adjusting my shirt. "It is."

I get home and my mom's frantic—she's vacuuming the living room in her church heels, back and forth. It's a nervous habit of hers. Some nights when I'd get home late I'd hear her vacuuming in the basement. She's looking me full in the face and doesn't say anything; she turns the vacuum off, rolls up the cord, and squeezes by me to shove it in the closet.

"It's almost six," she says, shutting the closet door. "You better get changed."

"Mom, I'm sorry." I stumble with my shoes.

"That's not enough, Jancy. You've got ten minutes. Church will be packed."

I drop my shoe and lean on the chair for balance.

"Have you been drinking?" She looks away. "Oh, Jancy, why do you have to do this?" She walks down the hallway and raps on my sister's door. She's younger, and doing okay. I haven't moved from the doorway. I'm standing with one shoe on while my mother rustles with her coat, the same one she's had since I was in high school, and they walk out the door, without me.

Pops is sleeping downstairs in one of those adjustable hospital beds. We've got a one-story house, and Mom moved him from their room to the basement so he'd be closer to a bathroom and the washing machine. Even though it's a finished basement, I don't like her shutting him down here. Like we're ashamed of him. When I first got home I said we should move him up into the living room so he could get better sun. Mom said, "You go right ahead."

"Okay," I said, and nothing happened.

All that's in the basement is a family room with a TV, the washer and dryer, and a small bathroom with one of those detachable shower heads. When I was little I'd go downstairs in the dark and hear the furnace, low and rumbly, hissing heat through the house. I'd pretend it was some sort of demon that would swallow me if I didn't turn the lights on. I'd move real slow, trying not to startle it. That's what I'm doing now. Inching my way in the dark, trying not to slip on the carpet.

Pops' bed is facing the television, but we don't have it on much because he always said TV gave him a headache. He listens to Lake Wobegon tapes, or mystery books on tape. I brought him some Agatha Christie cassettes, but I can't really tell if he likes them. When he first had the stroke, Mom said he could talk a little bit out

of the right side of his mouth. Tell her what he wanted. The past couple weeks, though, all he does is cry, or else just lie there. The doctors said he might be able to get up and walk someday, that he could still lead a fairly normal life. But they have to make sure his heart can take it, mom says. So he lies.

Mom scooted the La-Z-boy next to his bed so she could sit beside him. She's got a little table there that has a cup of water with a bendy straw, his pills in one of those day-by-day containers, and her cross-stitching stuff. She's halfway through a Happy Birthday pattern that she slips inside greeting cards. It alternates red and blue and yellow letters, but the yellow is hard to see. Right now it looks like it reads "Ha py ir."

I lean the glass of water over to him. "You want some water, Pops?" He keeps staring straight ahead, his mouth hanging open. I put the straw in his mouth and nothing happens. He's breathing though. I think maybe he's just not thirsty. I take a sip of his water. It's stale. I go to the sink, next to the washing machine, and pour him some new stuff.

His lips are puffed out and peeling pretty bad. Mom's got a tub of Vaseline nearby, and I smear a little on him. He's so small and sunken into the bed he looks like something got sucked out of him. I touch his hand and his skin's turned papery, flimsy, and I can roll the veins around inside his hands. He's in his sixties, sure, but I still need someone to holler at me and tell me to get my act together.

I start hiccuping and can taste popcorn in my mouth. I brush strands of his hair to one side, and drink a little more water.

I lean forward on my arms, putting them on that railing that goes around the bed. I can see the outline of his legs under the sheet, like sticks buried in snow. Mom has a red and brown afghan, his favorite, at his feet. He smells like Icy Hot, like old oatmeal, like those old yellow hallways at the nursing home. I tug the sheet up around him, covering his green and blue flannel pajamas, and smooth the wrinkles out just before I vomit all over him.

I look at what I've done and immediately feel sick again—this time I spin around and hit the wastebasket. The bed's a mess; everything's slowly spreading across the sheet, little splatters along the railing. And my pops, his waist and legs half covered. He hasn't moved, but I'm sure, inside, he's screaming.

I throw the afghan on the floor and pull the top sheet off. Now he's just lying there in his pajamas that are damp in the legs. It looks like he's wearing a flannel sack, the way they hang on him.

I pull the bottom sheet up, shift him to one side, and yank. I keep looking up at the basement window, watching for Mom's headlights.

"Uungh," he says, as I pull out the sheet.

I stop cold. "Pops, am I hurting you? I just wanted to change your sheets. Pops?"

"Uph." He flops back on the bed. I bundle the sheet up and press it close to my chest and wait there, in case he says anything else.

I set a warm, wet towel and one dry towel on the little table beside his bed. I start unbuttoning his flannel pajama top, talking to him the whole time.

"Okay Pops, I'm just gonna change your clothes here. I don't know what's going on." I unbutton the shirt and he looks hollow, like an old man, like people we would take communion to in the hospital. I put my arm around him and lean him towards me so I can get the sleeves off.

I don't want him completely naked at once—I tell myself it is because I don't want him to get colder than he has to, but really I don't want to see him completely naked. I don't feel right about it, even when he's like this. Maybe especially like this. I run the warm rag over his wrinkly arm. He never had much chest hair, and what's there is gray.

"Okay Pops, here's another shirt. Ready?"

The pants are tougher, but I manage to slide them down his waist and lift his legs so I can slide them off.

"We're gonna do this slow, Pops. Ready, up! Okay, good. I've got 'em. We're doing good." I run the warm towel over his leg. It's not all that wet, his leg, but it makes me feel better to know he's clean. I do the other leg, too. I'm careful not to look at him. Then I put the new pants on. Then the new sheets. When I'm finished wiping down the railing, I look at him, same expression, same vacant eyes. I want to slap him.

I pull the sheets up around him and put the afghan back at his feet. I rinse out the sheets and start loading them in the washer when I hear Mom coming downstairs.

“You’re awake, Maynard?” I can hear her say. “You changed your clothes, did . . .” She stops then, and calls out my name. She comes into the laundry room.

“Did he get sick?”

“I just cleaned him up,” I say over my shoulder.

She nods and touches me lightly, on the back, before she leaves the room.

Late that night, after everyone’s gone to bed, I get up and plug in the Christmas tree. I’m not wearing my glasses and the rainbow lights are round and blurry and bigger than they’re supposed to be. If I squint they all run together, like a neon rainbow. I’m wearing sweatpants and pull on a McKinley Elementary sweatshirt right when Hank raps twice on the front door and lets himself in. He takes his boots off and hangs his jacket on the back of the rocking chair. I’ve got my knees pulled up to my chest and he sits down and rubs my legs like he’s keeping them warm.

“Waiting for Santa?”

I nod.

“Me too,” he says, plucking a needle off the tree and chewing it like a toothpick. “I’m glad you called. I hate waiting up alone.”

We sit there in the dark, on the floor, our backs against the sofa. He puts his arm around me.

“Hey,” he says, touching my face. “Stop that.”