

KELLI DEETH

Pet the Spider

I HELPED LORETTA RAKE THE LAWN, which was covered in leaves. Loretta's Aunt Phyllis sat through the sliding glass doors watching *Magnum PI*, which she did in the afternoons. She had an illness which left her unable to move and Loretta said she had come from Scotland to die.

"Can we feed her?" I said.

"Feed who?"

"Your Aunt."

"You mean go within ten feet of her?" Loretta said, biting her lip, raking furiously, because her father, Mr. Beatty, was meticulous about his lawn.

"I'll feed her, you can watch."

"Whatever gives you a thrill."

Inside, Aunt Phyllis sat in her wheelchair, gazing out onto the backyard, her hair combed down over her eyes and ears.

"And we could fix her hair," I said. I wheeled the wheelchair into the kitchen, which Mrs. Beatty had recently painted red and white.

"Do I look like a beauty technician?" Loretta said. "You going to a dance Auntie?"

Aunt Phyllis groaned, and I smoothed her hair.

"Just for herself," I said.

"Aren't you a ball of fun," Loretta said.

I took a carton of strawberry ice cream out of Loretta's jammed

freezer. I thought she would like strawberry because it suggested femininity and delicacy.

I sat in the chair before her and spooned it into her mouth. I dabbed at the sides of her mouth with a serviette.

"She understands," I said.

"Two plus two," Loretta said. "Come on Aunt, hold up your fingers." The fingers were the last thing Aunt Phyllis was able to move, and they lay still in her lap. I thought she was trying.

"You can tell when she makes noise," I said. "I think."

"Aunt just likes to be heard. You should hear her go to the bathroom."

Aunt Phyllis's eyes moved slowly to Loretta and I could tell Loretta had gone too far, been cruel. Aunt Phyllis's eyes were almost closed. Loretta put her arm around Aunt Phyllis's neck, kissed her cheek repeatedly. Aunt Phyllis panted.

"She doesn't like that," I said.

"I love you Aunt," Loretta said, squeezing harder. "I'm sorry, Aunt." Loretta's voice was high, hyper.

"You're making it worse," I said.

Loretta was laughing, trying to catch her breath. "Oh, Aunt, you crack me up."

I spooned in more ice cream, trying to show her that I knew she was uncomfortable, and probably hated Loretta.

Loretta caught her breath, put her hands over Aunt Phyllis's ears. "Aunt, would you tell me if you could understand?"

I watched Aunt Phyllis's fingers. Instead, Aunt Phyllis closed her mouth.

"Watch," I said. "Is your husband dead or alive?" I watched the fingers—moving a finger up meant yes. But they remained still on her thigh. Mrs. Beatty said she was losing the ability to move even those.

"She's decided it's nappy time." Loretta kissed the top of Aunt Phyllis's head, rolled her into the living-room. Loretta lifted one arm and I lifted the other. When her weight was resting on my thigh, I felt a warm liquid, almost hot, spread on my leg, out and down.

For a second, studying Aunt Phyllis's face, I thought that I had been chosen for this act, that it was a message. Aunt Phyllis was telling me to leave her alone. When I looked at her, her flat eyes expressed vast loathing and I was not spared.

2

My mother and William were sitting in the living-room as they did every week night, and read separate portions of the newspaper. My mother drank an Irish cream that William had brewed and her lips tightened for the heat. William sucked a red wine, his eyes drooping at the print, his face red. In the evenings, you could smell his sweat, but my mother told me that in some countries, nobody really cared how you smelled. She added that William would die for each and any of us. I imagined his death by sword.

Downstairs, my brother, Andrew, played the bongo drums that William had brought back from a business trip. Andrew's friend, Dan, whose hair stuck out over his ears, leaned against the couch, operated on bass strings. Neither of them looked at me. I sat against the wall, writing in math answers on a piece of paper.

When they broke, I asked Dan if he had brought his motorcycle, though I had walked past it.

"How else would I get here?" he said, his foot tapping the carpet.

"Can I go for a ride?" I said.

Dan struck three loud chords. "Got your motorcycle licence?"

"I mean, can you take me for a ride?"

Andrew did a drum roll on the bongos. "Leah, leave us alone."

"Yeah, I'll take you for a ride."

Amplified chords drowned out whatever I might have said. He came through with the promise.

"Hold on tight," my mother said, leaning against the table on her fist.

"Daniel looks like a take-charge man," William offered.

Once Dan had the helmet on, I could not see his face. Up to the stop sign, Dan drove at a normal speed, but once he turned the corner, he sped up, and my neck was thrown back. I wrapped my arms all the way around his waist, and when he slowed down, I kept them there.

When he dropped me off at the end of the driveway, I could not see his eyes.

"Thanks," I said. I touched his hand, which was cold, and remained perfectly still.

"See ya," Dan said, revving.

He would see me again.

Before bed, I did what I always did: I kissed my mother's cheek, covered in thin, dark down. It was like kissing something

weaker than myself, something I couldn't protect from harm. William was soothing his back by lying on the Indian carpet, the wine glass propped on his chest, empty, his thin legs crossed. He would not expect a good-night kiss, or even a word, because he never got either.

3

After school, I wanted to go to Loretta's, so I could feed Aunt Phyllis. I wanted to have some sort of conversation with her. I wanted to know how she felt about death, if she was scared to die.

"Why can't we go to your house?" Loretta said. "Your house is bigger."

"Tomorrow," I said. My brother and Dan had skipped grade eleven and gone to Toronto for the afternoon, and wouldn't be jamming.

"I'd like to see your brother jam," Loretta said. "Maybe he can teach me how to play."

"Maybe."

Inside, I saw Aunt Phyllis's head first, the scalp visible. Her gaze was focussed on *Magnum PI*. Mrs. Beatty, who took care of her during the day, was pulling knee-highs onto Aunt Phyllis's legs.

"Keep her while I go to the IGA," Mrs. Beatty said.

"I'm not a babysitter," Loretta said.

Mrs. Beatty slipped her bare feet into sandals, though it was autumn.

"Spare me your tongue."

Mrs. Beatty slammed the door.

I rested my hands on the handles of the wheelchair, and smelled old skin, a salty, horrid smell. "She needs a bath," I said, firmly.

"There are some things I don't do," Loretta said. "I don't get near naked bodies."

"But how would you feel?"

"I would have a vodka and orange juice," Loretta said. "Nothing wrong with a little dirt."

"She needs a bath," I said. I did not look forward to seeing her without clothes on, but there was a part of me that had to know, had to know what it would look like, be like—I had to go through with it.

Loretta turned off the television with her toes. "If I help you, we watch you brother jam for three days in a row. Deal?"

"Why do you want to see him so bad?"

"I have my romantic future to consider," Loretta said.

"Fine." It suddenly occurred to me that I should ask Aunt Phyllis if she wanted a bath, but something told me it was safer to assume, that when it involved dirt and a body, you had the right to assume. I rolled her into the bathroom, onto the pink bath mat, and after that, I avoided her eyes; they were bright, glaring.

I ran warm water, not too hot, and I wondered if I were Aunt Phyllis, would I want a bath, or would I just want to be left alone?

I squeezed in bubble-bath.

"A bubble bath," I said, smiling at Aunt Phyllis, trying to appear light-hearted, friendly. Because giving a bath was an act of compassion. But Aunt Phyllis's face hung, her mouth tugged downward, as if she were trying to figure something out, trying to listen. I had the sudden sensation that Aunt Phyllis could read my mind—that she knew I knew that it was wrong. I should ask. Aunt Phyllis would think hateful things about me—that I was cruel, that I knew better, but didn't care.

I tried to pretend that it was just a bath, just a bubble bath. Aunt Phyllis would want to be clean and I had been compassionate enough to notice.

I took an arm and Loretta took another arm of the heavy, pink sweater, and when we pulled it off, Aunt Phyllis's hair rose with static electricity. I kept my eyes on Loretta's face, which was scrunched up. Her bra was lacy, and her breasts sagged in it like water balloons. There was an added intensity to Aunt Phyllis's eyes. She hated me. She would kill me if she could.

I was not sure I could carry on, and felt like vomiting.

"Flabby," Loretta said.

"She understands," I said.

"You know I love you, Aunty," Loretta said, pulling Aunt Phyllis's head to her own breasts. "I'm just teasing you because you have a bit of flab."

"One day this will happen to you," I said.

Loretta frowned, bit her red lipstick.

"You going to take it off?"

"We have to."

"Go ahead," Loretta said.

"I'm thinking."

"She's getting cold."

"Why can't you?"

"Who wanted to give her the bath?"

The word bath helped me remember our mission, and that's what it was, a mission. My eyes fell on Aunt Phyllis's pink arms, the diamond on her ring finger. Someone had loved her.

"Fine," I said. I leaned forward, got my arms behind Aunt Phyllis's back, and unclipped the bra. As I pulled it off, gently, Aunt Phyllis hummed in a high voice, an angry whine. That she hated me could not be mistaken.

"Do the rest," Loretta said. "And hurry before the water gets cold. Would you want to take a bath in cold water?"

I could not possibly turn back. It was my fault Aunt Phyllis was half-dressed and I would have to go through with it, get it over with.

I grabbed Aunt Phyllis's burgundy slacks around the waist, and pulled, the large white underwear with them. I turned my mind into a complete blank, a whiteness that allowed for no feeling. My eyes saw things I refused to absorb. Helpless things, a bright pink body, thin legs, grotesque helplessness. I would punish myself for seeing what I had no right to see.

We each peeled down a knee-high.

Loretta spoke in a kind, strained voice. "All right, honey, just take a deep breath while we lower you in."

My throat was closed. I simply performed my duty. I lifted her under one arm, under one leg, using the muscles in my back to hold her in a standing position, while she leaned her full weight on us. We moved her towards the tub, sat her on the rim. We slipped her legs over, then both lifted either side of her, lowered her into the tub. Suds floated flat in the water.

Loretta soaped her. "You're going to smell so pretty," she said. Aunt Phyllis was sitting in the water, getting soaped, and I was responsible. Loretta soaped her legs, her breasts, her bum, then quickly and brutally in the spot I could not look at. Aunt Phyllis was dying and couldn't move and there was nothing I could do.

I tried to do what Loretta did easily. I kissed Aunt Phyllis on the back of the head. "Don't worry."

4

My brother and I drove my mother and William to the airport, because they were catching a plane to West Palm Beach, to talk, my mother said, about adult things, privately. The whole drive to the airport, I stared at the back of my mother's head. The skull was so frail. There was nothing protecting it. My mother could experience a sudden blow, the worst pain, her head smashed to little bits on a strange road. William would leave.

He bought everyone lemon Danishes while we waited at the airport, two hours early, at William's insistence.

I held my mother's hand.

"My fingers are longer," I said.

"Yes, they are." My mother opened wide for the Danish. "You're the woman of the house now. That means keeping things in order." She chewed, swallowed. "Do you think you can do that?"

"Yup."

My mother patted my hand. "You're becoming a woman."

They had to leave.

My brother sprouted tears when he hugged my mother. He told her not to worry about anything. William hugged Andrew. When he looked at me, I crossed my arms.

I hugged my mother and her flesh seeped into my own.

"Bye, my lovey," my mother said.

"Bye."

I waved to William, whose mouth was a straight, pink line.

Andrew and I drove along the 401 and the only sound was Andrew chewing a Danish, the last in the box. He ate with his mouth open.

At home, I had the impression that the house leaked.

"I'm the boss now," Andrew said, getting out of the car. "You want to do anything, you ask me."

"I'm not asking anything." It had gotten suddenly colder, and the wind was stronger, pushing at my ear.

"Then you pay the price."

Inside, I kicked off my shoes and went immediately to my mother's bedroom. I got under the covers, breathed in the smell of her pillow. I could even smell William. Closing my eyes, I wrapped their electric blanket around me.

5

Andrew and Dan smoked a weed joint through the kitchen window. Andrew blew rings. "I bet she likes it up the bum."

Dan imitated the sound of a squeal.

I grabbed the Windex from below the sink.

"Who?"

"A pig," Dan said.

"Get out of here," Andrew said.

I wiped the glass in the front hall.

Wiping, I heard the clatter of Loretta's bicycle wheel, then the rustle of a grocery bag.

Loretta appeared at the door wearing blue eyeshadow that gave her eyes the shape of wings.

"Ha," I said, which was how we said hello.

"Ha," Loretta said. She gave me a significant look, raising the IGA bag. She had been able to get the booze, the Old Grand Dad kept in her liquor cabinet.

Before we did anything, I led us into the bathroom. I put on red lipstick.

In my room, we drank Old Grand Dad in mugs and ate chocolate icing out of the can with our fingers—Loretta had bought it.

"Are they going to play?" Loretta said, lying back on my bed.

"They play every day."

Loretta emptied her mug. "I think we should join the party."

I emptied my mug.

We strolled into the kitchen.

Dan, wearing a white T-shirt imprinted with a rig, rolled another joint at the kitchen table, his thick fingers performing a delicate task. Dan dabbed mustard onto their bologna sandwiches. When he turned around, he told me to wash that crap off my face.

Loretta said, "You're just jealous because you wish you could wear it."

"Who asked you, bird nose?"

Loretta grabbed the back of his hair. "Who you calling bird nose?"

"Bird nose." Andrew took her hand and held it behind her back. "Bird nose." He laughed. Then he pushed her away.

Loretta was out of breath.

"Smell my breath," she said to me. "Can you smell anything?"

"Ooh. The little kids have been into the al-co-hol."

Dan sparked the joint and offered it to me. His hands shook and I took it as a sign of deference. Only nervous people shook.

Andrew grabbed my wrist.

"Drop it."

"No."

"One puff," he said. "That's it."

I inhaled as deeply as I could. Then I breathed it in again, let it out, breathed it in again. I passed it to Loretta, who blew the smoke out without inhaling.

Dan told her not to waste it.

My mouth grew numb, and my eyes felt heavy.

Andrew took three short puffs in a row.

The whiskey must have made Loretta bold because she began to dance with Andrew. She draped onto his back, wriggled against it. Though I'd only had three puffs, Dan was small and far away.

"Your eyes are red," Dan said to me. "Holy. Are your eyes ever red?"

I felt myself smiling and my brother told me to stop.

Loretta would not let go of Andrew's arms. "When you teach me the bongos," she said. "When you teach me the bongos."

"You're not bongo material," Andrew said. He grabbed her breast and squeezed and Loretta covered her chest and leaned against the fridge, speechless. Then she jumped onto his back.

"Hi ya."

Dan's cigarettes were on the table and I slid one out of the package. "I'll show you something," I said.

"What do you want to show me?"

"Something."

Dan tapped the corner of his cigarette pack against his cheek. I stood. I had nothing to show him. I would put my arms around him and rest my head against his chest. I would tell him I loved him. His hands would rest on the small of my back. He would love me, too.

He tapped his fingers against the table.

I led the way.

While I put my shoes on in the hallway, I heard Andrew say to Loretta, "Let go, lesbo."

“Lesbo?” Loretta’s voice was high.

Dan said, “Everyone knows you’re a lesbo.”

Then suddenly Dan was in the hallway. He straightened a picture. “What are you going to show me?”

“Surprise,” I said. I opened the front door. Before I opened the gate to the backyard, I looked behind me to make sure Dan was following. He was, fingers slid into his front pants pocket. I realized in that instant that nothing had anything to do with love. It was something else, deep down, that made me feel like I had to do things, that I had no choice.

I sat on the picnic table.

Dan stood in front of me, flicking his lighter repeatedly and I smelled the clean smell of his jacket.

“It’s a joke,” I said. “I don’t have a surprise.”

“You have one.”

“I don’t.”

“You dragged me out here for nothing?”

“I like your hands,” I said. Then I felt dizzy; the alcohol was churning in my stomach.

“My hands?”

“They’re nice.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re weird?” Dan said. He held his hands out before his eyes.

“I’m not weird,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “You are.”

“I’m like everyone else.”

“Trust me,” he said. “You’re not.”

He tapped a cigarette out of his shirt. His hands were less kind, more selfish

“I’m older than I look,” I said.

“Stop making me laugh.”

I told him I was not afraid to do anything, and as I said it, I felt it to be true.

“You mean you’re not afraid to go scuba diving?”

“Other kinds of things.”

“What do you want to do?” Dan said. His smoke rings shook.

“Things.”

I lay on my back on the picnic table, which was cold and damp. “I’m tired,” I said. I closed my eyes.

“You’re not weird,” Dan said. I opened my eyes. Dan placed

a hand on my forehead, then held it over my eyes. Then he slid it over my mouth. "Your face is perfect," he said.

He slid his hand across my neck, down my chest, rested it on my left breast, squeezed tightly, so that my skin burned.

6

Inside, I finished off the chocolate icing using a spoon, so I could get a lot in my mouth. I found the whiskey mug, empty.

I closed the bedroom door behind me.

In the living-room, Loretta had Andrew pinned, her legs holding down his arms. Every time he got a hand free, he gave Loretta a purple knurple.

Dan reclined in the easy chair, and all I could see was his shaking foot.

I left the living room and stood at the kitchen window. Inside two panes of glass, a spider waved his leg.

Where was my mother? On the end of a hotel bed, her hands gesturing, trying to reason with William. Or maybe she was saying, I give up. William would leave.

I sat in the vinyl kitchen chair and pretended to be paralyzed. It took all of my concentration to imagine, to feel that I could not move anything, even if I had to. I breathed deeply, kept every muscle still, until I was paralyzed. Anyone can do whatever they want, I thought. I can't move.

I wanted to move. I stood and went to the window where winter would be coming. In the living-room, Dan was blaring "Hot Knife Boogie," his favourite song. The floor shook, the glass vibrated.

It wasn't winter yet: somehow that meant I still had time. It wasn't over for me, and I shivered at the thought, a shiver in my chest, from somewhere deep, permanent, felt only when it wanted to be. In the window, the spider was in the same place, but balled up, as they almost always were, and I petted it through the glass.