

Muslin

by Lydia Copeland

I stab myself on the lemon tree. I'm after Sweet Peas, the pink one in the red clay along the bank where the kitchen scraps are tossed three times a day. "Here, Tom!" says Ma, and the cats come bouncing from beneath the house or from inside the boat that sits in the sunny part of the yard. I squeeze my finger until a globe of blood swells out.

There are flowers on the velour of the couch, golden and orange like the height of summer. Aunt Livy nurses Little Joe there, while Big Joe sleeps in the guest room where the blue curtains blow in the air conditioning vent and the shelves of pickles turn mushy in their jars.

Pop and his boys swing golf clubs, hit balls off the car jack and into the dry creek bed, where I used to pour kettles of water wishing it would rain and the creek would run again. Wild onions on my jeans and dirt, the curl of new leaves in the garden. It's summer, but I always picture fall and winter and burning garbage piles, brick chimneys. Pop's words like butterscotch around the dove house. All the men stoking the fire and us cousins sleeping on the carpet by the hearth all night, watching the kenneling split and crack and glow toward ash. Eyes closed while the walls creak in the wind.

Pop gives Ma's injections in the bedroom with the door closed. I want to see. It is part of my fear of needles. The door from there has been removed or perhaps it was never there. Ma wears a hat. It is red and hand knit. Pop holds her arm steady. He keeps her supplies in the dresser drawer. She has a baby doll in there as well that looks like a real baby.

Pop smells whiskery, like Listerine and aftershave and car engines, like the orange and blue Gulf Gas Station ring that keeps the key to the bunk house where more relatives live. A husband and wife, newlyweds. They sleep in a skinny bed with tools hanging on the walls and a film of motor oil over everything. They have piles of mail on tables and bicycle chains and discarded books from the

library. Dante and Bluebeard, the Clue in the Diary, the Wind in the Door.

There are apples and chocolate snack pies in a bowl on the kitchen table. The aunts embroider there. They knit baby socks and wear Harley Davidson t-shirts and jeans. They talk about their bosses, some lady in line at the bank, a rude driver. The newlyweds have matching chain wallets. The husband has a mustache, is rail thin. The wife's hair is like Tenille's of the Captain and Tenille.

I sneak around, watching the aunts mother their babies, someone slicing an onion over a pot of water, the gray cats through the bedroom window walking in the garden. Some afternoons I see Ma rocking that baby on the edge of the bed and whispering into its muslin face, its Christening gown like the sway of a candle flame.

Outside I see the daytime moon, and it is faint as a fingerprint. My cousins have up-turned the biggest rocks and removed all the Sow bugs. The land is damp and red, and the trees feel wet to the center.

I put my finger in my mouth and suck and lick until the blood is gone. It is easy to make it go away, like rolling out dough, like pulling plums out of pies.

