

The Fountain

by Savannah Schroll Guz

When Kyle Barden was forced to reach into the toilet at Larry's Bar to retrieve his company-paid cell phone and his hand emerged bearing the index finger he had lost at the age of 22, he backed against the stall door and looked at the restored digit with uncomprehending horror. He shook the water off and held it aloft, away from his body, gazing at it in silent, slack-jawed bewilderment for several long moments before he turned around and tussled, one-handed with the stall door latch.

The latch was a rusting dial-turn fastener that had long since broken, leaving a guillotine-style slide lock that was perfect for getting a finger stuck. Barden's own finger, the one he was not holding up, was too broad to stick into the latch, and his ability to finesse it sideways was curtailed by a sudden attack of nerves.

"Let me out, goddam it!" Barden felt he couldn't get out of the enclosed space fast enough. He wasn't even certain he wanted to be close to his own hand.

The lock finally slid to, and Barden came running out of the bathroom, his pants buttoned up but his fly down, and his plaid shirt tail peeking through it. He threw himself against the bar, holding his hand up to show the owner Larry, who was drawing a beer.

"Jesus Christ, Larry. I had a miracle happen in that bathroom."

Larry was slow to look Barden's way, despite his animated movements. "A particularly good one, was it?"

"No! No! Look at my hand! Look at my whole freaking arm!"

Larry looked at him with a sense of alarm, thinking that perhaps he might be liable for something. Barden's arm, usually the width of a woman's calf and covered with hair, was now only sparsely coated. It was much thinner, its musculature undefined.

"My finger's back!"

"You joker," Larry waved him off. Take off the mitt. Halloween's not for another two weeks.

Another person came over to Barden, reached up and yanked on the finger, pulling Barden with it. "It's real," the man nodded. He brought his beer with him and took a sip, unaffected by the news.

Larry looked at Barden's arm for a moment, at the finger, which Barden held up in a way that suggested he was trying to get a waiter's attention or hail a cab.

"I even have feeling in it," Barden said, excitedly, wrapping the fingers of his other hand around it and squeezing.

"What did you do in there?" Larry asked, still uncertain.

"I just went in to take a piss--I can't usually go at a urinal. But I dropped my cell phone, and I had to reach into the john for it."

Larry grimaced.

"I *had* to. It's Teledyne's."

"And you reached in with that hand?" Larry pointed to the hand Barden's was still holding aloft.

"Yeah."

Everyone was silent for a moment. They looked to Larry. Larry gazed at the floor, thinking.

"I don't want this to come back and bite me in the ass. How do you know for sure this happened here?"

"Aw, Jesus, Larry. Where else could it have happened? I mean I came in here without my finger. I stuck it in that toilet in there, and it's back. I mean, what..."

"Bar's closed!" Larry yelled suddenly, looking out over the barroom tables.

"What?" said people, some muttering. "What'd he say?"

Another, piped up, "It's the middle of the freakin' game, Lar! I can't go home now! The wife won't leave me in peace."

"I said the bar's closed. Everyone has to go," Larry made wide sweeping motions with his arms, as if herding a group of flapping chickens.

People left. One or two spit at the threshold as they passed over it. Barden did not move.

"What about my hand? Ain't you surprised..." Barden leaned further over the padded bar edge. "I mean, ain't you..."

"Kyle, if you're worried, go to the emergency room. I don't know what else to tell you."

"But..."

"Come on, Kyle. Go home. I'm closing."

Larry escorted Barden out, shut the door, locked it, and turned off the neon in the windows. He listened as diesels fired up and trucks peeled out onto the road. He heard gravel fly against the building as guys hit their accelerators.

Larry stalked back to the bathroom. There was just one stall. Actually, there was just one bathroom. He didn't get very many women in his bar, and the ones who did were either there to find their husbands or were hard enough to use the facilities he offered. Anyone who didn't like those could go back behind the building.

He opened the stall door and gazed into the bowl, whose porcelain was no longer white. The seat—which he knew to be cracked, a real ass-pincher and a liability to be absolutely truthful—was up, and the rim was speckled with scummy yellow splotches. A brown ring wound around the inside of the bowl at water level. Larry could see trails of rust coming from deposits around the fill indentations. He had, on occasion, come in to use the john himself, but more often, he just unzipped at one of the two urinals. And, he usually sent whoever drifted in and out of the habitually open bartender position, in to deal with its general upkeep. He knew they weren't thorough, maybe didn't even clean it at all, but a sanitary restroom was not what his customers came for. His bar didn't attract polite company. Beside the ancient, brownish scrub brush were half a dozen dead insects. Thick grayish cobwebs hung from the brush handle, and someone had recently played target practice with it because beads of liquid clung to these dusty swags that looked, he thought, just like Spanish moss.

He thought for awhile about what to do. He had seen, with his own eyes, Barden's new finger. He had not, however, gone over and touched it himself—seen if it was actually warm, like a human finger should be. But Joe Prescott had, if he could trust Joe, liquored up as he usually was. Still, he didn't figure Joe for lying on purpose, or playing any tricks.

Larry heard a loud snap and a high pitched screech come from the barroom. A few hours before opening, he had painstakingly set a mouse trap, using peanut butter on a toothpick. With everyone suddenly gone, Clyde—as Larry had begun calling his nemesis because he'd eluded a variety of traps for so long that he'd earned himself a name—had been caught and would no longer leave his calling cards on the countertops or chew his way through bulk packages of salted nuts.

When Larry got out to the bar, he saw that Clyde, who was still screeching—an ear piercing expression of pain and terror—had been caught by the joint of his hind leg. Larry stopped for a moment and looked down at Clyde, who was visibly suffering. The furry body seemed detached from its foot entirely, the flesh around the joint smashed flat by the trap's unforgiving metal bar. The sight, combined with the sound of the creature's screaming, struck Larry directly in the gut.

Without thinking, he hunkered down and attempted to lift the bar, not considering that he might be bitten. For a moment, the mouse was silent, his black eyes unblinking. They looked like two onyx beads that reflected, in miniature, the overhead fluorescent lights. It took some doing, but Larry got the bar to lift, and the mouse emitted one sharp, but breathy screech and again went entirely silent. Larry picked him up and looked at him, petting his head with his index finger and being careful to support his dangling appendage.

He sat like this for several moments, in silence, while he felt Clyde's unsteady breathing. He wondered whether Clyde might die and regretted the void this would leave. Sure, he'd hated to see the caraway seed droppings on the bar top and the sticky dried-up puddles of mouse urine near the bottles of booze. It had pissed Larry off when he'd found bulk boxes of nuts laid to waste, but Larry now

felt that the agony he'd inflicted was not commensurate with the crimes committed.

Larry got up, looked behind the counter, and found a role of twine. He was somewhat surprised by Clyde's sustained calm and now realized that any other animal might, instinctively, have sunk its teeth into him, especially after Larry had disturbed his crushed leg. Instead, Clyde allowed Larry to do whatever he wanted. So, Larry tied a string around the mouse's mid-section, just below the front legs, and he carried Clyde to the bathroom. Having seen what had happened to Barden, he would hazard an experiment with Clyde.

Larry bent over the bowl, and taking a supporting hand out from under Clyde, he baptized the mouse in the toilet water, holding the piece of twine like a teabag string. When Larry pulled Clyde up, he realized the mouse had fallen through the make-shift harness and was now in the bowl itself, struggling and splashing but entirely whole again, his broken leg now moving normally. Larry staggered backwards. Clyde was two times smaller than before, just larger than a Brazil nut. Larry ran back to the bar and grabbed a cocktail strainer, and with it, was able to fish Clyde out. But by then, what lay rescued on the cocktail strainer was a tiny, hairless, translucent-pink creature whose eyes were not yet open.

Larry was struck dumb.

In the barroom, Larry found an old matchbox. He blew the tiny splinters and specks of wood out of it and laid Clyde inside it. Clyde twitched and lay still, his tiny claws grasping at nothing. Larry saw his eyes were like swollen purple spheres behind his sealed lids, like someone had punched him. Larry felt a stab of remorse. This was genuine helplessness.

Larry then rinsed out an old breast pocket bottle of Southern Comfort and went back to the toilet, where he hunkered down and

submerged it in the bowl, just allowing the tips of his fingers to touch the water. The bottle gurgled itself half full—all the further it would fill without Larry plunging his whole hand in the water along with the bottle—and Larry screwed the metal cap back on. The cracks in his fingers, which usually opened up during the winter from washing glasses by hand and spending so much time with the damp bar rag, had closed. He examined this for a few moments and then wiped his hands on his shirt. He picked up the matchbox carrying Clyde, slipped the half-full pony bottle into an inner pocket of his denim jacket, switched off the lights and headed for his truck.

By the time he got home, an early snow was swirling downward, looking like plucked chicken feathers. He kept both hands around the matchbox to keep out the draft, instinctively knowing the cold would kill Clyde, small as he was now.

When he got into the trailer, stomping his feet on the metal stoop outside the threshold, his head was coated with fat white flakes. His wife, Donna, who was lounging on the caved in velveteen couch sorted at him, “You look like an old man!”

“What?” Larry said, looking at her with alarm.

“Your hair....it's covered in snow. It makes you look old.”

Larry put his hand on his thinning hair, and the snow melted instantly. He felt the cold liquid trickle down his scalp towards the back of his head and down towards the root of each ear. He went to the bathroom in the back of the trailer, examined his features. His hair was steel-colored again. He showed no signs of having any aged any more than the last time he'd confronted himself in the mirror. He went back out into the living area, where Donna still gazed indifferently at the television but was now sucking on a cigarette.

“Where's mom?” Larry asked.

Donna turned and looked at him, as if he were stupid, "Where she always is."

Larry turned again and went to the room adjacent to the bathroom. The light was off. "Mom?" he said into the darkness.

She did not answer. Larry turned the light on. He saw she was lying under the covers, her hand under her pillow. She was turned towards him. Her eyes were open.

"Mom?"

"What, Lawrence. What is it?"

Larry sat down at the foot end of her bed. He saw that his father's framed army portrait was on the pillow next to her, on the side of the bed you couldn't see from the door. Another long, overstuffed pillow was positioned beneath it, running the length of his mother's back.

"I brought you something."

She looked up at him with her milky blue eyes, the pupils even in this dim light, the size of pin pricks. "What is it, Lawrence?"

Larry put out his hand and uncurled his fingers. The matchbox lay on his palm. His mother glanced at him. He nodded in the direction of the matchbox, "Careful."

She sat up and took it. Larry added, "You can't tell Donna."

She looked up at him uncertainly, but nodded.

Sliding open the box, she saw the baby mouse and her face lit up. "He's tiny!"

"His name is Clyde."

"Clyde," she repeated, continuing to look. "I can see his little stomach going in and out. His eyes are big aren't they?"

"They're not open yet."

His mother looked at him and creases formed at her eyes. He'd made her happy. "I can keep him?"

"Yes, Mom. You can keep him. We'll have to find a way to feed him. And we can't tell Donna. Ever."

His mother put her finger to her lips and made a shushing noise. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead. She looked up and smiled at him.

Larry went to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. He was looking for cotton balls, but he didn't dare ask Donna. That might get her up off the sofa and asking questions. He couldn't find any cotton, so he brought the box of tissues back to his mother's room. When he got there, she was holding the box, stroking the little mouse with her index finger, and singing what sounded like the same song line over and over, "Hänsel und Gretel verlieben sich im Wald, es war so finster und auch so bitterkalt."

He sat down on the bed again and his mother stopped singing. "I've never had a pet before," she said.

Larry took out the bottle of toilet water and slipped off his coat. His mother went back to stroking the mouse.

"Maybe don't touch him so much, Mom. He's had a hard day. Maybe let him sleep for awhile."

She put the box down on her nightstand and Larry took the lid off the bottle, stuck a tissue over the lip, and turned it briskly upside down. His mother folded her hands on her lap and smiled at him. "Now," he said, "I want you to stay still and maybe look up towards the ceiling. Okay?"

"Okay," she answered.

He took the dampened tissue and dabbed it around her eyes. She closed them on instinct, so he blotted the lids as well. Her wrinkles began to fade as quickly as the water evaporated. He rewetted his tissue and repeated what he had done. His heart began beating rapidly in his chest. The wrinkles seemed to disappear all together. He put the tissue down and turned her face toward the light. "Good Lord."

"What is it, Lawrence?" she blinked her eyes open.

"Wait here," he said, as if she would follow him.

In the bathroom, he went looking for a hand mirror. "Donna?"

"What?" she yelled from the living room. Her tone was flat, nasal, turned down at the end to communicate her annoyance.

"Do we have a hand mirror?"

"A what?" He heard her get up. Her feet hit the floor and he felt her heavy steps. "What are you doing?" Her wide frame suddenly filled the bathroom door. She had her hand high on the jamb. Her cigarette was gone, but he smelled it on her.

"A hand mirror. I need a hand mirror."

"What for? You checking your privates or something?"

"Do we have one?" He straightened, looking at her without humor.

"Try the shelves behind the door. Somewhere back there. What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

She continued to watch him around the door itself. "See," she said pointing a long fake lacquered nail and chubby finger towards the lower shelf, "there."

He grasped the mirror, came from behind the door and moved past Donna, who melodramatically flattened herself against the wall adjacent to the door jamb as he passed. She followed him and loomed then in his mother's doorway.

Larry's mother turned and looked her way. She said, "Hello, Donna," as if this were the first time she'd seen Donna all day.

Donna said nothing for a moment. She squinted and then craned her neck forward. "Did something happen to her?"

Larry did not answer her. He put the mirror in his mother's hands, and she gazed into it. "That's me," she said. She touched her cheekbone. You could no longer see the veins beneath her eyes. The skin underneath looked less like vellum. "Are these my eyes?" she asked, looking up at Larry.

"Yes, Mama," he smiled, tears suddenly welling up. One slipped over his lower lid, and he brushed it away before Donna could see.

“What happened to her?” Donna demanded. “She doesn't have those black circles under her eyes anymore.” Donna spied the bottle next to the matchbox on the nightstand. “You been giving her gin?”

Larry shook his head.

“What the hell happened to her then?” Donna demanded.

“Youth,” Larry looked directly at his wife now. “She's getting younger, Donna.”

“You're drunk!” Donna said with disgust. She waved him off and went back to the sofa.

Larry's mother smiled at him and lay down the mirror. “Do it again,” she said.

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When Larry got to the bar the next day, Kyle Barden's wife stood outside the front door with her arms crossed. Larry's heart fell into his shoes.

“I want to talk to you,” she said, coming towards Larry.

“Hello, Brianne.”

“Don't you hello, Brianne, me. I want to know what's in that john water.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know damn well what I mean.”

“Brianne, I don't know.”

“I want to see that toilet, Larry. I want to see it for myself.”

Larry got out his keys, and sorted through them, searching for the one that would fit in the door. “Is Kyle all right?”

“Of course he's all right. Can't shut up about it. And I just can't believe it.”

Inside, Brianne stood looking at the scummy toilet through the stall door. Her face had twisted into an involuntary grimace, “Oh, now that's just disgusting.”

Larry stood with his hands in his pockets, quietly.

Brianne crossed her arms. “I don't....I don't know.”

Larry continued to remain quiet, continued to direct his gaze to the toilet, and was prepared to shrug innocently, like he didn't believe it either.

“I want some. To try. But you're going to have to get it for me.”

“Me?” Larry looked at her like she'd pushed him.

“Yes. I'm not sticking my hand in that scum factory.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I don't know yet.”

“It's my toilet, so it's my water. And I'm not gonna give you any of it.”

“Then I'll sue you.”

Larry hooted. "For what? Not giving you toilet water?"

"For a contaminated restroom. Who knows what you could get here. I'll make somethin' up. You'll see."

Larry waved her off. "Go home, Brianne."

"I won't! Not until I get the water."

"No," Larry said. "Now go on home."

Brianne looked at him, set her jaw and narrowed her eyes. She raised her chin as she passed him, making sure to throw out an elbow as she went. It knocked him off balance slightly. But he heard the door slam, and he knew he was alone.

He began to empty and rinse out bottles of Pucker, Goldschlager, and Old Granddad. He got a rubber dish glove from beneath the bar sink and went to the bathroom, where he took the crud-covered lid off the toilet tank and filled each bottle until it was full. He flushed several times to refill the tank in the process. He put each of the bottles into three divided liquor store boxes and carried them to the maintenance door at the back, just a few steps from the bathroom. He then swept the foot-printed snow away from the rear entrance and away from the area around which his truck stood.

Around four, Larry began making a large cardboard sign with a Sharpie marker that read: "CLOSED Until Further Notice". Finished, he opened the door to put the sign up and saw that a van, a car, and Kyle Barden's Dodge Ram were pulling into the parking lot, like a miniature parade. A helmet-haired man in a suit and tie jumped out of the van's passenger side and began making his way towards Larry. He was carrying a tape recorder and what looked like a steno pad. The back of the van said, "Channel 11 Action News".

Brianne jumped out of the passenger side of Kyle's Dodge. "That's him! That's Larry Wallace," she yelled.

Larry stood there, his arms at his sides, "Brianne, what is this?"

A camera man was suddenly in front of him, taking footage. The helmet-haired man pointed a microphone at him, "I'm Lou McCafferty with WKAD. Tell us about the miracle that happened last night, Mr. Wallace."

"There's no miracle," Larry shook his head. "This is all a huge misunderstanding."

"Mr. Barden has shown us evidence of the restoration of his lost finger."

"Evidence?"

"Yes, before and after photographs. May we take footage of the restroom?"

"No. No, we're closed indefinitely. See the sign?"

Brianne moved towards the reporter. "See! He's hiding something! Why would he close? This place is filled every night. Kyle's here at least four times a week. It's not like he doesn't have business."

"Fine. Fine!" Larry said, putting up his hands. "You can see the bathroom. It's just a bathroom! There's nothing special about it."

They moved inside, through the bar area and into the small hallway that lead to the bathroom. "I don't think we'll all fit," said Larry, holding up a hand to detain Brianne.

The reporter and the camera man moved past Larry, who followed them in. If the area disgusted the reporter or the camera man, they made no exhibition of their displeasure. "The stall. Right, Mr. Barden? Not the urinals."

Kyle came in, squeezing past Larry and moved toward the stall. Larry was forced back into the doorway. "Yes, Lou, that's right," said Kyle. "I was right inside when it happened."

Before Larry even knew what was happening, Kyle was inside the stall once more, where Larry could no longer see him. He heard the sound of water moving, splashing around, and the look on Lou McCafferty's face changed entirely. It was not revulsion that Larry saw, but a genuine off-guard amazement.

Larry knew what Kyle had done. When Kyle emerged from the stall, both his hands and forearms matched. They were both almost hairless, the musculature light and undefined. The reporter was immediately on his cell phone. "We need live feed as soon as you can get it here," he said. "Special Live at Five Coverage."

A van with a telescoping satellite dish arrived and replaced the previous van, and a producer was on board this time, giving directions. Power cords ran from the bathroom, down the hall, through the barroom and out into the snowy parking lot. Tall standing lights shone down on the toilet in its tiny stall and began to heat up the little bathroom. Larry worried about the low ceiling tiles and wondered if they were made of asbestos or a flammable material.

He wandered around the barroom with his hands in his pockets, jingling change, clicking the nails of his thumb and forefinger off one another. Lou McCafferty was moving back from the parking lot

to the bathroom, and Larry caught his arm as he went, "Hey, uh, when will you all be wrapping this up?"

The man looked at him for a moment, as if he didn't understand him, "Mr. Wallace, you have a genuine miracle in your bathroom. This isn't something that just wraps up."

By 5:30, people began arriving in the parking lot. A barricade was erected to keep people back from the entrance. When this didn't work and people began parking two deep in the street, the police were called. By 8 p.m., it looked as if the carnival had come to town, there were so many lights and so many people pressing against the barriers. Larry stood outside, the snow again swirling around him—itsself an early, unexpected snow like the one the night before—and he marveled at how he had been so quickly displaced.

Finally, someone approached him, someone from the news crew, "We need your keys, Mr. Wallace."

"My keys? What for?"

"The church has asked us to ask you."

"What church?"

"St Mark's on Edison."

"I'm not handing over my keys, and if the church wants them, the Monsignor can come ask me himself."

The crewman walked away, and he didn't hear about it for the rest of the night, but by 10:20 p.m., a locksmith had arrived. Larry ran up to the man, who was allowed through the barricade with his minivan. "Wait! This is my property," Larry shouted at him. "What are you doing?"

“I was called here on an emergency job to change the locks.”

“But wait, this is *my* bar. I didn't call you.”

“The police did,” the locksmith tipped his head in the direction of the cops, who stood guarding the barricade.

“But this is violation of my property rights, my Constitutional rights!”

Larry ran over to the policemen, catching one by the shoulder and turning the man to face him, “The locksmith said the police called him. This is my property! You can't do this!”

The officer removed Larry's hand from his shoulder, slowly. “First,” he said, “let's get calm, all right? Now. You gotta talk to the police commissioner. He made the call. I'm just here to keep the noise levels down, and keep some order. I don't know anything about the locksmith.”

Larry began to notice that people were cycling in. A small line had formed. Kyle Barden's wife was organizing them. She held a small fan of what looked like twenties in one hand, but when she made eye contact with Larry, she shoved her hand into her coat pocket.

“Wait a minute! Wait a damn minute, you conniving bitch,” said Larry, charging in Brianne's direction. “What're you doing?”

At that moment, Lou McCafferty stepped out onto the parking lot and announced that a benediction would be given by St. Mark's Father Gaskin in time for the 11 o'clock news. In the meantime, they would continue to offer people the opportunity to touch the miracle water.

From somewhere behind him, Larry heard his name. Not just once, but multiple times. The voice was familiar, but distant and angry. He realized that it was Donna's. She was standing behind the barricade, shouting at him. He turned fully to see her, "You son-of-a-bitch! You lousy motherfucker. You never said a goddamn thing to me!" Donna was pushing her abdomen against the barricade and throwing her fist into the air at him. The police did not attempt to restrain her. "I'll sue you to get every cent you make on this, you fucker!"

Larry just stood looking at her. Finally, he turned and walked back to the bar, made his way around his truck, came to the back entrance, where the locksmith had not yet been, and got out his keys. When he opened the door, sparkling snow caught up by the draft cascaded from the roof onto the cracked linoleum tiles. A startled Lou McCafferty looked over his shoulder at Larry. Larry reached for his liquor boxes, "I have to deliver these to another bar that needs them before last call. Looks like you have things covered here. I'll be back, all right?"

Lou smiled uncertainly and nodded, turning again to attend to the line of people snaking down the hallway.

Larry quickly loaded the boxes, putting them in the foot well of the passenger seat and then on the seat next to him. He cranked up the heat, so they would not freeze. He nodded at the cops as they allowed him through the barricade. Donna saw his truck and tried to pull on the locked passenger side door to get in, but a police officer, not understanding who she was, pulled her back. She struggled against him and accidentally hit him in the nose with her arm. Larry saw blood come trickling out of the officer's nose. With relief, Larry thought that she would probably not be home that night because, if they incarcerated her, he would not be the one to bail her out.

He turned on the radio and the college station was playing Jack Teagarden's version of "Stars Fell on Alabama". Calm settled over Larry that was, he felt, like sepia toned photographs and real cotton long johns. He went back to the trailer.

"Mama?" he called from the front door. He did not stomp off his shoes this time. He left small cakes of wet snow behind on his first few steps.

The television was off and the trailer was dark except for one light on the end table near the sofa.

"Lawrence, is that you?" his mother called.

He turned on her light and stood in the doorway. She was sitting with her feet hanging over the side of the bed, as if she were considering getting down.

"How's Clyde?"

"He's wonderful. I fed him with the eyedropper like you taught me."

"Good. Now, you sit tight. I got some things to bring inside."

Larry brought all the boxes into the trailer and locked the door. He turned up the space heater in the bathroom and began emptying the bottles into the bathtub. It took him the better part of fifteen minutes until he'd glugged out twenty-four bottles. The whole time, his mother, who sat watching from across the hall, was quiet. She asked no questions, merely sat with her hands folded in her lap and smiled whenever Larry looked back to check on her. Once she put her fingers to her lips, pointed to Clyde's matchbox and said, "he's sleeping."

“Mama,” Larry said, somewhat embarrassed, “can you undress yourself or do you have to have help?”

“I can,” she said, with no small amount of pride, “Donna *never* helps me.”

Larry carried his naked mother from her bed and set her gently into the bathtub. She looked up at him, her brow knitted, “The water’s cold.”

“Yes, Mama, I know. I’m sorry. But can you splash around in it like a birdie. Remember how you used to tell me to be a like a little birdie? But no soap this time. All right?”

She did as she was told. And the transformation came slowly.

Larry pulled the last box of bottles into the bathroom. “Bend your head, Mama, like you were going to wash your hair.”

He trickled the water over her shoulder, her neck, and her head. He rubbed it into the curls of her loosening perm. He watched his own hand change and the color come back to his mother’s hair. It was a dark otter brown now that it was wet.

When his mother looked up at him, her face was different, still innocent and misunderstanding, but there was a new incipient intelligence there.

She scooped some of the water up and drank from her palm.

“Mama, don’t...” Larry said, pushing her hand away from her mouth.

She looked at him, her eyes no longer milky but suddenly sharp and burning, “I will so!” And she did, three more times. Larry turned

his head because hers was no longer the deflated body of an elderly woman. She had hips and thighs and a round buttocks any husband would have been proud of. He held up a towel and turned his head, waiting for her to step out of the tub.

When he turned to look again, because he could tell she hadn't gotten out, he saw she was shorter, leaner, without hips. Her chest was now flat. Her ribs were showing and her nipples were nearly flesh toned. She smiled at him, and he saw her eye tooth was missing. She jumped from the tub and ran at him, squeezing his hips. "Lawrence!" she shouted with glee. He bent and covered her up with the towel.

She skipped, with the towel trailing behind her, into her bedroom and peeked over the matchbox edge at Clyde, whose eye lids were just beginning to part. "Look at me, Clyde! Look! We can grow up together now!"

Larry went into his and Donna's bedroom and looked for his old steamfitter's union T-shirts, clothes from a time when he had been even skinnier than he was now. He found a knitted tie from the 1980s. It was, as far as he could remember, the only one he owned. He handed it around the doorway to his mother, this child, this seeming stranger. "Put this on and use the tie as a belt".

Larry himself put on his coat. "Pack a few things, Loretta," he said, using his mother's proper name, "we're going now." He didn't say where, only because he didn't really know.

His mother emerged from her bedroom in the shirt dress. She had the matchbox containing Clyde and a quilted bag that he knew contained the portrait of his father and apparently other things that clinked against the picture frame glass. She shuffled into the hallway in her worn velour slippers.

“We'll get you some new clothes and other stuff in the morning.”

“Okay. And pancakes. Can we get pancakes, too?”

Larry, who had never been a father, put his hand on his mother's head, and looked down at her hopeful expression. “You bet we can, Loretta,” he smiled and guided her towards the trailer door. “You bet we can.”

