

MINOR MIRACLES

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Fresh warm bread. Not that I expect Michael to be baking, and besides, it is not really the scent of fresh-baked bread I smell. It is laundry soap, body heat, Michael's pheromones and mine mixed together. This aromatic blanket is as comforting as baked bread. With my eyes squeezed shut, I burrowed deeper into the blankets on our bed and inhaled the scent of peace, health, and tranquility.

"Get out Dweeb-o!" screams Britney.

Britney's shrill cry brings me back to reality. I think over the events of the last few weeks while listening to the mumble of voices down the hall – Michael is getting on to the kids for yelling in the house and fighting.

The bedroom door opens. Without rolling over to face the door, I know it is Michael. Shane and Britney always knock, and I have long ago memorized the sound of Michael's footsteps and breathing. He sits on the bed behind me, his left hand massaging his right hand, then his right massaging his left. It was this nervous habit that I noticed on our first date, and it is something I take consolation in now. If he isn't rubbing his hands, I know that the earth stopped spinning. I also know he is trying to decide what to say, concerned that anything he could say would either be trite or would come across as insensitive.

"Laura"

"Hum," I say.

"You awake?" he asks.

“You know I am.” As much as I know about him, he knows the same about me, if not more.

Again I hear silence from his side of the bed. His right thumb is rubbing circles into the meat of his left. He wants to fix things, it is part of his male DNA, but this is something he knows he can't fix. I know he is taking this hard. Michael is never at a loss for words.

“You didn't say anything to the kids?” I asked.

“I think we should tell them together but they know something is going on,” he says.

“Yeah, I guess so.” I didn't want to talk about this, but I couldn't keep the words in any longer.

“I was in my twenties when Mom was diagnosed. And I know there is a chance that it could just be a cyst, but I know what it is. Britney just turned fifteen and Shane is only nine. That is a lot of weight to put on them. I always knew I would have to have this conversation with you, with them. But I am not ready, and I don't know what to say.”

“The kids are so much like you. They are strong and resilient.”

I didn't cry. Not when Michael pointed out the lump two weeks ago, not at the mammogram or the biopsy. But hearing Michael tell me that our children, our little clones of him, were just like me, I couldn't hold it in any longer.

I have only seen Laura really cry a few times. She gets teary at sappy movies or when she's pissed. When Britney and Shane were born, she held them and cried while making promises of a happy childhood and counting all twenty of their “miracles.” She

also cried at her stepfather's funeral a few years ago. But this time wasn't like any of those.

My stoic wife is sobbing. Crying is something for the weak, that's what she said, though I doubt she believed it. Her shoulders are trembling violently as she tries to scream and inhale at the same time, disabling the effectiveness of both. Her face is bright red and blotchy, and she has never looked more beautiful to me.

There is a panicked knock on the door. I feel every flush of blood and hear it roar through my ears, did I miss the phone ringing? Did the doctor tell Britney thinking she was Laura? Judging by the pale look to Laura's face, she is having the exact same thought.

"Yeah, come in," I called.

Instead of the distraught fifteen-year-old of my imagination it is an equally distraught nine-year-old. Shane looked so timid standing alone in the doorway with his face a similar shade as his mother's currently.

"They're gone. They got out of my room and now I can't find Ethel and Fred. I looked all over my room, and they are gone."

"Calm down, Shane. Your mom and I will help you look for them. You and I will look up here and Mom will look downstairs," I tell him.

I look at Laura. Her color is returning to normal, her resilience at work. I smile, blow her a kiss and follow Shane out to the game room to look for his missing pets.

Last place looked. Ethel and Fred turn up again, this time on the floor of the hall closet. Last time they were lost, I found him in the dirty clothes hamper in Britney's

room. And the time before that they were in the pantry trying to wiggle their way into a box of Cheese Nips.

“I found them, Shane,” I say, trying not to let the annoyance creep into my voice.

“At least those dirty rats stayed out of my room,” said Britney, immediately putting the cordless phone back to her ear. As my daughter rushes past me to the kitchen, her curly blond hair bouncing on her shoulders and her blue eyes rolling back into her head, I think we are nothing alike.

Shane tries to defend his white mice. “They’re not rats, and they’re not dirty.” He kneels and picks up Fred, then Ethel, and drops them into his shirt pocket. I get down on his level and am struck by how much he looks like his father. Clear Pacific Ocean eyes, sandy beach ripples of hair cascading over his ears. Ten years from now he will have girls falling at his feet like I fell at his father’s, weakened by his contagious smile.

“Didn’t we have a conversation about Ethel and Fred staying in their cages last week?” I ask him.

“But Mom, I’m teaching them to be search and rescue mice.”

“And what are they supposed to search for and rescue, exactly?”

“If someone breaks in and takes my Playstation, Fred and Ethel will go find it.”

His innocent optimism amazes me. After being a mother for fifteen years, some things have become mundane to me like the habitual stalling tactics of an over exhausted toddler at bed time, the summertime melody of “I’m bored,” or the morning stampede of a puberty-ridden teenager on the prowl for the perfect outfit. But the enthusiasm for lost causes was always refreshing.

“I should have named you Jude,” I say.

“What?” he asked.

“After the Beatles’ song.” Michael’s voice makes me jump. He presses his lips to my neck, playfully tugs on Shane’s shaggy locks and heads for the kitchen.

“There is a band named after a bug. Cool,” Shane says. Shane attempts to make a 180 degree turn to get more information about the bug band from his father.

“Hold it there, mister. Fred, Ethel, in the cage, now.” I say.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I turn and watch him go back up to his room to return the escapees to their cage, his pouting lips evident with every stair climbed.

“Has the doctor called yet?” asked Michael.

“That’s the second time in less than five minutes that you’ve snuck up on me.”

“Sorry, hon. I didn’t mean.” He places an arm around my shoulders. This is something else that amazed me. After seventeen years of marriage, Michael’s embrace still orchestrates a butterfly revolution in my stomach. He squeezes, mindful of the bandage on my right breast.

“Did he call?” Michael asked again.

“Britney is on her line, right?” I ask. I am trying hard to avoid the conversation he is wanting to have.

“Yes. Laura, did Dr. Sanders call?”

“Soon.”

His fingers trail down my arm to my hand, signaling the butterflies to seize my spleen and a ringing erupts in my ears.

“Laura, are you going to get that?”

The ringing stops, Michael forces a smile and we hold our breath.

“Mom, some guy’s on the phone.” She is clearly annoyed at being taken away from her own “life and death” conversation.

Because I am unable or unwilling to move, Michael pulls me by the hand to the kitchen and the waiting phone.

“This is,” the words never escape my throat. I try again, “This is Laura Jenkins.”

“Sorry to bother you at home, Mrs. Jenkins. I was hoping you would have a few minutes to talk about your phone service provider.”

I watch my angel pick the phone off the counter and in one movement pour her cappuccino brown hair behind her ear and deposit the phone to the same ear.

“This is Laura Jenkins,” she says.

Laura doesn’t want the kids to know about “it,” at least not until we know what “it” is. I turn to make sure Britney is leaving the kitchen. I have to suppress a chuckle when just as fluid as her mother’s moves, Britney tucks her hair behind her ear and places her phone in one movement.

As much as Laura swears that she and Britney have nothing in common, the two of them are more alike than they care to admit. Britney inherited her mother’s charitable heart and the unending compassion that leaves them both with their hearts in their hands. The difference in them is that the first eighteen years of Laura’s life weren’t anywhere as close to stable as Britney’s life – stability is something Laura is determined to have for her children.

My attention snaps back to my wife as she calls the person on the phone an inconsiderate asshole. She slams the phone back on the cradle.

“I hope that wasn’t...” But she cuts me off with a rampage on the annoyance of telemarketers and how they should all be shot. Her voice is carrying the same tone of exasperation that Britney’s carries when she is ranting about her brother. Laura is rolling her eyes in frustration and swinging her hands wildly as if conducting a frenzied performance of the *1812 Overture*.

This time I couldn’t hold the chuckle in. Laura stops mid-word during her tirade of emasculation of telemarketers and stares at me like I am the one planning torture for someone doing his job.

“What’s so funny?” she asks.

“You sound like Britney.”

Stupid, annoying bastards. I have a good head of steam going and am talking about castrating and feeding the infuriating telemarketers their own missing anatomy when Michael starts laughing. I swear the man is losing his mind, probably because of all the stress of the last two weeks.

“What’s so funny?”

“You sound like Britney.”

I think about my daughter and her little tantrums about whatever seems to be the bane of her existence that day. I can see her hands moving as she rants, swatting invisible flies or rational thoughts away. For the last thirty seconds I have been my daughter.

I laugh for the first time in weeks. It is an uplifting feeling, not only in my body but in the entire house. There has been this unspoken tension between everyone in the house for the last fifteen days, and with something as simple as hysterical laughing, the tension evaporates. I feel like I am in more of a position to handle whatever may come my way now.

Both kids poke their heads into the kitchen, unsure about the sudden change of mood in the house and their parents' unexpected laughter. Shane starts giggling but is not sure why. That is the beauty of hysterical laughter. You don't have to know why you are laughing, and it is contagious.

“Your mom was doing an imitation of you, Britney. She is really quite good at it.”

Britney huffs, rolls her eyes and swings her hand to banish her father. Her mini-tantrum starts Michael and me laughing again. This time both kids join in. I notice Shane has my laugh and it makes me laugh harder.

The phone rings. I answer it but I don't think about it until I hear my voice say “This is she.”

“Laura, Dr. Sanders. Thank God for minor miracles.”