

LITTLE MAN

*When the girl was alone the little man appeared for the third time and said,
“What will you give me if I spin the straw for you once again?”
“I’ve nothing more to give,” answered the girl.
“Then promise me when you are Queen to give me your child.”
Who knows what may happen before that? thought the miller’s daughter
and, besides, she saw no other way out.*

—*Rumpelstiltskin, The Brothers Grimm*

When Lola arrived at the hospital for Annabelle’s birth, she thought the two days she was supposed to spend there might work as a restorative, like a spa.

This time around, though, she knows better. The nursery attendant coming into the room is clearly an idiot, wheeling sleeping baby Silas — who has not grown into his name yet, who may *never* grow into his name — punctually into her room for her to nurse after two hours in the nursery. Even though Silas is still sleeping, obviously content.

For the past three years since Annabelle was born, Lola’s story — public, private, trotted out for playgroup mothers — has been that Annabelle cried herself red in the face the entire forty-eight hours she spent in the hospital when she was born. Now, Lola realizes that this had to have been impossible: Annabelle must have slept at some point, and Lola and David were just too shell-shocked to notice.

She swears that *this* time nothing will get past her. She sent David home hours ago, to sleep the sleep of the newly changed in a bed still ruffled from the beginnings of her labor. Her own goal is to keep from spending two entirely sleepless nights in a hospital bed holding an infant cradled in her arms.

She assumes the clock on the wall facing the bed was placed there thoughtfully, so that if she wants to follow the philosophies of the infant-care books so doctrinaire about schedules, she can time Silas’ feedings. But the only thing the clock has been able to tell her so far is that she’s holding a sleeping infant in her arms and she herself is not sleeping.

It's 1:23 in the morning. The door from the hall eases open again. No one, of course, knocks when they come into her room, and why should they? Since Silas was born and they wheeled Lola from Delivery to Postpartum, nurses, nurses' aides, nursery attendants, custodians and food-service workers eager to know whether she wants broccoli or cauliflower with her next meal have all paid her visits. This time Lola's sure it's a custodian, for a yellow mop bucket has nosed its way into the room like a cumbersome dog on a leash. Tendrils of mop, flung out, lap at the linoleum.

Beautiful, placid Silas sleeps on in her arms. He has second baby written all over his face. Why on earth are they mopping the floor at 1:24 in the morning? Lola has been awake for the better part of the past three days. The mop insinuates its way further into the room. In a second she'll be able to see the room attendant's face. She *hates* them. Silas stirs, kneads at her breast like a kitten. She cups her hand at the back of his head.

Beautiful, beautiful boy, says the custodian's voice.

Which is entirely too personal — at least they usually ignore her.

Beautiful baby, the voice repeats.

How can it have such a calm inflection, and still contain such longing? She looks up.

And there he is: Will, the friend of her youth, leaned up against his mop.

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He'd been Lola's bolt from the blue. Before him, her taste was always big, tow-headed men who'd run to fat as they aged, or maybe already had, seeing as three-fourths of the time she picked guys ten or twelve years older than she was.

But Will was three years younger, was dark-haired and wiry, and for the years they'd end up spending together, she wore his old Levi's without even bothering to roll up the cuffs. Will cast off clothes at the first sign of wear, another indication he was nothing like her usual type, who was sloppily indifferent to clothes.

But then, after him, Lola'd gone back to what would turn out to be her real pattern. Even her husband David would fit it. Six foot three, solid and calm. Who knew how these things got imprinted on you? David, she tells herself whenever she thinks of Will — which is not all that often — has always been all that she wanted.

But she can still remember how Will used to peer anxiously into the rust-speckled mirror in the bathroom of the apartment they shared all those years ago; the way he positioned her hand mirror behind his head and stared into the depths of the mirrored medicine cabinet, searching out what was already clearly the beginnings of a bald spot, one she charitably lied about and swore she couldn't see.

It'd been love, hadn't it, that led her to dissemble like that? Surely.

Who knows what happened to that mirror? It must've been a casualty of all the moves she made after Will left her holding the bag (in other words, *rent*).

But then — thank God! — she met David. Got married. Had one child, and now, another. An inexorable progress, toward things that when she and Will were a couple seemed as far away and inconsequential as the stars.

*

Will had been Lola's had-to-have. Her other half, her wild youth. The thing she always wanted. How long has it been since she last laid eyes on him? Sixteen years.

Why, she'd never even really known Will, she tells herself, staring at him. She wouldn't know him now if she were to bump into him on the street. Except, of course, that she does. Even though he's standing with his head bent, fiddling with the handle of his mop. He's older, more bald, softer — but it's Will all right, a Will who might've had the shit partially kicked out of him by the intervening years, but still Will all the same.

Can I hold him? he asks quietly.

Eyes open, Silas gazes up at her, a preternaturally wise expression in his slatey blue eyes, as if he knows there's still a piece of her that might belong to Will, even after all these years, a small, tough bit of heart that David — blissfully unaware of its existence — has never even bothered to try to tease from her.

“No,” she says curtly. “He's sleeping.” The pain chart that had made her so nauseous with dread a week ago, when she brought Annabelle to the hospital for her Big Sister Tour, is posted on the wall right behind Will's head.

When she and Annabelle and the other pregnant mothers with children in tow toured one of these hospital rooms, it seemed like something it wasn't, a place where you might actually relax and sleep. But by now it has transformed itself back into what it really is: a place where you wait for your life to begin, a place where it is always 1:30 in the morning and everything hangs in the balance and it makes perfect sense that the former love of your life is mopping the floor.

“Hey,” she says. The salutation, redolent of a younger, more slouchy self, slips out, surprising her. “How are you?”

The pain chart behind Will's head consists of cartoon drawings of faces, each grimacing more fiercely than the next.

I'm fine, he says. He resumes mopping sloppily. How many restaurant floors must he have mopped in the years since she met him, when he was twenty-one and she was twenty-four and they worked nights together at a Chili's in the college town Lola hasn't been back to in years?

She hopes he's had at least a couple of lucrative, grown-up jobs since the two of them split up.

"Would you've recognized me?" she finds herself unable to resist asking.

Course, he says. This is comforting, but at the same time, probably a lie. *Still beating around the bush, aren't you?* he adds, giving her a sharp look that makes her remember the old Will, *her* Will. Although like just about every other remembered thing, he's diminished, made smaller, like someplace she visited when she was little and has thought about fondly all these years.

"Meaning what?" she asks him.

Fishing, he says. *Fishing for compliments. Why don't you just come out and ask me how you look?*

"I just had a baby," she shrugs. "Why should I have to ask?"

I never said you weren't tough, he says politely. He, who once was always so complimentary of everything — her legs, her miniskirts, the way, the night they met, she held her liquor — looks strangely nonplussed.

"How'd you find me?"

You summoned me up.

This she doesn't believe. Since when has she had time to think about anyone besides Annabelle and David, and now, baby Silas?

The mop is planted sturdily in its bucket. Will has given up any pretense at working. Baby Silas squeaks against Lola's chest, all belly in his thin onesie, like a puppy.

"Look at him," she says, distracted by the aquatic pursing of his mouth. While she watches, his shape shifts again, until he looks more alien than anything else; eyes roving beneath the violet shadows in the creases of his eyelids.

I just showed up a little bit early is all, Will says. *In a month or so you're really going to need me. Up to your eyebrows in baby shit and dirty dishes by then. But no way will you get me anywhere near that.* He shrugs. *So I showed up a little bit early.* He moves closer to the side of the bed and peers at Silas's face.

*

In Lola's memories of the years she and Will were together, it's always July, always hot. They're too broke for an air conditioner, and sixteen years back is long enough ago that central air's still a luxury, nothing you're going to find in the sort of rental two people who live off tips from Chili's can afford. Droughty years: Lola knows that if there were a way to look up what the weather was in an old Farmer's

Almanac she'll see that it isn't just her imagination. Those years of her mid-twenties, they were lean ones.

Years of summer, spent mostly at Will's friend Jackson's place out on the lake, which makes it sound more glamorous than it actually was.

The lake's nothing but a glorified cow pond, really, one Lola surveys from a sagging green-and-white lawn chair, her rhinestoned, cat-eye sunglasses low on her nose and a sandal dangling languidly from the toe of one crossed foot. Her toenail polish is iridescent blue — oh, how wastefully she squandered the luxury of time she had then!

Will's current band has set up their equipment on the deck of Jackson's trailer. It'd be better to wait until dusk for this kind of thing, when it's cooler, but with enough beer anything's possible. It's the Fourth of July. A lone plastic container of coleslaw from Kroger and a busted-open bag of corn chips sit on the picnic table covered with a red-white-and-blue paper tablecloth. Some girl in a too-tight white sundress brought a bucket of Kentucky Fried Chicken.

"All right, now," Will draws. "People, let's get down to it." The sound of his amplified voice bounces back from the pines that fence in the pasture, the words partially absorbed by the lake.

You couldn't get Lola in that red dirty water on a bet. Will's told her how a few years back he and Jackson spent practically a whole winter hanging out on the deck smoking too much pot, watching the carcass of a deer that'd drowned, a buck, while it lifted, floated, sank, got caught up in a tangle of tree limbs; November, December, January. *Like biology class*, Will had described the way the deer had moved from life to body to skeleton as they watched.

Two days ago, Jackson announced to Will and the band that he wanted something like Woodstock for his birthday. Blankets on the grass, smoker going. Half a dozen kegs at least, a righteous way to ring in both the Fourth of July and his thirtieth birthday. Thirty years old! He ought to be doing something besides living in this junky trailer outside Rayle.

It looks like Jackson's gotten his wish. On the deck, some guy's tending the black oil drum smoker, laying ribs out on its grill with precision. The pasture is unmown grass turned to straw by the summer sun. Jackson put a lot of energy into tracking down kegs, and none at all to mowing so people wouldn't have to use the blankets they brought to tamp down the grass. A path bisecting the pasture has already been stomped out from trailer to pond. A steady stream of kids troops back and forth along it, dragging makeshift fishing poles constructed of rusty barbed wire and sticks.

Jackson being thirty, most of his friends are married and have children. Lola stretches out her legs and eyes her perfect toenail polish with approval. Maybe someday, she thinks idly, closing her eyes. Maybe someday she and Will will have two boys, will give them dirty-hippie-kid names like Donovan and Dylan.

“Hey,” a voice says above her. She opens her eyes. Will stands in front of her, a straw of grass between his lips like a cigarette, a plate of fried chicken in one hand. He balances the plate one-handedly, removes the straw from his mouth to tickle her extended foot. “What,” he says. “You sleeping?” He extends the plate toward her.

She shakes her head. He shrugs and stoops to set it on the ground. Straightening up, he puts a hand in his pocket, pulling it out to surreptitiously show her a palmed Baggie.

She squints up at him and grins. He grins back.

Will is the most beautiful thing Lola has ever seen. She reaches for him, even though she knows their combined weight will collapse her lawn chair. Behind him, the grass bends, turned to the illusion of gold in the late afternoon light.

*

Silas has fallen asleep, although *fallen* seems like too inert a word to describe what has happened. Sleep has gotten the better of him. Lola gingerly eases herself from the bed to stow him into his bedside bassinet.

She is not herself. Somewhere buried deep within her is the part of her she still thinks of as *herself*, but right now she’s just this flabby bruised flesh: somebody’s mother.

Propped up, swaddled tightly, Silas looks like a convalescent old man, imperious and distant, his mind on other things. Will ranges around the room, hard work since it isn’t much more than ten feet square. He skirts the reclining chair supplied for husbands to nap on, inspects the gaudy, silvered bouquet of balloons Lola’s mother brought when she came to the hospital to introduce Annabelle to her new little brother.

Mylar really sucks for the environment, you know, he points out, flicking the attached card with a finger.

“Since when did you care about the environment?” Lola asks him.

Since when did you not?

It’s not that she doesn’t care anymore; this is just what we all come to in the end, she wants to tell Will. And Mylar balloons and baby showers and blue for boys and pink for girls are just the way it’s done. You can’t reinvent the wheel. Or you could, Lola supposes, and tell the proud new grandmother to take her environmentally-unfriendly balloons back home, but that would just be stupid.

Doesn’t he have any other clothes? Will asks with his back to her, opening the room’s tiny closet. *Where’s his food?*

“Good God, Will. He was born twelve hours ago. He can’t eat solid food yet.”

Will turns around. *You know the drill, Lola*, he says, running a hand through his hair until it sticks straight up.

Lola reaches out to fiddle with the control next to the bed to adjust the angle of her mattress. “The drill is to sleep,” she murmurs, lying back. There’s something she’s wanted to say to Will for years, but she can’t think of it right now. Some time, some *later* time, she’ll think of him again. He’s the part of her she left behind. Isn’t he?

The drill, he repeats. *Why else did you think I was here? You promised him to me. Now I want him.*

*

She throws back the flimsy hospital-grade blanket and picks up Silas, disregarding what, until Will walked into this room, had been the most important rule in the world: *never wake a sleeping baby*.

Worry seems to be the first expression babies can have, before joy or even fury: left to his own devices, Silas curls like a cashew in her arms, two tiny frown lines creasing his forehead.

Lola has had two babies at this hospital, she knows how things work. Silas’s small mottled foot droops under the weight of the lojack-like device braceleting his ankle, a device that would make an alarm go off if anyone carried him too close to the elevator or, further than that, the outside world. It’s the same thing stores use to deter shoplifters, so somewhere in this hospital, she thinks inconsequentially, there’s one of those complicated machines used to remove them, like there is at the counter at Gap.

She will never let Will have him.

This hospital room looks anonymous, innocuous; characteristics she realizes could also fit the scene of a crime, where the large cup of water she’s supposed to sip from every few minutes would be turned over in the scuffle, or the sheets would be wrenched back and dangling from the bed like a rope ladder left behind as evidence of escape from a burning building.

“Over my dead body,” she whispers fiercely, head bowed into the fine swirl of baby hair at the back of Silas’s head. Any second, she tells herself, the nurse’s assistant will come in to wake her up.

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Lola and Will’s last whereabouts: A cinder-brick apartment building with a potholed lot in front, where someone’s car — the girl who lived in the apartment under theirs, whose boyfriend weekly shattered her bathroom window to get in? the

two guys who lived there before her without a stick of furniture besides a Playstation and a TV?— has been abandoned to list on three tires in the corner space. Lusty pink hyacinth bean vine climbs up the telephone pole beside the building and the neighbor's chain link fence. Everything is growing. Will sits on the fire escape playing his guitar, the sad, three-speed Raleigh he will in a few hours pedal furiously to his shift at the diner that's replaced Chili's as his workplace leaning underneath the shelter of the landing.

Lola is in the kitchen, standing at the sink in bare feet and a white dress, cutting strawberries that will look beautiful as art in a hand-thrown pottery bowl until they rot in the refrigerator and have to be thrown out.

They were gods, she realizes now. Food was inconsequential, was something left to the last minute that came from white grease-stained paper bags.

Which is certainly not the case now. She spent much of the last three weeks making casseroles to stockpile in the freezer for this moment. Six months from now, Silas will crawl around on the kitchen floor while she cooks, eyes sharp for every crumb she might forget to sweep up. Not even a wilted scrap of lettuce fallen from a colander will escape his notice. And standing at the sink above him, Lola will wish there was some magic way to take care of the chores that are the mainspring of her life. To transform dirty dishes, dirty clothes, dirty babies, into clean ones.

But back then Will and Lola never got hungry, they never washed clothes, they lived off of air in a dirty apartment.

Listening to Will play lazily as she cuts up the berries, Lola luxuriates into melancholy with the same delighted inattention a cat gives a stretch performed when it hops off a mattress. She loves the sound of his fingers squeaking against the frets as he changes chords, the matter-of-fact disorder of the apartment's single room. On the other side of the apartment's open door it's spring. It might be so forever.

"Come here," Will says behind her. He leans the guitar against the wall. He reaches to tuck a peroxidized strand of her hair behind her ear, then takes her hand to tug her toward the futon behind a dingy rice-paper screen that makes up their bedroom.

The bed is a raft, Lola and Will selfish and single-minded atop it; the apartment chimes with the slop-slop of waves against its sides and the sough of leaves from the oak that grows in the alley behind their apartment.

*

Lola has never experienced anything more perfect than the whorl of Silas's ear, though once she swore she'd never fall prey to conventional, *ordinary*, sentiments like that.

She has watched people sleep before this moment, for four years she watched Will, who stands on the other side of the room watching her, in fact. Back

then she watched Will and thought, sentimentally, that he slept like a baby, but now that she's witnessed the real thing, she knows that for the lie it was. Will slept like someone separate from her, someone who, in the end, meant nothing.

Will shrugs. His eyes are fastened on the baby.

"What've you been up to all this time?" she asks to distract him, fighting the urge to untuck a corner of the flannelette swaddling Silas to shield him from Will's gaze. Startled by the sound of her voice, Silas flinches and throws one arm out in a movement as graceful as tai chi.

You're going to make him cry, Will observes matter-of-factly.

"Cry?" Lola says. "And just what the fuck do *you* know about babies?"

You have no idea, Will says softly. He moves closer to her, and she can tell he's about to reach out and offer Silas his finger.

She looks away. She actually *doesn't* have any idea. All these years, Will's remained suspended in the amber of her memories of him.

You have no idea, he repeats.

Lola's chest aches. Her milk is coming in. What had seemed like such a mysterious, impossible undertaking when Annabelle was born has this time just transformed Lola's body, unremarked and unremarkably, in the middle of the night.

It seems shameful, to let Will see her breasts put to their intended use. The two things — the raft of that bed of the past and this awkward nest of sheets and nursing pillows — are insurmountably incompatible.

Which is as it should be. All Will is is a ghost from the past, when time was an endless commodity. They never ran out of it! Just thinking about it pisses Lola off. They spent days in bed. She read trashy novels in a single sitting. They nursed hangovers for entire weekends!

"I'm ready for you to leave now," she says. Silas's face crumples wholeheartedly: maybe because of the steely sound of her voice or maybe he's just hungry. In a second he will, as Will predicted, start to cry.

Nope, Will says flatly. *I'm here for what you bargained away. He's mine now.*

Lola looks at Will. She doesn't bare her breast in front of him, but at the same time she doesn't take much care to shield it from his view as she cradles Silas and tucks him up against her chest.

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It seemed like the end of the world, when it happened, their fall from grace. Lola's face was swollen from crying the day she finally realized that the two of them,

the *idea* of her and Will, the fact of them, was played out, but she went to work anyway. Where Will went, she doesn't remember anymore. To work at the restaurant that replaced the one that replaced Chili's? To crash on a buddy's sofa after a ritual binge of drinking identical to the one he'd indulged in after he broke up with the girlfriend before her? They bickered over purchases — the toaster, the television — and as soon as it was clear that there was no going back, they both did what they did best: immediately jumped into bed with someone else. A clean break. It wasn't like exorcising a ghost or amputating a limb; there were no contracts or covenants from which they had to extract themselves.

So why has he come back?

Tell you what, he says with an air of finality, as if they've just ratified an agreement. *I'll give you a few minutes. To get the rest of his stuff together. To say goodbye*, he adds kindly. *I'll go down to the cafeteria to get a cup of coffee. Then I'll be back.*

"The coffee here is crap," she says, her voice muffled as she bows her head into Silas's solid warmth. She knows this as much from the vigil she spent six months ago when her father lay two floors down in Intensive Care as from having two babies. "There's a coffee shop down the street, though."

She adds it slyly. Sixteen years ago, who cared about macchiatos and breves and double lattes? Oh — Will, who'd been skinny and most of the time was wasted. He'd liked his espressos with a fussy curl of lemon rubbed around the edge of a specific little white cup.

I'll be back in a few minutes.

Got him.

She'd been the one who bought him the espresso maker, which never worked right, the technology for such things less advanced 16 years ago than it is now. And she'd been the one who tossed it in the dumpster behind the apartment when he lacked the room in his car to take it with him.

Such petty squabbles, she tells herself. But for a second, she feels the self-same diamond-hard core of rage she'd felt when she tipped the espresso maker into the dumpster, strong enough to cut glass. It's like slipping into — not an old sweater, for she'd never been the cardigan type — the leather jacket she wore then, a comfortable carapace more familiar than the skin of motherhood she's clothed in now.

Silas has his big sister's long eyelashes, a sooty fan against the plump curve of his cheek. They're David's eyelashes, in fact.

And baby skin that might explain the yearning she feels every time she picks him up. It's skin the way skin should be, layered like pearl to shield the grain of *self*, containing its own mysterious luster. Unlike middle-aged skin, a battered house you have to live in.

All right, then, Will says, I'll be back.

*

What had Lola's life been before Will? Locked into a two-step with him that consisted only of the present moment, Lola wasn't able to say. The future was equally impenetrable. *Hope I die before I get old...* Will sang, a mock-snarl in his reedy voice while he sat on the edge of the futon watching her dress for work in her sensible shoes and mid calf-length skirts, a costume she put on and then shed joyously each evening.

"Call in sick," Will suggests, easy enough for him to say, since he doesn't have to be at the restaurant where he works until four.

It's only Lola who has to clock in at a job that requires nine to five. How is she to know how *that* will hasten their demise? In six months they'll break up.

"Can't," she says regretfully. "They need me," referring to her employer, a state agency she no longer remembers the complete name of. Now she knows what *need* really is: why on earth had she been in such a hurry to hustle herself into such a situation?

She pulls on her opaque hose, slips into her low, court-heeled shoes. Her newly acquired conscientiousness feels like an affectation, as much of a costume as the clothes she's dressed in.

"Suit yourself then," Will says, shrugging.

Picking up her purse and car keys, she feels virtuous. This person isn't really her, of course. She's playing dress-up.

*

When Silas starts to cry, the sound he makes is like a rusty gate. He hasn't even learned how to get himself worked up yet! Lola sets him in front of her on the bed. He looks back at her steadily as she begins to swaddle him with deft, practical hands.

"You don't even know how to do this," she says when she hears the door open. She doesn't bother to look up. She knows Will's standing at the foot of the bed.

Over, then under, she smooths the worn flannel blanket she'll steal when she and Silas leave the hospital twenty-four hours from now, petty thievery excused by parenthood. Swaddled expertly, Silas is a package. *Her* package.

"And how on earth are you going to drag yourself out of bed every two hours?" Every meal she sits down to, Annabelle wants to sample. No one ever told Lola motherhood might mean sharing the food meant for your mouth. Just as a matter of course. Not once or twice, life or death, because someone was starving.

“It will erase you,” she says, implacably.

She lifts her head. She and Silas are once again alone in the room. Will has been banished.

Silas begins to cry in her arms, heartbreakingly, as if wrenched by loss. Lola looks down at him, and his gaze catches hers like a towrope. Pulling her across an immeasurable distance; between the child that she was and the child that she has. Picking him up, she holds him close, and gets down to work.