

G I L B E R T A L L E N

The
Beasts of
Belladonna

stories



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GILBERT ALLEN

S L A N T



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For Barbara, the true *bella donna*

Allow not nature more than nature needs,
Man's life's as cheap as beast's.

—*King Lear*, II, iv

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Prayers

I'LL BE HONEST WITH YOU: I didn't like the new preacher. For one thing, he looked like Liberace, all baby fat and jewelry beneath mounds of wavy dark hair that must have been dyed to match his clerical collar. I half expected his fingers to rattle when he jogged by the house and waved to me while I was still in my pajamas, taking out the kitchen garbage.

When my wife went into the hospital for her tonsillectomy, he was waiting for us after we'd gotten past Admitting. Don't ask me how he did it. We hadn't even known the room number ourselves until five minutes beforehand. He smiled and asked us if we'd been blessed by God. Since the doctors had told Hilda not to talk, it was up to me to supply the answer.

"We don't know," I said. "Perhaps you should come back this afternoon."

"Of course," he said, taking his clipboard from the metal sink by the door and scanning it quickly. He stuffed it under his arm and placed both hands squarely around Hilda's neck.

I'd already gotten out of my chair when he started praying.

"Dear God," he chanted, his own Adam's apple quivering as he raised his blue eyes to the suspended ceiling. "Dear God, please bless this throat and all that is inside it, so it may once again sing Your praises in Your own house." Hilda was lead soprano at Belladonna Methodist. "The music of Your name is great, and it is in that name and in the name of Your only Son and in the name of Your Holy Spirit that we pray. Amen." I cleared my throat. After he'd left, Hilda went into the bathroom to put on her hospital gown. She came out with her dress folded into a perfect square and her teeth clenched, defining

her jaw. She always puts on that expression when I'm angry for what she's convinced herself is no good reason. I laughed aloud. "Okay," I said. "Okay."

When she was back in bed, waiting for the nurse, and thought I'd forgotten all about Reverend Paulsen, I spoke in my most innocent voice. "Your Pastor-Parish Relations Committee really knows how to pick them, doesn't it?"

She took a small pad of paper from the nightstand and scribbled on it before she tossed it across the room.

SO HE'S A LITTLE FLAMBOYANT

TRY TO BE NICE TO HIM, YOU INFIDEL

And then she closed her eyes, but I could tell she was getting nervous. She hadn't been in the hospital since she was born.

§

I TRIED. I MET HIM again as I was kissing Hilda at the entrance to the OR suite. He'd tapped me on the shoulder while I was still bent over her gurney.

"How's she feeling?"

Hilda had asked for a double dose of valium, so at the moment she wasn't feeling much of anything. I don't think she knew that either of us were within twenty yards. "She's fine," I whispered, as the orderly wheeled her through the fire doors. "She appreciates your coming all the way from Belladonna to see her."

He waved his left hand in what I understood to be a self-deprecating gesture. But what I mainly noticed were his three rings—silver, ruby, and gold. His fingers seemed oddly thin, given the broadness of his face and shoulders. Yet you couldn't call him obese, not really. He put his hand over my clavicle and led me to the visitors' elevator.

We sat in the cafeteria over two cups of coffee for an hour and forty-five minutes. I tried every means I could think of to get rid of him—telling him that I knew *he* was a busy man, mentioning all the shut-ins and shaky marriages in his congregation that I could think of. But the more I spoke, the more he wanted to listen. For you see, Reverend Paulsen had just arrived in Belladonna Commons—our wannabe subdivision, just beyond the security gates of the *real*

Belladonna—on what Methodists call Relocation Day. Every minister in South Carolina has to be out of his old sinecure by 9:00 a.m. so his replacement can move in by noon. It's efficient, I'll give them that much.

The reverend said he'd recently "gone through" a divorce, so he appreciated any information about his flock that I could provide. I followed his logic well enough to realize I never wanted to come back as a minister's wife. I said, "You'll need to see Butler Breedlove about your complimentary renter's insurance."

"I surely could use another cup of coffee," he said. "Why don't you tell me a little something about yourself?"

By that time I had resigned myself to his company. "I'm a biology teacher."

"What exactly do you do?"

I was in the middle of my worst summer school class in recent memory. "Waste good frogs," I said. "Preserve the school district's microscopes."

His eyes drifted out the window. "My wife was a music teacher," he said. "I think she'll be going back to it in the fall." Now his eyes returned to me. "Bless her soul."

§

THE OPERATION WENT WELL. A couple of days later, while I was helping Hilda pack her things to go home, Reverend Paulsen walked by on his way to another room. I cursed myself for leaving that oversized door open, but my wife seemed genuinely glad to see him again—though she still couldn't talk. I snapped the latches of her suitcase with what I hoped was finality, but when I looked up he was holding Hilda's wrist with one hand and had the other one extended for me.

"Let us pray," he intoned.

I had no choice, and I suspected he knew it. When I grabbed his hand, he squeezed my fingers like he never meant to let them go. Half in surprise, half in anger, I squeezed back. Unfortunately, he took it as a gesture of spiritual solidarity. "Noel, could you offer a word of thanks for us?"

This time Hilda didn't dare look at my face. "Certainly," I said. "Dear God, preserve us from those who enter rooms without knocking. Save us from those who never pay for their own cups of coffee. And most of all, deliver us from those who would meddle in our private lives in Your name. Amen."

I dropped his hand and picked up the suitcase.

Unfortunately, the reverend had permission from the nursing staff to escort the wheelchairs of discharged patients. According to recent research, time seems to elongate by a factor of ten for those in acute physical or psychological distress. I can vouch for it. I thought that the elevator was going to Hell, not to the ground floor. Hilda's tears were streaming through her makeup; I'd have felt better if she'd kicked me in the groin. After I'd gotten her into our Toyota, Reverend Paulsen spoke softly to me from the curb. "I've already forgiven you, Noel. I just hope Jesus has."

§

TWO WEEKS LATER, when my wife was speaking to me again, I drove her to her post-operative checkup. Everything was fine; she could start singing by the end of the month, just as long as she didn't overdo it. When we got back to Belladonna Commons, Hilda was visibly happier than she'd been since her last solo.

"By Christmas you should be one hundred percent," I said.

Tigger and Lambchop, our twin tabbies, were waiting for us. "Look at that," I said, trying to sustain my wife's good spirits. "We've got a welcoming committee!"

But they seemed uninterested in us. They were cackling at the front door, their front paws propped against the lower panels, their muzzles raised in what could have been supplication. Something had their undivided attention.

Hilda got out of the car and walked up the porch steps. "Oh my God," she said, covering her mouth.

Hilda's a little squeamish. After I ran up to see what had frightened her, my own stomach turned. A large robin had been nailed straight through the chest to the door's center panel, right below the

peephole. Its wings and legs were splayed outward; its beak rested against the steel head. It didn't look like it had been dead very long.

Now Hilda was vomiting into the foundation plantings, and the cats were still at the door. Enraged, I stuck my fingers between the feathers and the oak panel, and pulled. When I threw the bird into the boxwoods, Tigger and Lambchop went into full gallop. Hilda had just finished retching, and she was trying to wipe off her mouth with a Kleenex.

Damn him, I thought. *Damn him.*

§

"YOU'RE CRAZY," she said that evening at the supper table.

"Don't ask me how, but I know he did it."

"I never told him about the doctor's appointment," she said. "How could he know we were *both* gone? Our truck was right in the driveway."

"He jogs by here every morning. He could've knocked to see if we were home."

"It was probably one of your juvenile delinquents," she said.

I hadn't thought of that. I'd just finished summer school that week, and I'd had to fail three kids who'd already flunked biology once. They were all basketball players, and though they needed the course to be academically eligible in the fall, they'd spent the whole summer playing tic-tac-toe in the wax at the bottom of the dissecting pans. I fingered the nail in my pocket, which I'd decided to keep. "Maybe you're right."

"Of course I am," she said.

§

BUT I HAD TO FIND OUT for certain, so I devised a small experiment. One Sunday in September I asked Hilda if she thought the reverend might be looking for a jogging partner. She stared at me like I'd asked her to undress in the middle of our kitchen floor.

"I could stand to lose a few pounds," I said.

“Maybe you could.” She tried not to smile as she buttered her morning muffin. “Would you like to come to church and ask him yourself?”

I didn’t want to look too eager. That might have made both of them suspicious. “I was hoping you could ask him for me.”

“Certainly,” she said. “We’ll let you know.” And she was humming to herself in major keys for the rest of the day.

§

WE STARTED OUT SLOWLY, for my benefit—just a couple of miles every Wednesday afternoon. By Christmas we’d worked up to five miles three times a week. We didn’t talk much at first, but as the days passed under our feet we chatted about the state lottery (he was for it), video poker (against), and the finer points of theology.

“There’s something I’ve always wondered about,” I said as we were both bent over, clutching our knees in the driveway, trying to catch our breaths. Tigger stopped rubbing against the rear tire of the reverend’s Lumina as I lifted my shoulders and pointed upward. “Do animals have souls? Birds, for example.”

If he felt uneasy, he didn’t show it. “What makes you ask?”

“Just curious,” I said, walking up to my own front door. “Ebenezer, would you take a look at this?” I had filled my voice with as much surprise as it would hold.

He strode from his car to join me. “Might be blood,” he said. He took out a handkerchief and started rubbing the spot. “It’s been there for quite a while, Noel.”

Hilda would have to pick that moment to open the door. Ebenezer nearly fell into her arms over the threshold. “Would anyone like a cold drink?”

“Just water,” the reverend said, tucking the handkerchief back into his sweat suit.

After she’d ushered him into the kitchen, she came back on the porch for me and closed the door. “I’m ashamed of you, Noel Willis,” she hissed.

And, in truth, so was I.

§

ONE RAINY EVENING in March, the Belladonna Methodist Pastor-Parish Relations Committee decided that Reverend Paulsen would be better off with another congregation. “One a little less . . . sophisticated,” she said wearily, hanging her dripping overcoat on the brass tree in the hallway. “And they think we need a minister with a wife. Two souls for the price of one, I guess.”

I nearly choked on a taco chip, because Hilda doesn’t have a cynical bone in her body. After I muted the college basketball game on the TV, I said, “How did you vote?”

“It was unanimous,” she said, staring straight down at me. “Why should he have to put up with the crazies around here?”

“I’ve said I’m sorry, okay? What else do you want me to do?”

“There’s nothing *to* do. He’ll leave without knowing about your little experiment.” I’d made the mistake of using that word back in December. “Let’s not disillusion the poor man entirely.”

§

EVENTUALLY, THOUGH, we did find something to do. In June we helped Ebenezer clean the parsonage on the day before he had to move out. For Hilda’s sake, I insisted on doing all the messiest jobs—the bathrooms, the kitchen floor, the oven. Ebenezer had broiled a lot of hamburgers.

“You’d better wear rubber gloves for that,” Ebenezer said.

But it wasn’t any worse than the lab at school, and I told him so.

We didn’t finish until midnight. On the way to the foyer we passed all of Ebenezer’s possessions, boxed neatly on the floor. He’d probably be able to fit them into his minivan without having to use the rack up top. Ebenezer’s materialism seemed limited to whatever he could wear on his fingers and around his neck at a given moment.

He took our hands and offered a prayer. Through an act of will, or perhaps faith, I listened to his voice but not to the words.

“That was beautiful,” my wife murmured, dropping Ebenezer’s hand but not my own.

“It was,” I said, trying my best to mimic my wife’s intonation. “Thank you.”

§

EBENEZER ASKED ME for one last favor: to take his trash to the county dump after he’d left for Cowpens, his next ministerial appointment. He put his slender hand on my shoulder. “Nobody should begin his new life at Belladonna Methodist with garbage bags on his lawn.” I was glad we agreed on something.

School was already out—for once, I had no failures—so I was able to drive by at 9:30 a.m. to do my last bit of penance. There were five green sacks in a small circle by the sidewalk in front of what had been Ebenezer’s home. As I was testing my lower back, I noticed something nestled between them. It was a battered birdcage, with a blue parakeet still inside it, alive, without food or water.

I felt vindicated. I put the bird on the passenger’s seat of the truck and drove to Mall Mart. I bought a new cage, feeder cups, a water dispenser, a silver bell, and a cuttlebone. I kept the air conditioner running while I hauled the bags out to the landfill. I watched them go tumbling down the ledge, like lost souls, and I thought about Ebenezer.

When I got home, I gave the bird to Hilda and told her nothing about where I’d gotten it. Maybe she thought Mall Mart still sold parakeets. Anyhow, she didn’t ask. My humiliation might have been public, but my triumph would be secret. She told me she’d always wanted a bird.

Tigger and Lambchop took so little interest in our new pet that I wondered aloud about letting it fly through the house.

“Let’s not tempt fate,” Hilda said.

So we never did.

§

NEXT CHRISTMAS we received a card from Ebenezer. The red envelope was addressed to both of us, in an elaborate cursive, with my name first. I wanted to see if his taste in stationery would be as outlandish

PRAYERS

as his rings or his prayers, but he'd been Hilda's minister, not mine. I waited for her to come back from the Econoclast and put the perishables away, and then I handed her the letter opener.

On the front of the card, a pelican was feeding its young with drops of blood from its own breast. I looked uneasily at the little blue bird in the gilded cage in the corner of the dining room. Hilda had named it Dovie. "What does it say?"

"*Even a Bird Can Save a Soul,*" she said, wiping her eyes. Hilda can get pretty sentimental at times. "He wrote it himself. Bless his heart."

For a while, I was mute as Dovie. But I finally said I was surprised he'd had it in him—knowing that, whatever our mutual sins, I had spoken the truth.

Fat Eyes

AFTER HER DADDY PHONED from the hospital, Harriet couldn't look at the country-cured hams without crying. Since he weighed nearly as much as she did—300 pounds—the doctors had decided to keep Henry for “observation,” even though his heart monitor was putting the timer for the new deep-fat fryer to shame. Then and there, Harriet promised to spend more time *observing* them both.

At one-thirty, when the lunch stampede had dwindled to a few strays grazing at the salad bar, she told Demarcus, the assistant manager of Karrie's Kountry Kookhouse, that she'd be taking her two-week vacation “starting right now.” She'd look in on Henry during visiting hours, mornings and evenings, and use the rest of her time to get started on the PoundsAway Program. She'd seen it advertised on the placemats at the restaurant for the past month. RESULTS GUARANTEED! LOSE THE WEIGHT! WAIT TO PAY!

“Baby, you're not fat,” Demarcus said. “You're just—*comfortable*.”

“Not like you,” she said. “I'm no La-Z-Boy.”

Demarcus threw her grin right back at her. “I never had no chair in mind, Harriet.” He patted the worn red vinyl of the empty booth. “More like a love seat.”

How come the blackest men had the best teeth? She untied her apron and tossed it onto the Formica. “Dream on, honey.” Too bad Demarcus was married.

POUNDSAWAY (Incorporated) stuck out in the new strip shopping mall on the east side of Belladonna Commons, sandwiched between a florist and a Sara Lee outlet store. The glass doors opened with the wink of an electric eye, just like at the Econoclast. Except for the Weigh Station with a digital scale, it was one big open room lined with mirrors that hung like icicles down to the gray industrial carpet.

They'd told her the details over the phone. You paid one dollar for every pound you lost until you hit your goal weight. Then you went on Maintenance for at least a year, and, for the incentive, paid a little extra for whatever you gained back. They took her MasterCard number and said that programs started on the hour, nine to five, Mondays through Saturdays.

Now it was almost five o'clock. About two dozen white women were hovering around the scale, most of them skinny as hummingbirds, shivering in leotards. Harriet was glad she'd decided to wear a fleece warmup suit. It might have been the middle of March, but it still felt colder inside the building than in the parking lot.

She decided to approach the one woman dressed in something Harriet might have found in her own closet. The name tag said JOLENE. "Why are they all wearing bedroom slippers?" Harriet whispered.

"Maintenance girls. Gotta make their goal weight every week. Weigh over, pay over. Ten dollars a pound. Five dollars a shoe." Jolene's laugh sounded more like a sneeze. "You learn to choose your clothes real careful around here."

"Couldn't they bring a coat?"

"If it goes through the door, it goes on the scale. Corporate policy."

Harriet fingered the name tag on her own jacket.

"Oh, you did good for the first time, Sugar. It'll just add to your base weight. That way you'll have a few ounces to play with later on."

A buzzer sounded, and one of the mirrors on the far side of the room opened from the back. A tiny blond with a Mary Lou Retton haircut appeared in the shortest shorts Harriet had ever seen. Harriet stared at her thighs, then looked down at her own arms glumly. It was no contest.

“Hi. My name’s Bambi, and I’ll be y’all’s Loss Facilitator for today.” She adjusted the Wonderbra under her tank top, then blew her coach’s whistle. “Time to get our meat on the hoof, ladies!”

The skinniest women began to line up in front of the scale. Harriet and Jolene fell in at the end, where they couldn’t see what Bambi was doing.

“Excellent!” Bambi said. “Ladies, what do we say?”

“Aaaaah.”

Harriet began to wonder if she should report her credit card stolen—as of yesterday. Then she looked at Jolene. She wasn’t thin, but she didn’t look fat either, at least not by Harriet’s standards. “How much’ve you lost since you started?”

“Me? Two hundred and fifty pounds.”

Harriet felt her heart flutter.

Jolene grimaced. “That’s twenty-five pounds, ten times. I’m glad my husband can afford it.”

The *ooooohs* were leading the *aaaaahs* by about three to one. Most of the Maintenance girls weren’t making their goal weights. Bambi had to go to the Weigh Station desk for extra credit-card slips.

The line finally shrunk to Harriet. “First time?” Bambi said.

Harriet nodded as she placed her left foot on the scale, then slowly raised her right one to join it.

“Three-oh-four. Congratulations, Harriet!” Bambi handed her a white thirty-two-ounce plastic cup with a scarlet straw sticking out of the top. It said MOST AMBITIOUS LOSER in block letters. “Your personalized diet will arrive in the mail next week. Until then, just remember—water has no calories! Drink whenever you feel hungry!”

Bambi told the rest of the women to form a circle, then cart-wheeled into the center. She stood on her hands while she spoke. “Now that I’ve got y’all’s attention, today we’re going to work on self-denial.”

Jolene’s knee nudged Harriet’s. “Two face lifts and a BMW and she’s an expert on self-denial. Wait’ll you hear about how she lost seven pounds for her balance-beam dismount.”

“PORTION CONTROL!” the backflipping Bambi continued. “That’s the key to Lifestyle Management! Now I’ll need a volunteer.” She stuck her final landing, then stared squarely at Harriet. “Who’s our resident expert on portions?”

Harriet felt like a horseshoe magnet surround by an army of compass needles.

“Well, I work in Karrie’s Kountry Kookhouse. I make them up all the time.”

“Excellent!” Bambi said. “We eat what we see. We become what we eat.” She hooked Harriet by the elbow and hauled her to the nearest mirror. “We see what we become.” Bambi faced the group and pointed her thumb backward over her shoulder. “Harriet is living proof.”

Bambi took a Ziploc bag and a postal scale out of the Weigh Station desk drawer.

“Sliced turkey breast,” Harriet said. “You’d better refrigerate that.”

“It’s for demonstration purposes,” Bambi said. “Pure silicone. We won’t be eating anything.” Even when she frowned, the ends of her mouth still pointed upward. She handed Harriet the Ziploc bag but kept the small scale on her side of the Weigh Station. “Give me an ounce, Harriet. One ounce.”

“I don’t know if I can.” Harriet felt herself blushing. She’d failed algebra in high school, twice. “I never was much good with numbers.”

Bambi sighed. “Whatever you’d put on a sandwich.”

Harriet took out the customary Karrie’s portion for a Club Special, then lifted off one rubbery slice—then one more—to put back into the bag. “There,” she said.

Her brown eyes dilating, Bambi walked backward to the mirrored door, then disappeared. She returned with somebody who looked like Dolly Parton before she hit puberty.

“What did I tell you, Melanie?”

Melanie’s platinum hairdo moved slowly, from side to side. “Sweet Jesus, you’re right! Those are the fattest eyes I’ve ever seen!”

Bambi dropped the loose silicone slices on the postal scale and waited for it to finish wobbling. “Four and a half ounces. What do we say, ladies?”

“Ooooooh.”

“See y’all next week,” Bambi said.

Bambi stopped Harriet on her way out. “Maybe it’s a perceptual problem. Maybe it has nothing to do with your character.”

§

HARRIET HAD PLANNED to drive straight to the hospital, but now she decided to go to her daddy’s empty house instead. Her mama drank herself to death in her wheelchair three years ago, in keeping with her conviction that women never had heart attacks—they were too busy giving them away. Harriet threw her MOST AMBITIOUS LOSER cup against the microwave oven. For the first time she could remember, Harriet envied Lucinda—all one hundred and thirty-three hillbilly pounds of her—safely underground, embalmed in her own Southern Comfort, where she couldn’t cause any more damage.

Maybe her daddy hadn’t done his laundry before feeling those chest pains on Thursday. Hopefully, Harriet checked the hamper in the bathroom—nothing, not even a pair of socks. So she walked back to the kitchen and looked for anything else that might require her attention. But the poor man had even emptied the dishwasher before driving himself to the hospital.

Her teeth had been clenched for the whole fifteen minutes since PoundsAway. They still were. She had to do *something*. So she gathered her daddy’s clean shirts from the bedroom closet and carried them downstairs on their hangers. Ironing, she’d decided, might be even better than washing—for letting off steam.

The old ironing board stood next to the washer-dryer. When Harriet grabbed for the slender chain that had just brushed against her face, the overhead light didn’t come on. She kept pulling and letting go, listening to it clicking, till she finally reached up to remove the bulb. But it was only loose in the socket, not burned out. After she turned it clockwise, it almost blinded her.

She looked down and rubbed the spots from her eyes. “First thing gone right today.”

Trying not to smile, she smoothed the iron over the checkered cotton, enjoying the scent of the steam. It reminded her of cooking,

without the calories. In twenty minutes she put her father's last shirt back on its hanger, admiring the crisp collar that would never come straight out of a dryer, no matter what the Permanent Press label said. She felt better. And she skipped supper for the first time she could remember.

§

FROM THE OPEN DOORWAY, he looked asleep. "Henry?" Ever since Harriet's mama had died, her daddy had insisted she call him by his first name. "How you feeling?"

"It's only cause I'm a veteran," he said, opening his eyes and waving his big right hand over the bedsheets. "That's why I'm still here. Frigging Commies."

Harriet grabbed his wrist to slow him down. She didn't want him pulling out his IV and making the machine next to his bed go crazy. "That's silly," she said.

"I got benefits, see? Good benefits. They know Uncle Sam gone take care of me, right down to the box he'll bury me in. If I was just Medicare, they'd've kicked my butt outta here this morning." He shoved the bed rail with his foot. "They know. Nurse even call me Sergeant."

Harriet smiled. Her daddy complained the way some people played five Bingo cards at once on Wednesday nights. "You still haven't told me how you're feeling."

"Like I got a sandbag on my chest." He snickered. "Taking a leak. I walked round the whole floor after lunch. Didn't even lean on the wall."

"Do tell."

"Last night they said my major arteries looked like LA during an earthquake. They didn't know I could hear." He shook his head. "I guess they need a laugh too. Job must get damn depressing. Dealing with fat niggers like me."

Harriet blushed for them both. Then she told him she'd started her program at PoundsAway. "Maybe you'd like to read these brochures," Harriet said, cautiously putting them under the case for his reading glasses. "They make a lot of sense, Henry."

“*Snacking on the Hoof. Feeding Your Guilt. Drowning Your Fat.* Read this? My goldfish are dying, and I’m supposed to worry about drowning my fat?”

“I fed them,” Harriet said. “Just came from the house.”

“Bless you,” he said. “Have a cheeseburger for me. They’re in the freezer.”

“Which one?” She wasn’t planning to eat it, but at least she could throw it out to make him feel better.

“Upstairs. Cheeseburgers in Paradise. I only keep the stuff from the hunting trips downstairs.” He gave her his best laugh of the day. “Went through Hell to get it. Figure it should stay there.”

§

FOR THE NEXT WEEK, Harriet kept her water cup in plain sight, vacuumed the carpets three times a day (for the exercise), and slept over at her daddy’s house. She stayed in her own bedroom—the one she couldn’t remember ever *not* knowing, though the family had moved in when she was two and a half, almost thirty-five years ago. The bed hadn’t seemed so small then. It held the whole world—her Barbies, her Kens, her stuffed Bullwinkle, even her best friend, Mary. A sweet, gap-toothed white girl who’d sneak inside and use the mattress as a trampoline whenever both their mamas were drunk, which was most every day.

Harriet bit her lip. Whenever she filled her big cup at the Frigidaire, she’d opened the freezer side and stared at the cheeseburgers, individually wrapped, stacked like old 45s in a jukebox. She’d stick the straw between her teeth and suck deeply. *Portion Control. We eat what we see.* Today, she shut her eyes and closed the skinny door. She’d have to weigh in again the day after tomorrow.

She sucked more water, then sniffed suspiciously. Something seemed to float over the potpourri that she’d put on the kitchen table. She inspected the vegetable bins and found two withered apples and a soft potato with a black bottom. She double-wrapped them in plastic grocery bags and threw them into the garbage pail.

When she came back from her morning visit to the hospital, the smell was still there—only more so. She checked the bags—they didn’t

seem to be leaking. Squatting on her knees in the dining room, she sniffed the carpet. The scent was stronger but coming from no place in particular. Maybe your sense of smell got better when you ate less. She'd already cracked 300 naked pounds on Henry's bathroom scale.

She decided that putting Lysol into the toilets and sinks might help. Her daddy stored all the cleaning supplies downstairs, so she trudged down the hallway.

When she opened the door to the basement, she gagged.

The stairwell light flickered and popped, so she had to step slowly in darkness, holding her breath, listening to the wooden stairs creaking beneath her.

Groping her way to the laundry room, she could feel her feet sticking to the concrete. She breathed through her mouth as shallowly as she could. When she pulled the light chain, the bulb dimmed and wavered as soon as it went on. A soft whirring began from the concrete wall behind her.

In daylight the dark puddles might have been brown or red. The biggest one sat at the bottom of the freezer. She opened the door—then kicked it shut, coughing, leaving a bloody footprint under the handle.

This is what we eat. This is what we become.

§

“CALM DOWN, HARRIET. Come on girl, just spit it out.”

She stammered about the stench, the blood, the soggy mess still in the freezer.

“You downstairs before?”

She sniffled. “I ironed your shirts last week.”

“Did you turn off the light? With the chain?”

She nodded.

“It's the only good socket in the basement now. That's why I loosen the bulb. So the freezer keep running.”

She knelt on the linoleum squares and put her head on the bed-sheets, sobbing. “I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm so sorry.”

“Hey there,” he said, patting the crown of her head. “It’s just an old deer I shot three years ago. Could have died a natural death by now.”

“The smell,” Harriet said. “You can’t imagine it.”

“Just throw everything into some Heftys and hose down the floor. Use the Wet Vac to suck it up.”

“Can I put some bleach in the water?”

“Sure, honey. Much as you want.” He lifted her chin with the tip of his finger. “OK?”

She could still feel her own shoulders shaking. “The body, Henry,” she said. “Where should I bury it?”

“The trash, honey. Put it in the trash.”

“Mister Pritchard won’t take it. It’s disgusting, it’s—oh God, those white women stare at me like I’m some kind of animal.”

Now he held her face in both his hands. “You my baby,” he said. She could still see the scab from his IV line. “Did I ever tell you you got named after me?”

“After you?”

“That’s right. Henry. Harry. Harriet. Lucinda and me—well, we didn’t always fight. That was just her pain speaking. We got along good, before she messed up her back. You should’ve seen her. Anyway, we *sure* you gone be a boy. Don’t ask me how. And she wanted to name you after me. She insisted. And you know how your mama got when she insisted on anything.”

“God yes,” Harriet said.

“So you were little Henry for six months. Boy, were we surprised.”

She was still crying, but she laughed anyway. “You mean *girl*.”

“Harriet was my idea.” He wiped her cheek with the corner of his bedsheet. “After a few weeks, we wondered why we ever wanted a boy. You should’ve seen the look in your mama’s eye whenever she fed you.” He smiled. “Things got a way of working out. Just stay away from those skinny little bitches.” He picked up *Drowning Your Fat* from the nightstand and Frisbeed it through the open doorway of the bathroom. “Did I hit the toilet for once?”

“Almost,” she laughed. “Almost, Henry.”

HARRIET COULDN'T EVEN think about sleeping until she'd cleaned up the basement. She found a dust mask next to the paint brushes, which cut the stench if she kept her breaths short and shallow.

It took her till four o'clock in the morning, and she felt proud of herself. Mister Pritchard, if he was on time for once in his life, would be coming at dawn—she hadn't wanted the neighborhood dogs and cats to be tempted for a whole week before the next pickup. And after the bleach and the Wet Vac, the basement smelled more like a swimming pool than a slaughterhouse.

Now it didn't seem worth going to sleep. She had her instant coffee—no sugar, no cream, plenty of hot water—and waited for the garbage truck to make its morning rounds.

Then she decided to weigh in a day early.

She took a Ziploc bag from the kitchen cabinet and walked outside to the curb.

She held her breath and untwisted the plastic tie on the black Hefty. Then she took out the first piece she could find—a shoulder roast still dripping in Handi-Wrap—and shoved it inside the clear one-gallon bag.

Inside her father's house, Harriet ran her fingernail along the raised seam, just to make sure it was perfect. *Doe, a deer, a female deer . . .* Let's see her slice off an ounce from *this*. And when doe-eyed Bambi tells her it stinks, it's disgraceful, it's disgusting, she'll just *oooooh* and tell her to have a little more respect—for her relations.