

Perfect

by Gary Moshimer

In the cafeteria we have the cheese fries. Sara's favorite. She eats with two fingers, pinching like a crane. Cheese drips and she licks the fingers. She licks the plate. She goes for it. Big Lulu, the cook, calls from the back. "That's what I like to see." We have the cheese fries every day, and Lulu says the same thing every time. Our days must follow the same pattern, or Sara gets upset.

After the cafeteria we have strawberry ice cream at Moo Man's. The Moo Man, a guy in a cow suit, always shakes our hands and says, "MOO." And Sara giggles. He gives her the place mat to color. It's getting harder for her to stay in the lines. She shakes more.

Sometimes her hand will clench tightly for thirty seconds, a knot of pain. The crayons snap and she cries. Sometimes the hand crushes the cones without warning. A new medicine helps a little. At times I feed her, and she has a terribly sad look on her face.

At the car I lift her from the wheelchair and put her in the front seat. I fold the chair and put it in the back. I buckle her in. She is still afraid, every time. She digs her nails into my arms and I am glad I keep them clipped. I take good care of her. There was only one night that I didn't. Didn't buckle her in because we were young and invincible and were drinking. Didn't buckle myself, either, but she was the one thrown from the car and I was the one that tossed around in the back seat protected like a cocoon in our make-out blankets.

Whenever I start the car she punches my leg as hard as she can, as if to say I should have taken care of her. So I hold her leg gently but the difference is she can't feel it. And before moving I'll take her face in my hands and kiss her deeply. Her face is thinner, a little lopsided, but I tell her I love her so much, she is so beautiful. Her eyes melt me. They say to curl her into a ball. I hide her face in my

armpit as we drive. I drive to our apartment and carry her all the way in. She likes that.

Then I must do her catheter. I sit her on the toilet, open the package and slide the little lubricated hose in. The gush of hot urine is always like a miracle, a blessing as the flow vibrates my fingers, the stream that reassures the cycle of life. At the end she lets a sigh of relief. We have done something essential but wonderful. I wipe the lube from her and she clutches my hand. "Do you want to do it?" I ask. She squirms and does the coy smile. I rub her a little. She grabs my hair. I carry her to the bed.

She cannot feel anything down there. But the doctors say the real sex organ is the brain, sight and sound and memory. She has become very loud now, twisting her upper half, saying it is so much better in her brain. She is so much sexier now. Sometimes it's like she wants to get away and can't, and I'm like, "Yeah, take it."

The brain is such a beast I can't last. After a few minutes of watching her I'm ready again. We do it four times this afternoon. The upstairs tenant is banging on the floor begging to die.

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She always dreams of running and wakes me up at 2 a.m. to say I was chasing her in the woods, and I looked so angry, I fought with her, hit her with a branch and wanted her to die. "I'm always where you put me," she cries. "Always."

The next day, after Moo Man's, I take her to her doctor appointment. "You'll be thirty-two, Sara," he says. "Do you want to have a baby?"

"We can do that?" We always assumed we couldn't.

"We can do some simple screening. If Sara would want that."

We are supposed to discuss it and go back, but Sara has it stuck in her mind now. She fidgets while I do her catheter. "I want the baby," she says. "That's what I want."

"But..."

"No. Look what you've done to me. I need the baby."

Sometimes the mean things slip from her mouth, and I let them go. Sometimes, I hope, she doesn't know what she's saying.

So, we go without the condoms. Sara is a screaming maniac, four times a day for five days, until finally the landlord comes, summoned by the upstairs tenant. There's a police car on the street. They want to make sure I'm not beating her. "We're trying to have a baby," I tell him. He raises his eyebrows. "You know she has poor self-control," I say, and he says he must give me a warning.

It doesn't take long for her to miss her period. I put so much seed into her. We go to the CVS to pick out a pregnancy test. She starts crying there in the aisle, tears streaming down. In the harsh light she looks so forlorn, and her hair looks stringy, her face pale and broken out, and I take it upon myself. I've let her go. "This is supposed to be happy," I tell her, but sometimes I cannot decipher her actions, or read her thoughts, and she will not tell me. I think sometimes she hates me. She never tells me she loves me as much as I love her. She may never do that again.

We take a couple kits and get out of there. I grab shampoo and conditioner at the checkout, and some lady razors and some leg cream. I grab some dollar socks, frilly white with red hearts. I do this behind her back. I am thinking of her nice red dress when I pick the red hair bows.

I drain her bladder, some drops for the little stick. I shave her legs while we wait. I'm nervous about cutting her. I want a perfect job for

a special occasion. I rub the lotion and kiss all her toes with serious affection. If anyone can bring her legs back it would be me. I rub her cramped calves. I help her into the tub and wash her back and her hair. I blow dry her hair and it is a lush golden brown, the best I've ever done.

By then the stick shows positive, fit for her beauty. "Now this baby will grow inside a princess," I say. "It will be perfect."

I slip the red dress over her head. It was our first dress together in the school gym. Everyone watched us dance, king and queen.

She doesn't mind the little socks. "I'm a baby," she says.

"You're my baby," I say, which is the wrong thing to say. She punches my forehead. Her hands start shaking so I put some make up on her, and a little lipstick. "We're going to celebrate."

She calls her mother, who squawks on the line: "He did that to you? Who will take care of it?"

I'm calling in the background that it's not official.

Sara's eyes tear up and she slams the phone. She looks me defiantly in the eye and says, "I will."

"Where will we go to celebrate, Sara?"

She slides the stick over her ear like a cigarette. "The cafeteria."

She's so classy. I slip on her red heels and she feels like Cinderella.

