

Settling

by M. Barns

When Janie came home she found one cup in the sink, but the ice from another still in the drain, partially melted. Her first instinct was to look in the cabinet. To look for a glass that was still warm from the washing machine, a glass that still had condensation on the rim. But she knew what she would find. She knew it all the moment she felt the sticky fingerprints behind the slat of her old oak slay bed. The fingerprints that would only be left from a person grabbing it from behind their head. The fingerprints that she used to leave within the first year of her marriage.

It had been a particularly hard day at the hospital. Someone called out, so her 12 hour shift became a 15, and just when she was about to leave her neighbors called and said they were bringing their daughter in. They asked if she could bump her to the front of the ER line. She could hear the worry in their voices as they tried to not sound concerned about their daughter, who often came to play with her dog in the summer afternoons while she putted around the garden. Sometimes Janie liked to pretend that she was hers, that she was old enough to have a child that was thirteen. Or that she wasn't pre-occupied throughout her twenties with medical school, and settled down like the rest of her sorority sisters. But she reminded herself it was spring, the time for love to re-blossom, and that she would still be 29 for another month. Statistically speaking, she had that one month before her chances of pregnancy dropped. Statistically speaking, if she truly wanted a child, it shouldn't have been so hard to try more frequently with her husband.

Janie and Carl had met when they were fifteen. High school sweethearts who went to separate colleges, and fell out of love. When they both ended up in the same, small, mid-western graduate program after not speaking for two years Janie had convinced herself that it was fate. There could be no other reason that they

would have been thrown together in a school that only took fifteen new students a year. They were married that next September. Janie was twenty-three, and still three years from starting her residency. Carl started working in the private sector, and said he didn't mind that she wasn't able to work a full-time job. He never mentioned that he always expected her to drop out to have children.

Even though she has been on her feet for close to twenty hours, Janie could still feel the harsh, pressed creases of her scrubs against her body. She imagined they would soften if she washed them at home, instead of having them dry cleaned, but Janie knew that she wouldn't have time, or that if she did she would spend it lying in bed, or soaking in a bath, wondering what her husband was doing on the other side of the country. Wondering if he'd call this time, or just stop by and pack another bag between trips. But the added ice in the sink didn't give her comfort. She knew that her husband was not alone. That he had brought a stranger into their house. Either a business partner he didn't want her to meet—or worse. But he would always deny that it was worse— always deny that there was anyone there at all. And she never told him that, every time, she found fresh condensation on one glass in the cabinet, and the disregarded ice in the sink.

But that night Janie decided she wanted to try. That she wanted to find her husband and hold on to him the same way that she did when she first found him again. Hold him like she was afraid he would figure her out, and know who she really was. Hold him like she was trying to trick herself into loving him. But when she entered the bedroom he was asleep, bags already packed and next to the door. He had lined the space between where their bodies would rest with pillows, and she could see the high-arched neck of his pajamas peeking from around the sheets. But when she grabbed him, after climbing into bed— really grabbed him, he rolled over, smiled and said *good morning, beautiful*. It wasn't morning, and she

didn't think he ever saw her as beautiful, but it was a start. And a start was all she could ask for.

