

Olfactory

by Martha Mattingly Payne

Poised at the top of the basement steps, Mary called her son's name, then counted five. "David, honey?" she tried once more, but in her gut, familiar with the comings and goings of men, she could feel her son's absence. She turned into the kitchen and plucked the last of the Saturday laundry from the mouth of her space-saver dryer—a lemon yellow polo, the collar worn, a slit up the right tail seam. The shirt was still warm. Mary pressed it to her face, breathed in the clean scent of the soft cotton-knit, the faint earthy whiff of David deep in its fibers. She folded back the sleeves, met tail to neckline, and stacked the shirt in her laundry basket on top of another—same worn collar, same familiar fragrance, a nearly identical shirt, only mint green.

Like fraternal twins, all these shirts of David's.

The afternoon sun fell in sullen patches across her kitchen table. Outside, a cluster of brown-tipped daffodils curled toward the cool spring grass, looking, Mary thought, nearly as tired as she felt. Running her tongue over her teeth, she probed for caught bits of onion and found instead a crumb of chocolate wafer, a residue of the dill pickle she'd enjoyed with her sandwich a short while ago. Mary lunched late on Saturdays, preferring to finish most of her chores first. Such a relief it was to sit, to savor both her tuna on wheat and the idle passage of time after the hasty, gossipy leftovers she spooned up five days a week from her Tupperware bowl in the office break room.

Hoisting basket to hip, she returned to the stairs and started down. The basement was hot, the windows on its daylight wall filmed with moisture. Funnels of steam escaped the bathroom at the back corner and gathered into clouds near the playroom overhead, which burned full-force, as did the bathroom fixture, the bulb in the fish tank, the lamps in David's bedroom beyond. Mary stepped over a tangle of video wires, nudged aside with her shoe a half-eaten bag

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of popcorn gone filmy and rancid. A scramble of CDs (or were they DVDs?) covered one end of the coffee table, and orange juice had puddled at the other. The empty carton lay close by, overturned on the latest issue of *Sports Illustrated*, under which was a draft of a school report—Christian Symbolism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—its pages obscured by a photo of Barry Bonds at the plate, his swollen features full of rage and determination as he slung his bat through the strike zone.

Boys, she mused, smiling, loving the fact she'd birthed them, ruing the futility of training them. She set the basket on the sofa and lifted the report. She tapped the pages on the table, evening them up before reading the topic sentence, which sounded anything but Christian. It had been a long time since Mary had read a book, *any* book, much less one so charged with meaning. Setting the report a safe distance from the spilled juice, she reached for the baseball jersey that lay abandoned at her feet. Pungent with sweat, one sleeve was caught beneath the sofa leg. Pinching her nose with one hand, Mary yanked with the other, then yanked again, and again.

The jersey snapped free and with it came a bit of trash, a scrap of plastic wrapper. It was glossy and kite-shaped, aggressively purple and lettered in bottomless black. **TRO-**, Mary read, hitting her knees, knowing the rest. She hurled the wrapper aside, wiped her hand on her blouse. As if intimately hers now, it fluttered to rest against the knob of her anklebone, where it clung fondly to the creased nylon of her knee-high stocking. Mary brushed it away, swallowing the bile rising in her throat, then thinking twice, she lifted the wrapper and slipped it into the pocket of her slacks. She stood and her blood rushed so that she felt a chill, then a dizzying flush of warmth. Glancing at the empty key hook next to the garage door, she walked across the playroom, ignoring the trail of dirty clothes underfoot, the sour uniform pants, the grimy socks, the jockstrap that at least he'd waited to peel off until he crossed the bathroom threshold. Once inside the bathroom, Mary inhaled—how long had she been holding her breath? And there again, a faint eau de David hung in the humid air, that heartbreaking blend of cherry-

berry shampoo and a musk aftershave too heady for a boy his age.

She fell against the doorjamb. *Think*, Mary. Don't feel. To hell with therapy and *think*. "Certainly not mine," she quipped aloud. Yet did this scrap of trash necessarily belong to her son? Might be something that awful boy Flynn left behind. Or, say it was her son's ... she had two sons! Wouldn't the logical conclusion be that it belonged to Danny, her twenty-one year old who'd launched himself years before, God help him, with not so much as a GED to his name? And other options existed, plenty of them. David could have been helping out a desperate friend, maybe hiding the evidence—how like him! And such a comfort—really, it was—to think David, or Flynn, or *any* teenager these days would have the sense and good judgment to use protection. Still ... oh hell, but she couldn't help it, couldn't smother the image of a dim, smoky room, parents out of town, dark, sultry lyrics set to an erotic melody, couples sprawled on every cushioned surface—even on the bare floor (who needed cushions at their age?).

And so what? As if she'd been such an angel, back in the day. And nowadays ... well, who could care? Who would even notice? Mary turned, glanced at the sofa, the sagging skirt, the frayed piping, the comfortable slouch of its frame slumped in shame. She bit her lip, scrunched shut her eyes against a second image—the two of them, lying there, disheveled. Stifling the tug of longing these images irrationally provoked, the slight tightening in her crotch, Mary turned away and marched into David's room, passing quickly by keepsakes she normally lingered over—the display of Little League trophies on the window sill, the collage of Varsity letters tacked on the wall, the St. Christopher's medal hanging from a silver chain. As expected, the card was on the bedside table. For weeks, ever since David's 17th birthday, it had lain flat beneath the biography of Jackie Robinson Mary had given him in hopes he would take an interest in reading something, anything, before re-taking his SAT's. But today the card was propped against the lamp, as if someone had perched it there, as if someone *wanted* her to take a closer look, which she did. Homemade, the card featured a full-spread photo of the two of them,

David and his girl, arm-in-arm on a windswept beach. They were achingly beautiful, the photo enlarged, cropped tight, a little grainy, but it didn't matter. Their skin was tanned and radiant, their hair thick and silken, their eyes bright in the Florida sun.

Mary touched the image of her son's face with her thumb. David. And his girl. David. And Bianca. David and his girl Bianca. *Bianca?* Blanca! Blanche! In any language, white. *Immaculata*—ha! She opened the card. *Happy Birthday!* it read. *Can't wait to celebrate! And thanks, for everything. LYF!!!! B.*

Mary's throat clenched. Her scalp crawled. How uninspired. No, how stupid—as if *Forever* could mean the first thing to them; as if *Love* could mean anything at all. There was the requisite heart dotting the lowercase *i*'s, the smiley face in the belly of each *o*. These she might have expected. It was the comma, dark, heavy-handed, perhaps even gone over twice, that worried her. Why a comma just there, after *Thanks*, unless special, perhaps secretive, emphasis was intended for the words that followed? *Thanks for everything* meant one thing, *Thanks, for everything*, it seemed, meant something else altogether.

Mary cupped her fingers to her mouth. They smelled of sugar. And grapefruit. *Happy*. Her fingers, the card, smelled of *Happy*, Bianca's scent. Hand shaking, she set down the card. It had to be someone else's, this middle aged, trembling hand, each knuckle a pucker of wrinkles. She sat heavily on the edge of David's bed, unmade. A scrap of black fabric shifted beside her. Hinged beneath her full hip, it was the bow tie David would wear that evening. Sighing, Mary decided to ignore it, then didn't. She slipped the tie out, stroked its curved satin tail, and set it beyond the sleek tux slacks tossed carelessly across layers of rumpled blanket. Across the tidier end of the bed lay the jacket with its slim satin lapels, the shirt with muted pleats, and in a small velvet box, the silver links that had been left in a sock drawer by Danny's father, her first husband. Or her almost husband, her first fiancé. With a dramatic swoop of her torso, Mary buried her nose in the shirt, which had belonged to her *second* husband, actually her only husband to date, David's father.

This shirt smelled only of the cleaners, which coincidentally was where it had been the day David's father left, the day after they attended a friend's wedding together, a friend whose name she couldn't bring to mind. At the time she'd been a good friend, a colleague, someone she attended movies with, the occasional Happy Hour. She must have been important to Mary, important enough for her to cajole her husband into going along. Weddings of any kind had made him tetchy, and this one had been a large formal ceremony with a full Mass. She'd known about his distaste for pomp and ceremony from day one, had thus planned their own wedding as a small civil affair. Danny, barely four years old, had served as both best man and maid of honor. Sometimes Mary wondered, if she'd relented about her friend's wedding that day, respected whatever it was that had made him so anxious ... well, what was the point. He had left. They always left.

And wasn't that the real wonder, that after all these years she still didn't understand why. Life to her had come to resemble one of those mazes you find in a puzzle book, *inscrutable* except by those with exceptional IQs. She would run her pencil down one path in search of the passage that might penetrate to the exit, then another, but the paths she chose always looped elaborately back to the same confined space, a sterile circle, just as often a square or octagon, yet always at heart a stamp of white completely hemmed in with black ink.

Mary stood, rearranged the slacks, the shirt, the tie, and why not make the fucking bed? This was her portion, her daily cross to bear, and was there a better alternative? She could simmer by the door and prepare to pounce, she could cry, or she could make the bed. She chose the latter, found strength in the mindless gratification it provided. Then she walked away but with less haste, pausing to look over the pack of small stuffed bears clumped on the lowest level of David's bookshelf. To think he had kept them all these years, one for each Valentine's Day that had come and gone since he outgrew the big, cuddly type Mary gave him when he was small. His favorite had been the panda, mostly white, that purred when he pressed the

smudge of black fur on its tummy. It used to help him fall asleep. *Purr, purr, purr*, she would hear through the thin walls of their first matchbox house as she folded his little shirts, sorted his little socks, washed their dishes or repaired the drip in the faucet, while Danny with soft eager fingers turned all the wrong knobs and confused the nuts and bolts.

She moved on, passing again by the trophies, the Varsity letters, and the St. Christopher's medal hanging from a pushpin David had thrust into the drywall himself. Mary's sister had given him the medal after agreeing to be his confirmation sponsor, lapsed as she was, due to the dearth of Catholics in their lives anymore. Thus had the two of them guided David, Mary at one hand, her sister at the other, down the aisle of the church. He'd been only eleven years old yet so discerning, smiling in coat and tie. Soon after, he'd offered to play the piano for the children's choir, a ragtag group of kids organized by the only remaining nun at the elementary school.

David didn't play the piano, Mary had reminded him. "I think they need me, Mom," he'd replied. "It's what Jesus would do," and for weeks, he practiced on the old upright in their den, picking out notes by ear, linking them chaotically into chords, hammering them out, over and over, and over again. So earnest and dogged, he'd reminded her of Jimmy Stewart's daughter in that holiday film—what was her name? There was Tommy, and the little one—ZuZu—with her dead flower, her handful of petals ... well, he'd practiced with the determination of ZuZu's sister then. And he'd done it, by golly. By Easter, David had composed an original version of both *Jesus Christ is Risen Today* and the *Song of St. Francis*. He was a boy of great faith, a wholly absurd and unjustified faith that had always mystified Mary, mostly fallen away as she was herself, mystified her so literally she'd come full circle back to the Papal fold. She smiled wryly at the irony of it.

But what was that little girl's name, the older sister? She'd forgotten. She forgot everything lately, something that made her feel shabby, out of touch with her sons, with the world, with herself—with what, after all, made Mary, *Mary*. At night, she could

feel it—Mary's Mary-ness sloughing away, boiling up. Up, up and out, out and up, up, up and away. *Good-bye Mary! Fare thee well! Go in peace! Same time next week! See ya later, alligator!* She sometimes heard voices, or dreamed them, men's voices—why only men's? Why not dream the sweet *Adieu!* of her girlfriend Sophia? Or her sister's *Kiss, kiss—call me?* But no, it was always a man Mary heard in the night, a lost lover, her therapist, a parish priest, David's father (*Check's in the mail, Hon*)—any man, everyman, all the men who had walked in and out of her life now found their way into her dreams, breathless tragic dreams from which she would wake, then dream, then wake, then dream, until finally she would rise up in her bed and sit shivering, her nipples sore, her nightgown drenched, her hair salty with sweat. She would throw back the covers and open her eyes to the bland silence of her bedroom, the empty hallway beyond, Danny gone and David's temperate breathing a flight of steps away. Then, blinking, she would slide to the dry, cool side of the bed, her heart gone limp and furrowed as the skin of a popped balloon.

Mary would remember, she *could* remember. ZuZu's mother was of course another Mary; the bad guy, Potter, and . . . Sam Wainwright! Big sister still a blank, but she felt some better having come up with the name of the jilted beau. Little wonder, too—to think how many cold December nights they'd snuggled in to watch together, the three of them—Danny decisively alone at one end of the sofa, David's warm, wiry body against hers, his short, hard shins pressing against her thighs, and Jimmy Stewart so sad and steadfast on the screen.

Well then. Mary walked back to the playroom. It was chilly now, the heat and steam having evaporated, the sunlight through the twin windows weakening as afternoon passed into evening. Pushing aside the laundry basket, she sat down and ran her hand over the span of carpet around the tell-tale leg of sofa, her fingers aching for something but finding nothing more than a cold spaghetti noodle, an M & M, finally a paper clip and the head of a Lego figure, Darth Vader, no less. Still there from some quiet afternoon of play—what, five, six years ago?

Then everything sped up—roar of car engine, screech of tire, a door opening, slamming shut, then another, and he was there.

“Mommy!” he cried, stopping short, his rampant bangs and the fringe of hair over his ears still patchy wet from the shower.

Mommy? Not that since he was ten.

“Had to run—almost forgot the corsage!”

Balanced in his outstretched hand, David held a clear plastic box containing a blush-pink orchid, its stem wrapped in emerald green. Mary sat there, wilted and frumpy, the toes of her flats pointed stupidly at each other, staring at the flower. How did they manage to pluck them—how many on a night like this, prom nights all over?—to pluck each one at this moment of perfection?

She worked Darth Vader between her fingers, afraid of what might happen if she looked into David's blue expectant eyes.

“You'll be late,” she said, eyes flicking from the corsage, to the Conrad report, back again. “She doesn't like when you're late.”

“Naa. Plenty of time,” he said, his voice gentle. “Mom?”

She shook her head, sat up and ran the rank baseball jersey across the warm orange juice.

“Oh, shit,” David said. “I mean shoot.” He glided the plastic box onto the coffee table. “Be right back.”

He raced to the car, again slammed a door, raced back in.

“For you, Madame,” he said, bowing ornately. His gaze fixed on his large bony feet in rubber flip-flops, his left forearm tucked against the hem of his tee shirt, he waited for her to accept his offering. Standing, Mary took it—a single white rose in bud. She held the tender neck, touched a petal to her nose, and sniffed. It was then the corners of her mouth began to sag, her eyes to well, her heart to succumb to the heavy press of years behind her, before her.

“Oh, Mom,” David said, abruptly pulling her close, hugging her tight, then just as quickly letting her go. “Got a clean tee in there?” he asked, gesturing towards the basket.

“I do.”

Wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand, Mary fumbled through the neat stack, tossed David a fresh cotton undershirt. He caught it, leapt into his room.

“Two seconds then can you help me with all this stuff?” he called, flipping the switch on his Ipod speakers.

Mary tucked Darth Vader into her pocket and smoothed her blouse. When David announced he was ready, she strode in. She noosed together his cummerbund, fastened his cuff links, straightened his tie, fingered once more the pleats of his shirt and ran her palms over the polished cotton stretched across his strong back. She helped him into the jacket then stood back as he slipped his feet—his long, vulnerable feet—into the black leather shoes they'd borrowed from her father.

“Thanks, Mom,” he said, turning to kiss her cheek, musk rising off his neck. He snatched the keys from their hook and called, “For the car too!” and pulled the door closed behind him.

“Be careful!”

The engine roared to life. Quickly, before the odor of musk could diffuse into the cool April night, Mary stowed David's clean clothes in their proper drawers, gathered his soiled laundry, and walked up to the kitchen, where she found a bud vase, dropped in an aspirin, filled it with water, then clipped the stem of her rose on the diagonal and thrust it in.

Later, she thought of it—Janie. “Janie Bailey,” she said aloud as she slid her Saturday rental video into its slot. Though Sophia had a date, she'd decided to go ahead with their girls' movie night, to go ahead with the delivery pizza and the Hugh Grant. Settling into the armchair in her bedroom, her sweet-smelling rose on the table beside her, Mary reached into her pocket. After polishing Vader's head with the tail of her blouse, she set it upright beside the rose in the vase so that his dark phantom eyes were fixed on the screen. Moving again to her pocket, her thumb grazed the scrap of purple wrapper and left it to be forgotten, to be kept close, like ZuZu's petals.

