

The Inconsequential Leaping of Rabbits

by shawnacy kiker

'You've got the dropsies,' her mother used to say to her when she was a girl. She had never been what anyone would call graceful, and indeed there had been a few years, growing up, when she was downright klutzy. Dropping the salad dressing all over the damask tablecloth one year at Thanksgiving dinner; dropping the offering plate at church, folded dollar bills caught in a draft under the pews, blowing in every direction, coins careering down the slightly sloped concrete floor toward the platform like hallelujah converts; dropping her father's keys in the sand once at the seashore. They had been packing up to leave, she and her two brothers, mother and father all laden, knees to chin, with beach bags and towels, ice chests and folding chairs, making the long sunburned trek across the sand to the parking lot. It had been a thoroughly nice day, and they were all pleasantly tired and salt-buzzed from too many epic holes dug and spectacular Frisbee catches, and nobody even caught on to the missing keys until they were all packed in, belted, snoozy, ready for the warm trip home. When the keys could not be located either in her father's pockets, the ash tray, the strange, pointless plastic region between the two front seats, her mother's pockets, her mother's purse, or the floor of the car; the trunk was unpacked, the bags searched, and the members of the family interrogated, to discover which had been the one to pick up the keys from their place next to the wallet on the corner of the beach blanket. The resultant two hour search through the endless miniature dunes of beach sand, finally yielded the keys (miracle of miracles), along with a thoroughly irritated family party and a new nickname — Teflon.

It wasn't a daily occurrence, by any means, but they would hit Alice, these phases of dropsiness, from time to time, like a special dispensation of specific gravity, and in these stations, nothing was

safe. She dropped her prom ticket in the gutter outside the Tom's Tacos where the sweaty-palmed party of six had stopped for an overdressed ironic dinner before the night's festivities, and though it was finally recovered, the ticket retained so much damage from silty, brackish gutter water that it was no longer recognizable as an entrance fee and had to be replaced to the tune of \$65.00 which her date's father had to bring from home while they waited for him silently on the corner.

She had been paranoiically wary the first time she held a baby.

Still. She had managed to get through having two children of her own, and the dropsieness of her youth had not troubled her in a decade, give or take.

It had been somewhat comical the first morning. Dropping her very hot, very full mug of coffee for no evident reason all over her black suit, to say nothing of the couch, the rug, the kids' homework folders, the basket of remote controls on the coffee table, and the coffee table itself. It wasn't like she had bumped the cup, either. It wasn't a case of having been jostled. For no good reason at all, the extra large mug had simply slipped from her fingers, tipping itself out toward the living room as it fell, covering everything in a two and a half foot radius with freshly prepared Seattle's Best, Level 3 Roast, liberally doctored with chocolate raspberry flavored CoffeeMate.

Surprised out of irritation, Alice managed to laugh through the ordeal, the last minute change of clothes; the attempts to salvage the homework folders, picking them up by a corner letting them drape, openfaced, over the sink; the dash to the kitchen for more dishtowels to sop up the puddled rug; laughing with her children over the mishap and regaling them with suddenly recalled memories of her childhood ailment.

Did I ever tell you guys about the time I dropped a brand new jar of Marshmallow Fluff all over the floor when I was little?

The children shook their heads, wide eyed.

Keep dabbing the cushion, Cade. Well, grandma NEVER let us have Fluff because she thought it was the grossest thing ever, but at

the store this ONE time, she said yes, and Uncle Randy and Uncle Peter and I were so excited, we decided we were going to share ONE fluffernutter every day after school for a month. We were so totally captivated by the prospect of a month of fluffernutters, that we felt jubilant. Magnanimous. Do you know what magnanimous means?

No.

Here, sweetie, use another towel. It means that you're so happy that you want to be nice to others and make them happy too. And Uncle Randy and Uncle Peter and I were feeling magnanimous because of the Marshmallow Fluff, and so we told Grandma that we'd put the groceries away, so she could go lie on the couch and rest. And Uncle Peter decided that we should put the groceries away like firemen, passing buckets along the line. So he'd stand on one end of the kitchen pulling things out of the bags, and handing them to me, and I'd run across the kitchen and hand them to Uncle Randy who would put the things in the fridge or the pantry or wherever they belonged. And we saved the Fluff for last because we had decided to make the first fluffernutter right then. So Peter handed me the jar, and I ran across the kitchen to pass it to Randy, but somewhere in between, the jar just slipped out of my hands and ... splat. All over the floor.

Cade's response: Did you get in trouble? Did Grandma go back to the store and get more Fluff? Were Uncle Pete and Uncle Randy mad? From Laila: Can we have fluffernutters after school?

...

The kids were deposited at school, and Alice, hip deep in phone messages, had already forgotten about the coffee that morning, to say nothing of the Marshmallow Fluff, when for no reason at all, she dropped a stack of files she was carrying to the conference room. Files she'd spent weeks typing and preparing, color coding, tabbing, and arranging in the correct order for her meticulous boss, suddenly bore an uncanny resemblance to a Mardi Gras morning-after .

She apologized profusely, and her boss — Paula, a woman Alice had never seen make one uncalculated movement — stood in the

conference room doorway and watched her and Gennine the receptionist attempt to shuffle the paper disaster back into meaning.

She made it through the meeting in a kind of quiet frenzy. She had perfected a calm, easy exterior, professional and charming at the same time, and she drew the other parties into warm conversation as she sifted through piles of case histories and logged accounts for the reports Paula asked her to produce.

The meeting had been salvaged, but the look of questioning on Paula's face, and the anxious knot growing in her stomach accompanied Alice through the day. She felt concentrated. An ice-breaking ship plowing through the work of the moment, silent, steel. She left carefully, collecting her purse, phone, laptop, stack of files for the evening, a half smile and weary nod to Gennine.

The next day was Saturday, and the kids were spending the weekend with their dad. She made them pancakes in the morning before he came for pick ups, and felt no surprise, only a sense of low dread, when the bowl of batter slipped from her hands, depositing, through a strange fall sequence that sent it almost rolling down the island cabinet doors, a whiteish vertical splattering over the entire west wall of the kitchen.

She joked about it for the benefit of the kids, and served them toast and jam while she cleaned up and told them the story of when she dropped a box of Christmas ornaments they had made at school. They were clear plastic globes that the second grade class had spent one afternoon stuffing with red and green and gold tinsel, along with a current school picture. The crowning privilege had been the teacher, Mrs. Sanchez, allowing them to pass a gold paint pen around the classroom, 'carefully, carefully!' and write, with equal care, "Merry Christmas from Alice, 1981" on the back of the plastic ball.

Mrs. Sanchez had planned to take the ornaments home that night to attach sprigs of plastic holly to the tops of the ornaments with hot glue, and asked Alice if she wouldn't mind carrying the box to the car for her. How light the box had felt in her hands, full of nothing but 27 plastic, tinsel-filled globes. Alice was sure there wouldn't be

any danger of dropping it. And for the entire trip through the school's hallways, through suddenly opened doors, through kids in bundles running to afterschool activities, through intermittently caught grownup conversations — the mystery of teachers calling each other by their first names — through a maze of janitors steering yellow buckets with long mop handles and teachers stapling papers with Excellent! and Nice Work! written across the top in red ink to hallway bulletin boards, Alice managed without a hitch. She carried that box like it was the task she was born to. Following Mrs. Sanchez to her car, there was not a soul in the parking lot. Alice hitched the box a little higher for a better grip and wondered briefly, for no particular reason, if Mrs. Sanchez ever went swimming. Mrs. Sanchez wore sneakers and sweatshirts and red lipstick that gave a particular emphasis to her words as she spoke, sounding out difficult spelling words and explaining about photosynthesis; and she had the most perfect hair Alice had ever seen. It was black and thick and set in large curls that never moved. Not even the day when she had playground duty and Michael Andros fell off the monkey bars and broke his arm, and Mrs. Sanchez had run across the grass blowing her whistle for everyone to step back. It was a very windy day, and Alice had watched Mrs. Sanchez fall to her knees beside the screaming boy, and bend over him talking and looking so gently at him like a wise, slow butterfly, pausing to consider a bruised flower in the middle of a hurricane. Her hair had not wavered an inch. Alice could never imagine Mrs. Sanchez wet, hair plastered to her head, slick and straight, mouth dull and un-red, her words falling out limply, unimportant and thin.

They were halfway across the parking lot, and Mrs. Sanchez was turning to remark to Alice that they were nearly there, when the box jumped. That was how it always seemed to Alice. It wasn't so much that she dropped things. She was no Teflon. It was more an issue of the things leaping of their own volition. It was like holding a rabbit, as Alice had done once the summer before at a petting zoo. It had been content to lie in her arms, warm against her chest, its heart beating against Alice's own, the bones of its back and ribs

surprisingly close and delicate under the soft fur, when suddenly, before Alice had a chance to react, it had kicked against her and was racing across the dirt and scattered hay of the enclosure.

Alice stared at the box on the parking lot asphalt. One corner had crumpled in the fall, and the globes that had lain so neatly in layers of newspaper and scrap sheets of mimeographed addition pages were jumbled together like festive, unruly bubbles. There was little real damage. None of the balls broke. A few smudged letters that Mrs. Sanchez insisted she could touch up at home; “No problema!” shaping itself, smilingly in between the red lines of her lips.

Still, the incident had disheartened Alice, and for a long time after Mrs. Sanchez drove off, she had stood in the parking lot feeling the box leap out of her arms, too fast to register, wondering why it was that things always wanted to get away from her.

She regretted telling the kids this story. It wasn't all that funny. It didn't involve anyone they knew, apart from her. Nothing had really happened. And it made her irritated. She was irritated at herself for having dragged up the memory, for having been such a clumsy, awkward kid, and at the clumsiness for having found her again, now, when everything was already ... just ... now. She was irritated at the pancake batter for having landed on the corner of the ceiling, requiring her to stand on a chair to clean it off, at Jason for not having picked the kids up last night like he was supposed to, and for being late this morning as well.

...

Jason was always late. Always. There was always a reason, and it was usually a solidly vindicating enough reason to leave you morally unable to be annoyed with him, but it was annoying all the same. And the associated guilt with feeling annoyed by someone who had such a good reason for leaving you waiting was likewise an annoyance.

He worked on staff as a legal consultant to the mayor, though his current projects kept him away from the city full-time. Jason and Alice had met in law school when both were gung ho about social justice and defending the marginalized. Jason had been especially on

fire for the plight of the homeless in metropolitan cities, and for Alice it was politics and the victims of international war crimes. Children mostly. Growing up, Alice had plastered her walls not with posters of teenage heartthrobs, but of starving African children, and shots of Cambodian killing fields. She had spent two years in Ghana working with an NGO after getting her BA, and decided that as an aid worker she could help only the people within her physical and geographical reach, while, with a degree in law, she could work for larger, systemic change that would help entire nations.

The meeting of Jason and Alice in her second year of law school — Jason, an intern at the DA's office, studying for the Bar — could almost have been said to be gravitational. Inescapable. They met, each dazzled by the brightness of the other's passion; their marriage an inevitable joining of forces.

Alice had been pregnant with Cade the last year of law school. It was a surprising turn of events. Alice was scheduled for a tubal just three weeks later. They had planned on adopting kids. Later, though. Much later. Call it poor planning, call it a fluke of contraception, call it a certain case of the mental dropsies, but it was nothing to worry about, Jason had said when she told him, one night, walking under the lights downtown. Just a little ahead of schedule. Nothing they couldn't handle. She'd be beautiful, pregnant. He had squeezed her hand and kissed her on the side of the head, and that had been that. His confidence was impregnable.

Cade was born two weeks before her exams. She took them, but didn't pass. No worries, Jason had said, nobody passes the first time (he had, she didn't mention). She'd take them again in a few months when the baby was sleeping through the night.

She didn't end up taking them again until Cade was a year and a half. She passed, but it was more just the tying up of loose ends, as she was working freelance as a paralegal and they were in the process of Laila's adoption. They had flown to Ethiopia together when she was born, and it was both the gladdest and most heartbreaking week for Alice. Her passion for Africa, for the children she saw on the street, nearly bald-headed and grey with

disease; the passion that was stored now on the floor beneath the mother-wife-employee department which was open for business, welled and swelled and erupted, and she held the newborn Laila in her arms in the hospital room and sobbed.

On the flight home, they had decided that in a year, when Cade and Laila were older, and Jason was making a better salary, they'd hire a nanny, and she could start applying for positions again. He was working, then, for the Street People Alliance, and coming home every night more and more disgusted with the incompetence of the 'uneducated do-gooderism' of the volunteers and leaders of the organization. 'They'll never accomplish any real kind of change' he would fume, 'but, man, will they get a hell of a lot of blankets distributed.' Later that year, he submitted a proposal to the mayor's office to develop a plan for temporary housing to be paid for in city work-in-kind. It was a good plan. So good, in fact that the Mayor had asked to meet with him personally, and offered him a job on his legal team the summer that Cade turned three.

Alice had ventured to ask about hiring a nanny, now that his paycheck had increased considerably, and he had told her how lucky she was to be able to spend all day with the kids. The time with them went so fast. His salary would be enough now, that she could stop doing the paralegal work, and they could take family vacations. 'Maybe we'll go to Ghana this year,' he had said, looking at her with his earnest, earnest face, and his eyes that held none of the cloudiness of uncertainty. 'Or we could take the kids to Kenya... drive around in jeeps...see the giraffes...' he grinned. 'How are things going with Watoto and SEAU?' They talked about the organizations she volunteered with, and the work they were doing, and the fact that he had asked was a concession to her. He didn't often emerge from the cavern of his own ideas these days.

They didn't end up doing Kenya that year. Jason had gone to three conferences that summer, and missed the beginning of Cade's first year of preschool. His work with the homeless problem eventually stemmed into overseeing a statewide program. He got an apartment in Sacramento, and flew home when he could get a free day or two.

Things were going amazingly. Alice was proud of him. She sometimes watched him on TV. Other times the jealousy for his life, for the ease with which it all fell into his hands overtook her like a black hood, and she had to turn it off. She didn't call him anymore. When he wanted to talk, he would call. If she tried, she would inevitably irritate him. He was with the Governor, he couldn't sit there and listen to Laila sing the ABC's. Could she please wait until after 8 to call? He'd asked her who knew how many times.

She hung up, tired of explaining that Laila was always asleep by eight, forced the gathering storm inside her deeper, and stared out the window at nothing in particular. Wondering wordlessly whether the world was really there at all, or whether it wasn't just an elaborate projection flashing over the glass. Or over the insides of her eyes.

She made grilled cheese sandwiches and popcorn, and curled up with the kids in a blanket fort to read stories and make shadow puppets.

:::

The divorce happened almost naturally. Like an organic thing, coming to slow fruition. The time between trips home grew longer and longer. He would call and tell her he needed a day off. Just to sleep. To gather himself. She understood. She sent him pictures of the kids. He called on Sundays. He always ended the conversations, 'miss you, Al.'

Eventually, in an email, she asked, 'so, hey, are we married still?' She didn't feel hurt. It wasn't a reproach. More just a request for information. She had expected a weary and half-annoyed response railing at her for her lack of stamina. Telling her she wasn't being fair. Promising trips and so forth. Instead he had written back. 'I think that's been played out, Al. Don't you? What do you think about doing a separation? I love you guys of course. It's just too strange, all this. I mean, we're never together. How about we just try for a separation. Give us each a little freedom. What do you think?'

Freedom. That was amusing. Freedom to do what? To raise the kids alone? To put off the things she wanted again? Again... again...

freedom. The word was like a stone tossed into the ocean. Heavy; sinking down into the dark cold parts of her. Freedom... All the same, she didn't think separation would be any different from what they'd been doing. 'Ok, then.' She'd replied, sending off a copy of the separation papers.

It was a year or so later, when he'd requested a formal divorce. There had been a few women in the interim, but it seemed there was one in particular now, who was being fussy about particulars. They got a divorce.

He still called on Sundays. Came to see the kids. Sent birthday gifts when he couldn't make the parties. Took the kids to ball games and Disneyland when he was in the area. They adored him. He and Alice were friendly as always. She felt the same kind of affection for him she felt for her brothers. She was proud of what he had accomplished.

But he was late this morning.

Alice took the kids outside to play some catch — Cade was playing flag football this year. He was fast, and had a good arm. She dropped eight out of ten catches.

She had no plans for the day. There was always work to do, of course, and she had planned one engagement — a lunch with a friend she hadn't seen in a while — but Alice had messaged her the night before to reschedule. There was a substance low in her belly like electric lava, something that was making her hands too hot to be home to anything at all, something that needed to be addressed, she knew not how. There was a slight guilt around the edges of Alice for her inability to meet such a simple thing as lunch with a friend with the right amount of aplomb, but the thought of the empty, friendly chatter and scripted biography sharing; of all the appropriate laughter, was distasteful to her. She looked forward to long hours of not speaking anything at all.

She did need some things from the store though. Practicality was a reflex for Alice. A tool she had come to rely on when she needed

grounding. Grabbing a canvas shopping bag, wallet, phone, keys — linchpins of modernity — she hopped on her bike to ride the block and a half to the market. She rode through bright sunrays that felt like they were falling over her, they possessed, that morning, a sense of speed, of momentum. They crashed softly over her head and shoulders and the backs of her hands, and she let her mind loose with its thoughts, sitting back to observe. It would take a while, she understood, but she needed ... NEEDED ... to figure out what was going on with her.

She thought of Jason. He had brought Sydney with him when he picked up the kids. They had been together for a couple of years. Sydney was the Governor's rep on Jason's projects. She was blonde. Slim and beautiful and brilliant and dedicated to the work. She was neither idealistic nor callous. She was genuinely nice, as well as a formidable politician. She had managed to succeed at politics without seeming at all tainted in the process. When Alice had met her for the first time, she had the uncanny feeling that she was looking at an alternate version of herself. It was a gripping feeling of inexplicable loss. And Jason was crazy about her. Not that Alice blamed him. She was a fan of Sydney herself, it was just strange to see him in love. He had never seemed that way with her. They had been partners, affiliates. He was fond of her. Loved her. Sure he had. He did. Just... not this way.

She walked the aisles at the supermarket and her thoughts drifted from one thing to the next, unconnected. The endless rows of packaged foods always disgusted her, how was it possible that people needed an entire 50 foot long alleyway lined eight feet high with breakfast cereals? Faces of Bello and Gamba and so many others she had known in Ghana. Sydney had understood about Ghana when they had spoken of it. On a more personal level than Jason ever had. She thought their adopting Laila was wonderful, but she had no desire for children herself. She wore shoes costing upward of \$400.00. It was the job, Alice knew. Working in politics required a certain, very specific wardrobe. Was it better to work for large scale justice and have to battle for your own soul with things

like Marc Jacobs shoes and the latest tech gadgetry, with getting your Audi detailed every week, and ugly, postured scheming humanity, or to turn your back on that and dive into the hands-on work, but sacrifice the scale of your impact? Is it more noble to save your own soul through renunciation, or was such a desire itself selfish? The same old questions. Unresolvable. And she supposed it didn't matter much anyway, as it wasn't exactly a choice she would be making herself any time soon. A familiar feeling settled somewhere low in her hip bones. It was a feeling of something softer than bitterness, but not quite resignation. It was an old sorrow, worn and washed over so often that it had become smooth and soft, like a polished rock. Avocados... here. Three, I think. And we're out of eggs. The preliminaries for the Courtland case. Don't forget those. Ugh, forgot to tell Jason about the book for Laila. I'll call tonight. Megan's leaving for Somalia on Thursday. The smooth stone feeling again. Accompanied this time by a warming flicker of pain. It was moderate this time. In her mind, these pangs looked like spike patterns on a sound recording. They flickered through her abdomen in pulses and flashes, midding reds and oranges like this one, a slight flare-up. Sometimes low and barely noticeable, a single electric link like a Tesla blast between hipbones, and then once in a while, though less and less often now, huge and blue-white, clawing up her chest and down the insides of her arms like a lightning hand, curling its fingers around lungs and heart and diaphragm and throat. She was sure in these moments that the invisible hand would clean her out like a pumpkin, dragging a fistful of the organs that had failed so completely in their given work, out of her body, veins and arteries stringing down through the fingers. A kind of disembodied spiritual repo man.

She watched them all — her thoughts — as they happened, aware of the erratic pathways she was taking. An outside observer of her own mental process. Why this recent, ruthless attack of the dropsies? She could only think of the thing in this term. A juvenile malady definable only in the ridiculous parlance of childhood. Was it the job? It wasn't what she thought it would be, certainly, but there

was nothing going on recently that was any different than her work of the last four years... Jason and Sydney? She probed her emotions, looking for a reaction. She couldn't find one. It was too old and shallow a wound to provoke such a deep and strange response.

OK, that comes to \$24.16

Alice smiled and handed the cashier a twenty and a ten.

It's beautiful out today. He was 18 at the oldest, and he said this to her every time she came to the store, regardless of the weather. She wondered whether it was just something he said, or if he was reminding her to find the beautiful in every kind of day.

It is. Will you be able to enjoy it?

Yeah, I get off around three. Hopefully they won't have used up all the sun by then.

She laughed. I'll be sure to save you some.

Thanks. He counted her change back into her outstretched palm, twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight—

And then suddenly, there was a small metallic clatter, and her change was scattering itself all over the linoleum floor, rolling past the bagging station, under the rack of discount movies, under the feet of the next cashier; the bills fluttering across the floor like broken-winged birds.

The runaway money had everyone's attention. The cashier was gushing out a profuse apology. —so sorry, how did that happen? He hurried around the register to pick up what could be found of the change.

Don't worry about it. I seem to have a hole in my hand lately. Alice looked at the bills he was holding out to her. They seemed far away. As though they belonged somewhere else. As though she were watching this boy with the handful of unkempt dollars on television. As if they had nothing to do with her.

Thank you, she said, taking the bills with a laugh in her voice. Don't worry about the change.

Are you sure? Here, I'll just re-do the change.

No really, don't worry about it. Hope you find some sun later.

Yeah, me too. Thanks. ...Have a good day.

She biked home with a fierce speed, her gaze fixed and piercing, pounding the pedals with all of her strength, slamming them through their rotations, feeling the fire in her calves and thighs.

...

The mail was lying on the floor when she opened the door. She picked it up, flipping through it. Letters from various organizations she supported sat in her hand like accusations. What are you doing? Yeah, you, wasting your life in unnecessary luxury, in assurance and safety, while others struggle to survive? Look at the unfairness. Look at the injustice. See the oppression. How can you sleep at night? Why don't you do something? You are? Well, it's not enough. It could never be enough. She slapped the letters on the desk, unopened. She knew the content. She had helped write the copy for some of them. They were good organizations, the causes true and necessary, but there were times the endless guilting was too much. It came from too many sides. A silent, well-meant stoning.

Her hand fell on a pile of notes and research notebooks. They slipped to the floor in a slow motion avalanche of months and years of sleepless nights of work. Information she'd compiled for the organizations she worked with, for articles she'd written to a deplorably small readership. Correspondence with local and national aid workers. News clippings. She felt the weight of her own gaze on the pile. Pinning it to the floor. She couldn't think of the work. Her life's work that no one seemed to want. Forcing her gaze away from the puddle of paperwork, Alice lifted her head and found she was face to face with the board hanging on the wall over her desk. Messages, notes to self, quotes she wanted to remember, pictures of friends in Africa, goals... she realized she was making a face. She hated it. This. This thing she was doing. This clinging tooth and nail to the edge of a dream. It was ... she felt almost ashamed of it. She wanted to tear the board off the wall. To take a match to the pile of papers and notes. It seemed ... everything seemed intolerably stupid to her. She realized it had suddenly become hard for her to breathe. She turned away.

There was a window across the room. It framed the falling light in a tall narrow rectangle. She stood before it allowing the feeling to dissipate. Things were working themselves out inside of her that she was not privy to. Wordless things, churning unidentifiably. The occasional movement of the leaves of a stiff ficus tree offered no opinion. A long exhale.

Music played and Alice wandered around the house aimlessly tidying up, shoes gathered from their various hiding places under tables and next to the tub in the bathroom, lined up under the bench by the door, stacks of folded laundry deposited in drawers, dishwasher emptied, dishes stacked like blank rigid pages, glasses upside down one on top of the other, crystal circus acrobats, waiting in silence atop a landscape of shelf paper. She picked up a ceramic jar, holding it up in order to wipe down the countertop, and felt it again — too late. As always — the small, unperceivable kick, the rabbit move, of the jar against her hand. It shattered with the unmistakable high pitched crunch of ceramic on tile. Alice didn't look at it. One hand held the sponge, and the other remained outstretched, holding the space that a moment ago had been occupied by the late kitchen accessory. It was nothing special, just a jar she used to hold things like wooden spoons and spatulas and the good tongs. She blinked and breathed and tried to calm the uncontrollable jerking of her heart.

'Goddamnit, Alice, keep it together. What is wrong with you?' a voice was growling in the back of her mind.

She knelt down and picked the utensils out of the mess. They made a pile on the center of the kitchen tile like a bundle of sticks. Something you could use to start a fire. Something you could be warmed by. Something you told stories around. Something that could burn shit down.

She walked to the cabinet and picked up the broom like it was a weapon. She swept up the shards and the dust as a warrior might sweep a broadsword at a company of encroaching Visigoths. She swept up dirt collected in the corners, she swept pieces of onion peel and small bits of paper that had accumulated under the kick

plate of the cabinets. She did not allow herself thought, working without the accompaniment of inner dialogue. When the work of the broom was done, she filled a bucket and pulled a hand scrubber from under the sink. Hands and knees and bucket after bucket of water. She scrubbed the worn wooden slats of the floor, thinking nothing. Wrestling to free herself from thinking; the way a prisoner wrestles with the ropes binding his wrists. Working to clean the thoughts from her body. To scrub the endless churning conversation from her muscles, from her wheeling blood, from the relentless, antennae-like seeking of nerve-endings. She scrubbed and she noticed after a while that the muscles of her back were screaming, and that she was crying, soundlessly. She did not stop.

It was late when she finally ran out of floor. She let the scrub-brush sink into the dirty water, and sat back with her head against the corner cabinet. She closed her eyes. There had always been a quiet inner surety in Alice. A knowledge that someday, when the time was right, she'd be able to do something that mattered. That she would be all the things she was meant to be. That when her time finally came, she would be able to hang on. That there were things she would not let drop. She was no longer sure. She sat back, closed her eyes and searched for it. For the inner knowing. She searched a long time. If it was there, it was well hidden. What was there instead was only a tiredness. Not of body, though she was exhausted, but of spirit. She was tired. Done. Exhausted of hope. Weary of belief, of the effort of clinging to the side of a mountain that hadn't been shaped yet; a mountain she had always promised herself she would build in the future. If someone were to place a rabbit in her lap right now, there would be nothing she could do to hold onto it. It would leap. Drop. Hie its powerful body elsewhere. At the end of her life she would have nothing to show but a collection of rabbit-shaped emptinesses. A scrapbook full of photos taken a fraction of a second too late. Empty hands and half of her face, caught in an expression of slight surprise underscored by the realization that it would always be so. She wouldn't do it anymore. The research, the endless articles, the letters and applications, the

chairing of organizations, the counting out the years until she could pour her whole self into her work, the denial of the fact that even when she was able, no one was going to want to hire a 50 year old legal novice. Stringing herself along on frayed threads of possibility. It was too cruel. It was immature. It had no purpose. If she was looking for a way to keep herself from admitting that she should give it up, well, that was the worst kind of deception, and she wanted nothing more to do with it. She had tried. Now she would be done. She would be a good mom, work for partnership with Paula, sleep. She wouldn't make of her one great passion a weak farce. That was it.

Well then.

She felt quiet.

Alice watched herself there on the floor, as if from outside. It's despair, she thought. That's what I ought to be feeling. But she couldn't feel it. She observed it in herself, but without any accompanying emotion. She had mind to think that it was like looking at a subject through field glasses, a specimen in its natural habitat, or perhaps like reading of a character in a book. The emotions not flesh and blood, but ink and paper.

It was as if she were saying to herself, Look at that poor woman there, sitting in her well of fluid nothingness. She must feel so devastated. But she could not feel so herself.

She was as an observer of her own emotions. A reader of a story of some slight interest. A detached, quiet biographer of her own fall. So much so, that she had occasion to think to herself that in a book, when a character experiences this moment, the reader can look with satisfaction at the thickness of the unread portion of the novel, and take comfort that things will change. She wondered distantly, how thick was the rest of her own book. And if the remaining pages would be worth reading at all.

:::

A patch of moonlight moved across the drying slats of the floor. She felt the unmistakable rabbit-kick. Something was escaping. The last thing. Deep inside her chest.

An instant — a leaping — and it was gone.

