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The Bones in the Womb

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I

Les called my mother that time from the only public telephone of a one-horse New Mexico township; I stuck my elbow in his ribs and told him he was acting damn stupid – what'd he do if somebody else showed up and wanted to use the phone, started pacing and overheard him? But Les snapped, 'Shut up, Cate,' and he dialled. The booth stood between an adobe post office and the highway; I squashed next to him so I'd hear her replies, because this call was more important than any of the previous ones. 'You don't need to listen,' he told me as usual, and scowled. 'Not trusting me, huh?' When I was little he'd lock me into the truck while he called, and anyway I'd no notion what the calls meant, but when I reached my teens he couldn't do that.

The phone rang her end, a mangy palm tree outside our booth rattled and a truck zoomed by. The hot air sat around us and I said, 'She's not home.' (With a wide grin to mean I didn't care.) I pictured her like in a movie, watching the phone ring and not answering it; that'd be much worse. But after four and a half rings the ringing stopped; I pressed close and imagined I could hear her breathing.

Les said what he always says, in one form of words or another. 'I got your kid here with me, you know. She truly is alive.' He took a moment to glance past me, making sure we weren't overheard, then he told her in that soft voice like he's pleading, 'Ma'am, I wouldn't lie to you.'

I hate when he uses that soft greasy tone; every time

after, I say to him, 'Just talk ordinary with her, whyn't you?' And he frowns, says, 'But I was.' Never has realised he's begging her – begging for what? For her to believe something that's the God's-truth, is all. But I pressed close past the grey desert dust and Les's sweat and the roar of another truck, and heard her say (as she most often does), 'Insane. Inhuman.' Her voice not interested, not a bit caring. Which has always hurt me, though Les tried to say there was part reason. Reason, the hell. She sounded like a robot voice, ready to switch off. And the next thing she said, in her bitty accent which Les claims is British, was, 'I'm hanging up now.' Click, the buzz of the empty line.

Les cussed but he'd already stacked the coins for his next try; was less than half a minute before her phone rang again, and this time she picked it up at once. Les said, 'You can't put me off that way.' Hoarse; he smokes too damn much. And breathless because he'd gotten jittery; after twelve years with him I can read his moods like my own. (Easier than mine, most often.) He said, 'This here's no nuisance call, ma'am.' A car on the highway slowed, saw the booth was occupied, speeded up. 'All these years,' said Les, 'I kept you informed, right, ma'am? Faithful I have.' No sound from her; he must have wondered if he'd dialled wrong, for he said, 'Hi there? This *is* Miz Janice I'm speaking with? Miz Janice Wingford that the daughter of got—'

Then she did answer, like talking from a clenched jaw, 'Say "murdered", why don't you? Might as well be honest.'

No matter how often Les has told her the truth, she's never believed him. He chuckled, but I couldn't view her as comic any more. Sick-minded or thick-brained or both, that's how she sounded to me. Les changed hands on the phone, wiped his sweaty palm on his jeans and said cosy to her, 'Thought I'd gotten the wrong number there for a second.' A pickup truck pulled in near us and the guy went

into the post office. Not highway patrol or sheriff, but Les got nervouser and said fast, 'Ma'am, are you still there?' She grunted and he got to the meat of his call. 'Truth is, ma'am – and I do wish you'd quit fussing about a murder. They never found a body, right? Nor could they, seeing as she wasn't killed. But the truth is, ma'am, I need your help.'

He held his breath and I did too. If she hung up again, refused to talk this over, we could drive east and find her address and just arrive – but she might act furious disbelieving and call the cops at once. Which both Les and I had our reasons for not wanting to chance; we needed her co-operation. So it was a relief when she spoke again. 'You've a shitting nerve,' she said, 'my God, have you ever! You abduct my three-year-old daughter and do away with her, you spend the next twelve years tormenting me and then ask for my help? When the police catch you – and they will, I don't doubt they're much nearer now than you suppose—'

She paused for breath and I took a quick look from the booth in case she knew something we didn't, but the dusty surrounds and highway were clear. Then I thought, *This* is my mother? Her that's ranting on and not giving Les a hearing to put his side? So, I'm not saying him taking me away from that campsite was right, only – from what he's indicated since – he was lonely and unhappy at the time and seemed to him there was reason for what he did.

My mother went on, 'When the police take you in, I'll give my evidence with pleasure and try to make sure you never kill anyone else's child.'

I made a face at Les to mean, Same old stuff, and he nodded; he's closer to me than I can imagine any dad ever being. He keeps on telling me I'll for sure love my mother when I meet her, but I don't know how to go about loving anyone except Les. Especially this woman I can't even remember.

She said, 'A death sentence on you—' as if she could hardly wait – 'will mean full death.'

The man from the pickup truck came out of the post office with a bundle of magazines under his arm; he drove off without looking at us but I could tell Les was getting right jittery. Also I had a thought and wrote it, 'Traced?' in the dust on the window, poked Les's arm so he'd notice. And it did make him talk fast. 'Ma'am,' he said, 'hear me out, will you? The truth is, I want to hand the girl back to you.'

Every time he talked that way it didn't seem real; how could he hand me over to someone I'd no memory of, had scarcely really known? But there it was; he figured he'd got reason enough. I kept telling him no one'd found out what happened to Jeff and if by mischance anyone did discover – why, Les and I were living isolated in the desert anyway; we'd just shift on and no one was familiar with our habits or indeed us, no one'd be any the wiser. But I'd never realised how scared Les is of any sort of violence; when I told him what happened to Jeff, all of a sudden it wasn't any longer Les staring back at me but an old grey-faced open-mouthed stranger. Though seems to me there was reason for what happened, and no one could mostly call me violent. But there you are.

Anyway, when Les said that to the woman there was two thousand miles of silence for at least a minute and I thought, she doesn't want me, how could you not want your own daughter? Then she said in her stiff voice, 'This is a cruel scam.' I knew by divination when she said this that she'd noted down our number and was getting ready to put the cops on us; I joggled Les and pointed to the dusty word on the glass and he nodded. She said, 'You dare to inflict this on us after what you've already made us suffer.' She took a two-thousand-mile deep breath. 'What the hell piece of dishonesty has your crooked mind schemed up now?'

Les isn't in the habit of being spoken to so abusively; when we drive into town to pick up welfare money and food stamps the clerks mostly act polite even if they basically hate the guts of all us wanderers. And fast food outlets or gas station attendants mostly speak friendly enough; one bunch of dollars is as good as another. He's a sensitive guy too, although she mightn't think so. His cheeks coloured up and I wrote 'Trace us' on the back of his hand with dust; he scowled but there was no point in the two of us spending so long on the phone, trying to make arrangements, that we'd give the cops our end plenty of chance to catch up with us. No one'd found out about Jeff yet, as far as I knew – but how would I know? Les really did have a strong point about us needing to get out of that whole area, at least temporarily.

'Ma'am,' Les said, 'I got to stop talking now. You notified the cops to chase us, right? And I durstn't stay around in case someone shows. But I'd like—'

She interrupted; you wouldn't expect a woman that stiff-voiced to have so much energy in her. 'You, you,' she mocked. 'And please explain to whatever trashy girl you've persuaded—'

Then everything came clear to me; she didn't believe I was her daughter Cate, didn't *want* to believe. Wanted no part of any deal with Les or me, wanted us to get off the phone and leave her be so she'd never hear from us more. I nudged Les and pointed to the scar on my arm, and he nodded hard. Another car slowed on the highway; he turned to watch it pull in, then he said into the phone loud and clear, 'Ain't no point in you denying, ma'am. Because I can prove she's yours.' He hung up and we jumped into our pickup, got the hell out of there.

He drove fast, like I love to when he lets me, and after five minutes or hot whooshing air and red desert blur he said, 'Anyone following us?'

'You got paranoia. Nope, the road's empty. What'd you expect – sheriff and a posse of deputies?'

'You sure can joke,' he said past his teeth. 'Just a barrel of laughs, ain't you? Except when there's a knife in the room.'

'How often do I need tell you it was nearly accidental?'

He screwed his eyes half-shut against the glare and me; his voice went almost as clenched as hers. 'A man got killed, didn't he? And you right there with no clothes on. Went to him willing, didn't you? Snuck out, knew I'd forbid you.'

If I'd wanted to hurt Les I'd have said, Hell of a lot of difference your forbidding'd make. But he's always been like a true father to me and I'm really squishy fond of him, wouldn't hurt him just for the pleasure of giving pain. So I said nothing and we both stared at the road.

Trouble with desert is, there's no scenery. A fifty-mile drive in belting sun, amid grey sagebrush and rock, from that one-phone-booth town to the next buildings – a huddle of four shacks at a railroad crossing where the freight trains roar by and nothing but dust and scorpions hangs around for long. One of the shacks sells fast food and cold drinks and there's an ice machine on the front porch; I said, 'Won't we stop off here for a minute? I'm thirsty,' but Les shook his head and gunned the engine. Paranoid, like I said.

Another sixty miles of rock hills, and only a tattered few sagebrush, from the railroad crossing to the disused ranch we were hanging out on. A dirt track, a few shrivelled cactuses, three wooden buildings. We weren't messy squatters, we acted responsible; Les tidied up outdoors and I kept the inside as clean as possible. It was sort of a home and no one ever showed up to bother us, which was the important thing. We'd been there a good many months and I knew Les had gotten fond of the place, didn't want to leave; I felt bad that something I'd done was pushing him out. Lots of other

empty places in those hills we could have shifted to; I lay awake that night, like I had lain quite some nights already, feeling extra sorry for both Les and me because I'd forced – without intending to – our moving clear away from that area we both felt comfortable in.

When we got home from the phone call that day I hugged him and said, 'Whatever happens, promise me that when we reach her you'll hang around there with me. Don't just hand me to her and walk out, right?'

He said, 'She for sure won't want me around,' but I made him promise.