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# A GIVING TOILET

Marcus Pactor

Gabriel descended the stairs and presented me a bowl full of his teeth. He lisped the number of dollars he expected from the Tooth Fairy. I helped him rinse out his mouth, then returned him to bed, medicated Lila, and soothed the woken daughter. The next morning Gabriel counted his money but could not gloat. Staff doctors at the hospital turned us over to the distinguished resident from Bombay. He read Gabriel's x-rays and declared our son's voice box gone. "Poof," he said, clapping and turning his palms up to the light. We were not amused. The resident explained that such things happened sometimes in the woods, less often here.

The resident sent us home after a week of fruitless tests and samplings. He asked to be kept informed. An article could be published, a documentary could be made.

In the downstairs bathroom that evening, old scratches in the toilet's base turned into cracks, those cracks turned into deltas, and water ran through my socks.

I never told my family that, before I installed the new toilet, a golden spider had clambered from the air vent. Lila would have looked at me foul if she knew I had not bagged it alive for money but instead ground it into the tile. I swept the goop and fragments into the brown hole which led, I figured, to a landfill or ocean or limbo. Then I set the wax and leveled the toilet and bolted it down over the portal. I hacksawed the bolts' rough ends and caulked the toilet's base and attached the water cable and opened the valve. The liquid treble feedback sound of the bowl filling reminded me of TV news anchors interrupting my dreams. After some time Gabriel fetched me to eat. I forgot to test the flush.

Lila baptized the toilet after lunch. The children were banging pots and I was rinsing dishes when a moan grew louder and louder beneath the house, followed by a pop in the bathroom. Lila squealed.

Gabriel ran in while I scooped up the baby. Our family together surveyed a toy duck, preserved in shrink wrap, floating on its side in the bowl. I washed the find in the sink and sliced it free with a box cutter. I massaged and sniffed it. No excretory residue adhered to it. Then Lila tested it with close-up eyes and hard sniffs and

hot-potato hands before agreeing that it posed no harm. Now, the daughter was of smiling age but did not smile often. She ignored my best goo-goo faces and sounds. She giggled, though, when Gabriel squeezed and flew the duck at her nose.

In the living room the children continued their play while Lila cuddled me on the couch. She had the tenderness of a noodle, though I never said so aloud. She would think I considered her bland or plain when I meant nothing so untoward. She would ask me if I thought I was the marital sauce. But the word “noodle” simply came to mind whenever she touched my heart. Later I touched the crown of the toilet. Later still I touched the forehead of my sleeping son and hoped.

[NIGHT]

During night feedings I often sang mindless songs or whispered tall tales to the daughter. We rocked in a chair belonging to Lila’s dead uncle. The deceased had given us a great deal, though he failed to leave us money. And he loaned rather than gave, I felt, no matter what he or Lila said. The story was complicated and despised. He had not been long removed from us, three or four months.

In this near privacy I thought of the nurse whose hand grazed mine at the hospital’s commissary, reaching across me for a blueberry muffin. I had never touched a nurse so white and fat. In the cradle of my arm the daughter slept and sucked. She could not express much. She had not hit many of the benchmarks listed in Lila’s books and articles. I sang of a princess who turned into a fish, then a tiger, then a bird which flew beyond the mountains. Afterward I described the mountains’ wondrous shapes. I detailed their icy tops.

The portal might have been opened by the noon sun’s height, the composition of our meal, or an elf’s caprice. In spite of regular lever-pulling, it did not open again for days. My hope waned until another moan and pop applauded Gabriel’s flush. He came out beckoning like a happy dog. He led us back to a necklace of blue diamonds, again in shrink wrap, moving in the bowl. I cut it free and trusted it to my son, who offered it to his mother. Lila sniffed it and let her young gentleman clasp it round her neck. He smiled rosy gums and broken roots. The diamonds shined like crumbs of sky.

She wore the necklace that afternoon to the city’s most neglected park. There

grass grew from rocks and rocks grew from grass. Trees slumped more than grew on a line to the east. The basketball goal had neither backboard nor hoop. Puddles had the haze and glow of motor oil. Ducks flapped noise on the womb-shaped pond. At the water's edge, frogs gathered round a bike tire. Its upper half cooked in daylight, its lower half waved like a ribbon on the water. Somehow the sun made wonder of all that earth. I pushed the family on the big spinner colored with graffiti. They rode with open, laughing mouths, though Gabriel of course could not laugh.

Older children advanced from the court. I worried over the necklace, but they were drawn and charmed by Gabriel's silence. They made him a crown of grass. They built an altar of brush and brought him a frog and sharpened stick, but he waved off their plan, and they were amazed by his mercy. He tossed the stick forty yards end over end. It landed spike down on an anthill. A glory floated about and through him.

I watched from the tree line, where I had followed the women. The daughter crawled over the roots of a dead oak. Lila tugged my shirt and said that I must flush the toilet after lunch tomorrow.

[NIGHT]

In the dead uncle's chair, rocking easily for any and all to see, I felt songless. The daughter's mouth hardly moved on the bottle, though she groaned whenever I pulled it back. The longer she took, the more I soured. I could never sleep after her leisurely drink sessions.

The uncle had bought this rocker and the baby's crib and dresser. He had bought most of Gabriel's furniture as well as the living room couch and the lamps scattered across the house. He would not let me slip him twenty bucks here or a hundred bucks there. Sometimes, though, he let me wire a fan or replace a rotten board on his property. On breaks I looked in vain for signs of company: a razor in the shower, a tampon in the trash can. He could not tell a screw from a screwdriver. He had more liver spots than real teeth at his passing.

I relayed these dumb facts to the child.

Then I turned inward, to the nurse. Her blond hair. Her berry-flavored kiss. Her smothering white fat smothering me.

But no one chose a random nurse over a son with a vanished voice box and a girl so young and a wife unless he had one cheap heart.

But couldn't I indulge a dream?

Say a man stops at a hospital's commissary for lunch. The moment he tongs a lukewarm chicken thigh, he spots a nurse paying for her tray of slop. Later he brings her a muffin. And so on. Should have skipped to the so on.

A song came to me. I declined to share it with the girl.

[NIGHT]

Gabriel slept fine. I watched his back inflate and deflate. The toy duck stood guard atop the bed's mantle. It had nailhead eyes. The tooth money was crumpled in a bowl beside it, the same bowl Gabriel had used to deliver his teeth, and beside the money lay the crown of grass. The bowl had been a mainstay of blackjack games between him and the uncle. No talking was allowed. They would tap a card to hit and wave a hand to stay. They played for pennies and whenever Gabriel won he dropped his spoils into the bowl. He stirred those pennies with his hand, making a sound like rain.

Gabriel must have learned something from their otherwise quiet play. He had not saddened once over his losses and in fact enjoyed pointing at what he wanted of the world. And he did not want much beyond, apparently, his sister's duck. I touched the money. Then Lila entered, stroked my arm, and pushed her modest chest against mine.

[NIGHT]

She rolled from me to the open window and faded from coitus to dream. I sat up, filmy in the crotch and bitter atop the covers. At the climax the nurse had filled my mind.

Now I wondered what the golden spider's bite could do. Its venom might transmute guts into gold. Then noodle and children and mortician and nurse would tear at me with forks and knives. They would set the golden muscles and

bones on the prospector's scale. I retain—even now—a low opinion of justice.

The uncle seemed to make money from air. But he was less alchemist than diviner, as he had seen before almost anyone the importance of floppy discs and, later, their obsolescence. Yet he had seen little of the world. Its weather and landscapes and cultures did not stir him. He played cards. He called and took calls from his broker, Tom. He went barefoot through our house on many summer days. The daughter, like him, had large gaps between her toes and dulling brown eyes. My wife said to forget the debts. And he had, to repeat myself, said that money did not matter. But on his last Valentine's Day, I pulled him into the garage to show off a pair of earrings. He asked me what I knew of thrift. I did not ask him what he knew of women.

I excused myself from the table before biting once into my roast beef sandwich. The family came with me to the bathroom door, smiled as I closed it on them. They joined me after my flush. Soon a moan and pop brought a green thong from below. It moved unwrapped and free as seaweed atop the refilling bowl. It could not have fit around Lila's hips. It could not have been a voice box in Gabriel's throat. We watched incoming water carry it around the bowl until it floated dead before us, and a monogrammed "B" on the crotch became legible. It was outlined in blue sequins. I could not deny that this thong was made for someone elsewhere.

Gabriel fished it out and made a dripping pendulum of it. My daughter splashed the forming puddle. Lila conveyed several unpleasantries to me. "What?" I said. She went upstairs.

The children and I returned to the table. Before the occurrence, Gabriel had been slurping milk-soggy chocolate cereal. He would continue a soft food diet for another week, when his dentures would be ready. At other meals he ate strawberry ice cream and, less often, his sister's jars of pureed fruit. He would not try the jelly given us by the distinguished resident from Bombay. That mixture of vitamins and herbs and elephant shavings was favored by some villagers from the woods of Chota Nagpur. The doctor claimed its heartiest devotees survived well past their centennials, but Gabriel had not listened past the word "shavings." I could not blame him. The mixture smelled like a zoo cage left unattended for several summer days. I raised my sandwich level with my mouth when Gabriel set the thong on the table. I told him to put it in the trash. He dipped it in his bowl, waistband first, as though he was releasing a fish into a pond. Then he swirled it in the milk till the crotch flattened and spread over the surface. I dumped the bowl's

contents into the sink and switched on the garbage disposal. Its blades chopped at the thong. They failed to eat it.

I poured him a second bowl of cereal. Gabriel let it soften, then ate it without complaint. The daughter painted her tray with milk and pureed peas. Cabinet doors vibrated. The refrigerator hum sounded male and soothing. My stomach seemed to fold over my bladder. I took the children to the living room and overturned a bin of toys. They crashed and rattled till Lila came back. She wanted to take her kids for a ride.

I unscrewed the bathroom's air vent and gloved my hands and drew from the duct a morning's worth of Cheerios, gauzy sheets of webbing, and three golden eggs like misshapen marbles, all of which I flushed.

Then I stretched the thong across the pit of the sink. It smelled like chocolate milk and disposal bottom. The "B" looked ripped by a gator's claw. I considered working it further with the box cutter and tossing the shreds into a neighbor's back yard, then taking the family out for barbecue.

Instead I replaced the air vent and returned to the table. At last I would eat what I could of my sandwich. I set aside hardened bread and wilted lettuce and faded tomato and chewed the softer slices of meat, still flavorful with veggies and creole mustard. The cabinets had not quit their vibrations but they bothered me less now. The thong lay over my knee, letter down, G-string twirled. I would have liked the thong in better condition and the dead uncle alive. I would have liked the uncle across from me, eating a sandwich of his own. I would have given him the thong to sniff.

Under the last slice of roast beef I found a golden egg. I washed it and the leftover sandwich down the drain. I rinsed the other dishes, loaded the washer, hid in the master bathroom, and found a second egg in my pocket. I sent it down the bathtub drain. I showered till I heard the ticking of legs in the drain grow louder.

But I felt easier and more certain after I dressed. I waited in bed for the last egg to reveal itself and hatch, for the newborn spider to bite into my calf. Later I woke to pressurized quiet. My ears felt encased in plastic shells. I did not budge. An idea remained from my dream to call the daughter by name. She had not yet had a chance to flush the toilet. My family would gather round. I would help her press the lever. The moan and pop would deliver us the necessary gift at last. I would wire the new box to my son's throat. Gabriel would beg in his old voice for ice

cream. Lila would push her breasts against me, and they would be enough. The daughter, too, would know the weight and value of my heart.

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Marcus Pactor wrote the short story collection, *Vs. Death Noises*. His work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *The EEEL*, *Heavy Feather Review*, and *Literary Orphans*. He lives and works in Jacksonville, Florida.