



THE HAPPINESS BOX

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Photo: Kerry St. Ours

I have to begin with us in bed,

Jack's hands cupping my face, his blue eyes pinning me fiercely to the pillow, daring me to look away. I moan and thrash my head from side to side. He holds me while I cry, letting me sob freely into his chest until the storm passes through me, and I feel the shudders move from my body into his.

I have to tell you how old we are as we move apart in the practiced way of experienced lovers, his hand holding the condom close to his body, me turning, snuggling my backside to fit the curve of his belly. He is sixty and I am forty-one, dangerous ages both. Plenty of water under the bridge. Jack is five years younger than my father, but I don't want to think about that. I have seen how age and illness and bad luck can take apart a body, and, at heart, I am terrified.

Jack spits out one of my hairs, winks at me, grins.

"You're so proud of yourself," I tease him.

"I just like to make you scream, you little squirt." He tousles my hair and strides to the bathroom, where I can hear him urinating proudly. And why not? He is proud of his big body and all its functions, with the pride of a little boy still alive inside that strong, aging flesh — alive, and scared, too.

We both understand that this pleasure could go in a minute: a stroke, a heart attack, a slip, a fall. "You, too," he reminds me, his fingers kneading my breast. In just such a way, one ordinary day a year ago, a friend — a radiant woman in her early thirties — found a lump in her own breast. That woman is now dead. A slip, a fall.

I also have to tell you that it is impossible for Jack and me to have children together. He had a vasectomy years ago, when his children were young and I was barely old enough to be their baby sitter. We have had the conversation about what happens if we get married and he dies in ten years and I'm a widow of fifty with no children, and he has said, "I refuse to distract you from your path. If it's family, then it must be family, but I am not that man."

And so we have agreed to have no obligation to each other, no commitment beyond . . . this, whatever it is. We are two people who understand in our bones the importance of tribe, yet our lives are too complicated for us to stay bound to the families we are still a part of. At the heart of this fullness we feel together is a sadness, and we have agreed to look each other in the eye when it comes upon us.

On Christmas Eve, Jack and I drive to my old neighborhood. There's no light in Grace's kitchen window. We knock on the door of her housing-project apartment. No one answers, and Jack says, "Maybe they're not there," but I know they are. Grace is almost always at home. And I can see her old car in the driveway, looking sheepish, as though it has recently broken down in the Safeway parking lot, or on Martin Luther King Jr. Way.

Sure enough, after a few minutes, I hear a noise behind the door and then: "Who's that? Who's there?"

"It's me!" I yell. "Ali!"

"Oh, Ali. Norah, get the door." Grace's voice is warm and Southern, always with a faint note of wide-eyed surprise — a good concealer for anything that might automatically need to be concealed from white folks.

I lived around the corner from Grace for three years. This neighborhood is where I came to lick my wounds and Learn to Live Alone after my divorce. I was scared at first. Drug dealers occasionally got into loud midnight arguments on the street that sounded, to my woman-living-alone ears, as if they were taking place in my living room. But I stayed here because it was cheap and close to the freeway I drove to work. And because there were rosebushes in my neighbors' yards. And because, unlike in other (whiter, more middle-class) neighborhoods, people talked to you as you walked down the street. The men said, "How ya doin'?" and, "You married?" The old women nodded and said, "God bless you, baby."

I came here to wallow in loneliness and independence, to eat frozen vegetables from the package. ("Did you at least thaw them first?" a friend asked.) I did not expect to fall in love, but I hoped for it. I prayed for a suitable Prince Charming to ride up on a white horse, or in a battered Toyota, and rescue me from the silence that pressed in, from the days I woke up missing my ex-husband so badly I could hardly breathe.

Instead, leaning on my bell the very first day, and every day after that, were Norah and Elijah, Grace's foster children.

"Ali, watch me do a back flip!"

"Ali, buy us a soda at the store, but don't tell Mama, because she says don't be begging you for stuff."

"Ali, can you take us swimming?"

While they visited, that invisible beast Loneliness would shift on his paws and pad quietly out of the room, only to return faithfully when darkness fell and I crawled into a bed that was too big. Lucky for me, the kids always stayed as long as possible. Norah, especially, hated to leave. She'd cling to my hand or my neck with the ferocity of the early-abandoned.

Grace had taken in Norah and Elijah at a time when her own brood didn't have enough beds to sleep in, and somehow, through a combination of welfare, food stamps, and mother wit (mostly the latter), she'd managed to keep them clothed and fed and schooled and sweet and funny. I was an extra adult with a running car, a few spare dollars in my pocket, and a hunger for family, and so I became their rattle-taggle white auntie. It is on the basis of this makeshift relation that I have come around now on Christmas Eve with my nervous not-quite-boyfriend on my arm.

Norah greets me by throwing her arms around my waist and squeezing tight. We rock back and forth a minute while Jack takes in the surroundings. The kitchen counter is stacked with dirty plates and pots and pans — evidence of five or more teenagers coming and going and cooking and burning and eating. The kitchen table is covered with

clutter: homework papers, a bowl of plastic fruit, some real fruit going bad, cereal bowls crusted with milk and soggy Cheerios, a rabbit cage, newspapers.

In the living room, Grace sits regally on her plastic-covered red armchair and smiles at us from underneath a waterfall of shiny curls: a new wig. She does not rise; her arthritis must be acting up. The coffee table is buried under opened Christmas presents. In the corner leans a small tree, weighed down with ceramic angels. Fat candles, striped red and white like candy canes, are stuck into star-shaped holders. Piles of folded and unfolded laundry slump against each other on the plastic-covered couch. The loud, oversized TV dominates the room. On the screen is the new, updated *Leave It to Beaver*. The original was the suburban ideal of my childhood, the one we were brought up to believe in: white picket fence; smiling parents; small, comic problems, easily fixed.

Norah stands next to the parakeet cage, touching it with a finger. It's always awkward, the shock of seeing each other again after a few weeks. I feel like a guilty divorced father who's been skipping custody visits.

"Norah," Grace says, "get Ali some tea. And for her friend, too." She asks Jack and me, "Do you want some tea? I got that kind with no caffeine."

We nod. I push aside some laundry and sit on the couch. Jack folds his long body into a chair in the corner.

"I just brought over some presents for the kids," I say.

Grace is watching the TV with one eye and talking on the phone to her ninety-year-old father back in Louisiana. "But, Daddy, I think you ought to get them tests done," she says into the receiver. "What do Wilfred say? Mmm-hmm." She interrupts her conversation. "Norah, get Ali and her friend some fudge . . . on a plate!"

On TV, Wally and the Beaver have been invited to a party where the kids are going to play (snigger, snigger) *spin the bottle!* Beaver is in agony, anticipating his first kiss. Apparently, the show hasn't gotten any more enlightened in the thirty years since I last watched it.

Grace smiles at the program. "Lord, I remember my first kiss," she says after she hangs up with her father. "A boy stole it from me. Yes, he did! And I was so upset because I was only twelve, and I thought if a boy kissed you, you'd come up pregnant! I cried for three days. We was so innocent in them times."

"Ignorant," Jack says feelingly from his crowded little corner. He has told me about how it felt to be a teenager in the fifties, when the fear of pregnancy loomed dark in the waters of adolescent petting like the Loch Ness Monster.

"Ignorant," Grace agrees, shaking her curly head. "Land, we was ignorant. Even though I used to share a bed with my cousin who had a baby every year. When I was little, it scared me, the sounds she made when the baby come! I used to squinch my eyes up tight — Norah, get them some napkins — 'cause I didn't want to see."

Jack leans back into his chair, a rapt look on his face. He loves a good story.

"In those days," Grace says, "the old folks, they really punished you if you was pregnant and not married. I remember my cousin sitting on the back porch 'cause her belly was big and she wasn't allowed to sit on the front porch no more. After the baby come, all the folks would rally round and help you take care of it, but when it was just you with your big belly and no ring on your finger, they would talk *about* you, but they wouldn't talk to you. That's just how it was."

"That's how it was," Jack agrees.

In a former life, Jack traveled all over the South with his ears open and his big cameras ready, documenting the civil-rights movement. He photographed many poor black families and wrote down their stories. The work taught him how to shut up and stay out of the way, he says. Now he half closes his eyes and nods encouragingly as Grace sails into the memory like a ship with a full wind behind her:

"My cousin's mama always used to deliver them babies. One time, the baby was turned around wrong. It couldn't come out. My cousin was crying and saying, 'I can't, Mama, I can't.' And her mama just up and smacked her hard on the behind — *pow!* Then she felt the baby turning himself around, and she said, 'Oh!' It come out just fine."

Grace smiles. I imagine her as a round-faced little girl, the screams and smells of birth all around her. She and I talk about men sometimes, when I come to pick up Norah and Elijah for an outing. I've introduced her to one or two of the men who have taken a spin on the merry-go-round with me before deciding they couldn't afford to go for the brass ring. She never judges, just tells me, "I been celibate for the longest!" and laughs, shaking her head. "Done had me enough problems already."

It was after her husband left for good — "Drugs," she said succinctly — that she took in Norah and Elijah as foster children. Then, when her brother died, his widow and her five children came to stay with Grace. How they all fit into this apartment I'll never know. They stayed until a neighbor reported them to the Housing Authority. Even now, when I come over, there's often somebody sleeping on the living-room couch, nestled in among the piles of laundry, and someone else curled up on a sleeping bag on the floor. There's always room at the inn.

Grace is lost in her memories. "Two or three she had sitting on the slop bucket, you know. It kept the sheets from getting messed up."

Behind his half-closed eyelids, I imagine Jack is seeing the exact scene she is describing, as he saw it in Alabama and Mississippi thirty years ago. I try to picture him the way he was then, big and young and raw, frightened but also intrigued to be so far out of his element, moving his equipment carefully so as not to interfere with the tableaux he was trying to capture.

(end of excerpt)