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# L I T E R A R Y   H U B

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EXCERPT

## TIGER BITES

LUCIA BERLIN

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August 19, 2015

*The following is a story from Lucia Berlin's selected stories A Manual for Cleaning Women. Berlin worked throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Her stories are inspired by her early childhood in various Western mining towns; her teenage years in Santiago, Chile; three failed marriages; lifelong alcoholism; her years spent in Berkeley, New Mexico, and Mexico City; and the various jobs she later held to support her writing and her four sons. She died in 2004.*



The train slowed down outside of El Paso. I didn't wake my baby, Ben, but carried him out to the vestibule so I could look out. And smell it, the desert. Caliche, sage, sulphur from the smelter, wood fires from Mexican shacks by the Rio Grande. The Holy Land. When I first went there, to live with Mamie and Grandpa during the war, that's when I first heard about Jesus and Mary and the Bible and sin, so Jerusalem got all mixed up with El Paso's jagged mountains and deserts. Rushes by the river and huge crucifixes everywhere. Figs and pomegranates. Dark-shawled

women with infants and poor gaunt men with sufferer's, savior's eyes. And the stars at night were big and bright like in the song, so insistently dazzling it made sense that wise men couldn't help but follow any one of them and find their way.

My uncle Tyler had cooked up a family reunion for Christmas. For one thing he was hoping my folks and I would make up. I dreaded seeing my parents... they were furious because my husband, Joe, had left me. They had almost died when I got married at seventeen, so my divorce was the last straw. But I couldn't wait to see my cousin Bella Lynn and my uncle John, who was coming from L.A.

And there was Bella Lynn! In the train depot parking lot. Standing up and waving from a powder-blue Cadillac convertible, wearing a fringed suede cowgirl outfit. She was probably the most beautiful woman in West Texas, she must have won a million beauty contests. Long pale blond hair and yellow-brown eyes. Her smile, though, no, it was her laugh, a dusky, deep cascading laughter that caught the joy, implied and mocked the sorrow in every joy.

She tossed our bags and Ben's little bed in the backseat. All of us Moynihans are strong, physically anyway. She kissed and hugged us both over and over. We got in and headed for the A & W across town. It was cold but the air was clean and dry, she kept the top down and the heater blasting, talked nonstop as she drove, onehanded since she waved at just about everybody we passed.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

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“First off I should tell you we’re short on yuletide joy out at our place. Uncle John gets here day after tomorrow, Christmas Eve, praise the Lord. Mary, your mama and my mama started drinking and fighting right off the bat. Mama went up on the garage roof and won’t come down. Your mother slit her wrists.”

“Oh, God.”

“Well you know, not bad or anything. She wrote a suicide note about how you had always ruined her life. Signed it Bloody Mary! She’s in Saint Joseph’s psych ward on a seventy-two-hour hold. At least your father isn’t coming, he’s furious about your D.I.V.O.R.C.E. My crazy grandma is there. Looney Tunes! And a passel of horrid relatives from Lubbock and Sweetwater. Daddy has them all put up at a motel and they drive over and eat all day and watch TV. They’re all born again so think you and me are just rotten to the core. Rex Kipp is here! He and Daddy are buying presents and stuff for poor people all day and hanging out in Daddy’s shop. So boy am I ever glad to see you...”

At the drive-in we ordered Papa burgers and fries and malts, like always. I told her Ben could have some of mine. He was just ten months old. But she ordered him a Papa burger and a banana split. Our whole family is extravagant. Well, no, my father isn't like this at all. He is from New England, is thrifty and responsible. I turned out a Moynihan.

After Bella had filled me in on the reunion situation she told me about Cletis, her husband of only two months. Her folks had been as mad when she got married as mine had been with me. Cletis was a construction worker, rodeo rider, roughneck. Tears rolled down Bella's lovely cheeks as she told me what happened.

ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT

"Lou, we were happy as clams. I swear nobody ever had such a sweet tender love. Why in heaven's name are clams happy? We had a dear little trailer in the south valley, by the river. Our little blue heaven. I cleaned house and washed dishes! I cooked, made pineapple upside-down cake and macaroni, all kinds of things, and he was proud of me, and me of him. First bad thing that happened was Daddy forgave me for marrying him and he bought us a house. On Rim Road, you know, a mansion, columns on the porch, but we didn't want his house so Cletis and Daddy had

an awful fight. I tried to explain to Daddy we didn't need his ol' house, how I'd be happy living with Cletis on the back of a flatbed truck. And I had to explain it over and over to Cletis too, because even though I refused to move he took to sulking. Then one day I went to the Popular Dry Goods and bought some clothes and towels, just a few things, on my old charge account I've had my entire life long. Cletis had a fit, said I had spent more money in two hours than he made in six months. So I just took it all outside and poured kerosene on it, set fire to everything, and we kissed and made up. Oh, Little Lou, I love him so bad, so bad! Next darn fool thing I did and why I did it I'll never know. Mama had come to call. I guess I was just feeling like a married lady, you know? A grown-up. I made coffee and served Oreos on a little dish. Blabbed my big mouth about S.E.X. I suppose I felt I was big enough to talk to her now about S.E.X. Oh God, well, and I didn't know, either, so I asked her if I could get pregnant if I swallowed Cletis's come. She tore out of the trailer and ran home to Daddy. All hell broke loose. That night Daddy and Rex came and beat the living daylight out of Cletis. Put him in the hospital with a broken collarbone and two broken ribs. Talking about he was a pervert, and putting him in jail for sodomy and annulling the marriage. Can you imagine, going down on your own lawful wedded husband is against the law? Anyways I wouldn't go home with Daddy and just stayed at Cletis's bedside until I could bring him home. And we were fine, happy as those old clams again, even though Cletis took to drinking a lot, account of he couldn't go back to work for a while. Then last week I look out and see this brand- new Cadillac in our driveway, with a huge stuffed Santa sitting in it, and

satin ribbons all around it. I laughed, you know, 'cause it was funny, but Cletis said, 'Happy, huh? Well, I ain't never going to make you happy like your precious Daddy does.' And he left. I figured he'd just gone off on a tear and he'd be back. Oh, Lou. He's not coming back. He's gone! He went to work on an oil rig off Louisiana. He didn't even call. His trashy mother told me when she came to get his clothes and his saddle."

Little Ben had actually eaten all that burger and most of the banana split. He threw up all over himself and Bella Lynn's jacket. She tossed the jacket in the backseat, washed him off with napkins dipped in water while I got him out some clean clothes and a diaper. He didn't cry once though. He loved the rock and roll music and the hillbilly music, and Bella Lynn's voice or her hair, never took his eyes off her.

I envied Bella and Cletis, being so in love. I had adored Joe, but had always been afraid of him, trying to please him. I don't think he ever even liked me much. I was miserable not so much because I missed him but for the whole failure of things and how it all seemed like my fault.

I told her my short sad story. How Joe was a wonderful sculptor. He had been given a Guggenheim, got a patron and a villa and foundry in Italy, and he left. "Art is his life." (I had taken to saying that, to everybody, dramatically.) No, no child support. I didn't even know his address.

Bella Lynn and I hugged and cried for a while and then she sighed. “Well, at least you have his baby.”

“Babies.”

“What?”

“I’m almost four months pregnant. That was the last straw for Joe, me having another baby.”

“It’s the last darn straw for you, little fool! What are you going to do? No way those folks of yours are going to help. Your ma will just kill herself all over again when she hears *this* news.”

“I don’t know what to do. Another really dumb problem... I wanted to come so bad but they wouldn’t even give me Christmas Eve off at the escrow company. So I just quit, and came. Now I’m going to have to look for a job pregnant.”

“You need an abortion, Lou. That’s all there is to it.”

“Where would I do that? Anyway... it will be as easy to have two babies alone as one.”

“As *hard*. Besides, that’s not true. Reason Ben here is so sweet is because you were with him as a baby. He’s old enough now to go to somebody while you work although it’s a crying shame to leave him. But you can’t go leaving a newborn infant.”



“Well that’s the situation.”

“You’re talking like your father. The situation is that you’re nineteen and you’re pretty. You have to find yourself a good strong decent man who will be willing to love little Ben as his own. But you’ll have a hell of a time finding somebody who’d take on two of them. He’d have to be some kind of rescuer do-gooder saint type you’d marry out of gratitude and then you’d feel guilty and hate him so you’d fall madly in love with some fly-by-night saxophone player... Oh it would be tragic, tragic, Lou. Let’s think. This is serious. Just you listen to me now and let me take care of you. Haven’t I always had you do what’s best?”

Well, far from it, as a matter of fact, but I was so confused I didn’t say anything. I wished I hadn’t told her. I had wanted just to come to the reunion and be happy, forget all about my troubles. Now they were worse, with my mother killing herself again, and Daddy not even coming.

“You wait right here. Order us coffee while I make some phone calls.” She smiled and waved to people, men mostly, who called to her from other cars at the drive-in as she made her way to the phone booth. She was in there a long time, came out twice, once to borrow a sweater and get some coffee and later to get more dimes. Ben played with the radio knobs for a while and turned the windshield wipers on and off. The carhop warmed a bottle for me; Ben drank it and fell asleep in my lap.

Bella put the top up when she got back, flashed me a smile and took off down Mesa toward the Plaza. “South of the border... down Mexico way!” she was singing.

“Okay, Lou. It’s all settled. I’ve been through this myself. It’s horrible, but it is safe and the place is clean. You’ll go in this afternoon at four and be out by ten in the morning. They’ll give you antibiotics and painkillers to bring home, but it doesn’t hurt real bad, it’s like having a period. I called home and told them we were going shopping in Juárez, were spending the night at the Camino Real. That’s where little Ben and I will be, getting to know each other, and you can come the minute it’s all over.”

“Wait a minute, Bella. I haven’t thought this out.”

“I know you haven’t. That’s why I’m doing all the thinking.”

“What if something goes wrong?”

“We’ll get you to a doctor here. They can save your life and everything in Texas. They just can’t do abortions.”

“What if I die? Who will care for Ben?”

“Well, I will! And I’ll be a darn good mother too.”

I had to laugh then. She made sense. In fact a big load was off my mind. Not worrying about a little infant in addition to Ben.

God, what a relief. She was right. An abortion was the best thing to do. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the leather seat.

“I don’t have any money! What does it cost?”

“Five hundred. Cash. Which I happen to have in my hot little hand. I have money to burn. Every time I go near Mama or Daddy—sometimes I just want a hug or to tell ’em I miss Cletis or ask maybe should I go to secretarial school—they shove money at me, go get yourself something pretty.”

“I know,” I said. I knew what that was like. Or did, before my folks disowned me. “I used to think if a big old tiger bit off my hand and I went running up to my mother she’d just slap some money on the stump. Or make a joke... ‘What’s that, the sound of one hand clapping?’”

We came to the bridge and the smell of Mexico. Smoke and chili and beer. Carnations and candles and kerosene. Oranges and Delicados and urine. I buzzed the window down and hung my head out, glad to be home. Church bells, ranchera music, bebop jazz, mambos. Christmas carols from the tourist shops. Rattling exhaust pipes, honkings, drunken American soldiers from Fort Bliss. El Paso matrons, serious shoppers, carrying piñatas and jugs of rum. There were new

shopping areas and a luxurious new hotel, where one gracious young man took the car, another the bags, and still another gathered Ben into his arms without waking him. Our room was elegant, with fine weavings and rugs, good fake antiques and bright folk art. The shuttered windows opened onto a patio with a tiled fountain, lush gardens, a steaming swimming pool beyond. Bella tipped everyone and got on the phone to room service. Jug of coffee, rum, Coke, pastries, fruit. I had formula and cereal and plenty of clean bottles for Ben, begged her not to feed him candy and ice cream.

“Flan?” she asked. I nodded. “Flan,” she told the phone. Bella called the gift shop and ordered a size 8 bathing suit, crayons, any toys they had, and fashion magazines. “Maybe we should stay here the whole time! Plumb forget Christmas!” she said.

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We walked around the grounds with Ben between us. I was so relaxed and happy I was surprised when Bella Lynn said, “Okay, hon, it’s time for you to go.”

She gave me the five hundred dollars. Told me to take a cab back to the hotel and have her come down and pay it. “You can’t take any other money or identification with you. You can give them my name, and this number.”

She and Ben waved good-bye to me after she had put me in a cab, paid for it and told him where to go.

The taxi took me to the Nueva Poblana Restaurant, to the back entrance of the parking lot, where I would wait for two men dressed in black, wearing dark glasses.

I was only there for two or three minutes before they appeared behind me. Quickly and silently an old sedan pulled up. One of the men opened the door and beckoned to me to get in, the other ran around to the other side. The driver, a young boy, looked around, nodded and took off. The back windows were curtained, the seat so low I couldn't see out; it seemed we were driving in circles at first and then the whap whap whap of a stretch of highway, more circles, a stop. The creaking of heavy wooden gates. We drove a few yards and stopped, the gate closed behind us.

I had a glimpse of the courtyard as I was led inside by an old woman in black. She didn't exactly look at me with scorn but her failure to speak or greet me was so devoid of usual Mexican warmth and graciousness it felt like an insult. The building was yellow brick, maybe an old factory, the ground was entirely cemented, but there were still canaries, pots of four o'clocks and portulacas. Bolero music, laughter, and the clatter of dishes from across the yard. Chicken cooking, a smell of onions and garlic, epazote.

A businesslike woman nodded to me from her desk, and when I sat down she shook my hand but did not give her name. She asked for my name and the five hundred dollars, please. The name and number of someone to call in case of an emergency. That was all she asked, and I signed nothing. She spoke little English but I didn't speak Spanish to her, or to any of them; it would have seemed too familiar a thing to do.

“At five o'clock the doctor will come. You will have exam, catheter placed in utero. During the night cause contractions but sleeping medicine, you don't feel bad. No food, water after dinner. Early morning spontaneous abortion most usually. Six o'clock you go to operating room, go to sleep, get D and C. Wake up in your bed. We give you ampicillin against infection, codeine for pain. At ten car will take you to Juárez or to El Paso Airport or bus.”

The old woman took me to my bed, which was in a dark room with six other beds. She held up her hand to show five o'clock, then pointed to the bed, then gestured toward a sitting room across the hall.

There had been so little sound that I was surprised to find twenty women in the room, all Americans. Three of them were girls, almost children, with their mothers. The others were emphatically alone, reading magazines, sitting. Four of the women were in their forties, perhaps even fifties... change-of-life pregnancies, I imagined, which proved to be true. The rest of the women seemed to be in their late teens or early twenties. Every one of them looked frightened,

embarrassed, but most of all, intensely ashamed. That they had done something terrible. Shame. There appeared to be no bond of sympathy between any of them; my entrance was scarcely noticed. A pregnant Mexican woman swirled a dirty damp mop around, staring at us all with undisguised curiosity and contempt. I felt an unreasonable fury toward her. What do you tell your priest, bitch? You have no husband and seven children... you have to work in this wicked place or starve? Oh, God, that was probably true. I felt a tiredness, an immense sadness, for her, for all of us in the room.

We were, each of us, alone. The young girls perhaps most of all, for even though two of them were crying, their mothers also seemed distant from them, staring out into the room, isolated in their own shame and anger. Alone. Tears started to come to my eyes, because Joe was gone, because my mother wasn't there, ever.

I didn't want to have an abortion. I didn't need an abortion. The scenarios I imagined for all the other women in the room were all awful, painful stories, impossible situations. Rape, incest, all kinds of serious things. I could take care of this baby. We would be a family. It and Ben and me. A real family. Maybe I'm crazy. At least this is my own decision. Bella Lynn is always telling me what to do.

I went out into the hall. I wanted to call Bella Lynn, to leave. All the other doors were locked, except for the kitchen, where the cooks shooed me away.

A door slammed. The doctor had arrived. There was no question that he was the doctor, although he looked like an Argentine movie star or a Las Vegas nightclub singer. The old woman helped him off with his camel's hair coat and scarf. An expensive silk suit, a Rolex watch. It was his arrogance and authority that labeled him as doctor. He was dark, liquidly sexy, he walked softly, like a thief.

The doctor took my arm. "Back with the other girls, dear, time for your exam."

"I changed my mind. I want to leave."

"Go to your room, sweetie. Some change their mind a dozen times in an hour. We'll talk later... Go on. Andale!"

I found my bed. The other women were sitting on the edge of theirs. Two of the young girls. The old woman had us strip, put on gowns. The really young girl was trembling, near hysterical with fear. He began with her first, and I must say, was patient and reassuring but she slapped out at him, kicked her mother away. He gave her an injection, covered her with a blanket.

"I'll be back. Just relax," he told the mother.

The other young girl got a sedative too, before he began a perfunctory exam. He asked a brief history, listened to the heart through a stethoscope, took a temperature and blood pressure. No urine or blood samples had been taken from us. He did a quick pelvic exam on each woman,



nodded, and then the old woman started packing each woman's uterus with a ten-foot length of IV tubing, shoving it in, slowly, like stuffing a turkey. She wore no gloves, moved from one patient on to the next. Some of them cried out, as if in terrible pain.

"This will cause some discomfort," he said to us all. "It will also induce contractions and a healthy, natural rejection of the fetus."

He was examining the older woman next to me. When he asked when her last period had been she said she didn't know... had stopped having periods. He took a long time on her exam.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You are over five months along. I can't take the risk."

He gave her a sedative too. She was staring up at the ceiling, wretched. Oh, Jesus Christ. Christ.

"Look who's here. Our little runaway." He put the thermometer in my mouth and the cuff around my arm, pinning my other arm. When he let go to listen to my heart I took out the thermometer.

"I want to leave. I have changed my mind."

He couldn't hear, the stethoscope was in his ears. He cupped my breast, insolently smiling at me while he listened to my lungs. I recoiled, furious. In Spanish he said to the old woman, "Little tart acts like nobody touched her tit before." I spoke then in Spanish, roughly translated I said, "You don't touch it, asshole scum."

He laughed. “How rude of you, to allow me to stumble along in English!” Then he apologized and went on about how cynical and bitter one became after fifteen, twenty cases a day. A tragic but so necessary an occupation. Etc. By the time he was through I was sorry for *him* and, Lord forgive me, was gazing back into his big brown swimmy eyes while he stroked my arm.

Back to business. “Look, Doctor, I don’t want to do this and I would like to leave now.”

“You realize that the money you paid is nonrefundable?”

“That’s okay. I still don’t want to do it.”

“Muy bien. I’m afraid that it will still be necessary for you to spend the night. We are far from town and our drivers won’t return until morning. I will give you a sedative for sleep. You will be gone by ten tomorrow. Are you sure, m’ija, that this is what you want to do? Last chance.”

I nodded. He was holding my hand. It felt like comfort, I was dying to cry, be held. Oh, what we won’t do for just a little comfort.

“You could really help me,” he said. “The child in the corner is very traumatized. Her mother is in bad shape and no support. I suspect the father, or some particularly bad situation. She really should have this abortion. Will you help me with her? Soothe her a little tonight?” I went with him to the girl’s bed, introduced myself. He had me tell her what he was going to do, what to

expect, to explain that it was safe and easy and everything would be fine. Now he is going to listen to your heart and your lungs... Now the doctor needs to feel up inside you... (He said it wouldn't hurt. I told her it would hurt.) He has to do this to make sure everything will be okay.

She still resisted. "A fuerzas!" he said. By force. The old woman and I held her. The doctor and I held her then, talking to her, trying to calm her, while the old woman packed her tiny body with the tubing, foot after foot. I hugged her when it was over; she clung to me, sobbing. Her mother sat stone-faced in the chair at the foot of the bed.

"Is she in shock?" I asked the doctor. "No. She's dead drunk." On cue, she toppled to the floor; we lifted her to the bed next to her daughter's.

He and the old woman left then to go to two other rooms full of patients. Two young Indian girls came in bringing dinner trays.

"Do you want me to have my dinner here with you?" I asked the girl. She nodded. Her name was Sally; she was from Missouri. That's about all she said, but she ate, ravenously. She had never had tortillas before, wished there was some plain ol' bread. What's this stuff? Avocado. It's good. Put some with your meat on the tortilla. Like this, roll it up.

"Will your mama be all right?" I asked.

“She’ll be sick in the morning.” Sally lifted the mattress. There was a half-pint of Jim Beam. “If I’m not here and you are, this is for her. She needs it so she don’t be sick.”

“Yes. My mother drinks too,” I said.

They took away the trays then and the old woman came with big Seconals for us to take. The young girls were given injections. The old woman hesitated by Sally’s mother, then gave the sleeping woman a shot of barbiturate too.

I lay in bed. The sheets were rough, smelled of being dried in the sun, good, and the rough Mexican blanket smelled of raw wool. I remembered summers in Nacogdoches.

The doctor hadn’t even said good-bye. Maybe Joe would come home. Oh, I had no sense at all. Maybe I should have the abortion. Not fit to raise one child, much less two. Dear God... what should I...? I fell asleep.

There was a ghastly sobbing from somewhere. The room was dark, but from the dim hall light I could see that Sally’s bed was empty. I ran out into the hall. At first I couldn’t budge the bathroom door. She was lying against it, unconscious, dead white.

Blood was everywhere. She was hemorrhaging badly, tangled up in coils and coils of tubing like a berserk Laocoön. The tubing had clots of bloody matter sticking to it. It arched and buckled, slithering around her as if it were alive. She had a pulse but I couldn’t rouse her.

I ran down the hall, banging on doors until I woke the old woman. She was still dressed in her white uniform; she put on her shoes and ran to the bathroom. She took one quick look and ran to the office and the phone. I waited outside, listening. She kicked the door shut.

I went back to Sally, washed her face and arms off.

“Doctor is coming. Go to your room,” the old woman said. The Indian girls were behind her. They grabbed me and put me in my bed; the woman gave me an injection.

I woke in a room filled with sunlight. There were six empty beds, neatly made, with bright pink bedspreads. Canaries and finches sang outside and magenta bougainvillea rustled against the opened shutters in the breeze. My clothes were on the foot of my bed. I took them to the bathroom, spotless now. I washed and dressed, combed my hair. I was staggering, still sedated. When I got back to the room the other women began to be wheeled in on gurneys to their beds. The woman who didn't have an abortion was sitting on a chair, looking out the window. The Indian girls came in with trays of café con leche, pan dulce, slices of orange and watermelon. Some of the women had breakfast, others retched into a basin or went stumbling toward the bathroom. Everyone moved in slow motion.

“Buenos días.” The doctor was in a long green gown, his mask under his chin, his long black hair tousled. He smiled. “I hope you slept well,” he said. “You will leave in the first car, in a few minutes.”

“Where is Sally? Where is her mother?” My tongue was thick. Hard to get out the words.

“Sally needed blood transfusions.”

“Is she here?” Alive? The word wouldn’t come out.

He grabbed my wrist. “Sally is fine. Do you have everything? The car is leaving now.”

Five of us were hurried down the hall, outside and into the car. We took off and heard the gates close behind us. “Who goes to the El Paso airport?” All of the other women were going to the airport.

“Leave me at the bridge, on the Juárez side,” I said. We drove along. None of us spoke. I was dying to say something stupid, like “Isn’t it a lovely day?” It was a lovely day, matter of fact, crisp and clear, the sky a gaudy Mexican blue.

But the silence in the car was impenetrable, heavy with shame, with pain. Only the fear was gone.

The din and the smells of downtown Juárez were the same as when I was a little girl. I felt little and like I wanted to just wander around, but I waved for a cab. The hotel turned out to be only a few blocks away. The doorman paid the cab. Bella Lynn had taken care of it. They were in the room, he said.

The room was a complete wreck. Ben and Bella were in the middle of the bed, laughing, ripping up magazines and tossing the pages into the air.

“This is his favorite game. He’s going to be a critic when he grows up?” She got up and hugged me, looked into my eyes.

“Judas Priest. You didn’t do it. You little fool! Fool!”

“No, I didn’t!” I was holding Ben to me, oh I loved his smell, his bony little self. He was babbling away. I could tell they had had a great time.

“No, I didn’t do it. I still had to pay, but I’ll get you the money back. Just don’t go lecturing me. Bella, there was this girl, Sally...”

People say Bella Lynn is spoiled and flighty. Not a care in the world. But nobody understands things like she does... She just knew everything. I didn’t have to say a word, although of course I did anyway, later. I just cried and so did she and Ben.

We Moynihans, though, we cry or get mad and then that's that. Ben got tired of it first, started jumping on the bed.

“Look, Lou, of course I'm not going to lecture you. Anything you ever do would be okay with me. All I want to know is what do we do now? Tequila sunrise? Lunch? Shopping? I'm starved, myself.”

“Me too. Let's go eat. And I want to get something for your grandma and Rex Kipp.”

“Well, Ben, does that settle that, or what? Can you say ‘Shopping’? We got to teach this kid values. Shopping!”

Room service came with her fringed jacket. We both changed and put on makeup, dressed Ben. I had thought he had a rash, it was only her lipsticked kisses all over his face.

We had lunch in the beautiful dining room. We were gay, not a care in the world. Young and pretty and free, with our future stretching out before us. We gossiped and laughed and figured out everybody in the dining room's whole life story.

“Well, we'd better get on home to this reunion sometime,” I finally said, over our third coffee and Kahlua. We bought presents and a straw basket to put everything in, including all the toys in the room. Bella Lynn sighed as we left. “Hotels are so homey, I always hate to leave...”



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Inside the massive front door of Uncle Tyler's country house Roy Rogers and Dale Evans were belting out Christmas carols. A bubble machine was rigged up inside the door too so your first view of the gigantic Christmas tree was through a soapy blur of prisms.

"Judas Priest, it's like going through a car wash! And look at the rug." Bella Lynn unplugged the machine, turned off the music.

We went down the flagstone steps into the mammoth living room. Logs, whole trees, burning in the fireplace. Aunt Tiny's relatives were all slouching around on leather couches and Barcaloungers watching football on TV. Ben sat right down; he had never seen television. Sweet little baby, never been away from home; he was taking everything in stride.

Bella Lynn introduced us all, but most of them just nodded, barely took their eyes from their plates or the game. They were all dressed up, like for a funeral or a wedding, but still looked like a bunch of sharecroppers or tornado victims.

We went back up the stairs. "I can't wait to see them at Daddy's party tomorrow. In the morning we pick up Uncle John, then go spring your ma. Then there's a huge open house. Eligible bachelors, mostly, so we won't like any of them. But lots of old friends too, who want to see you and the baby."

“Jesus, our Blessit Redeemer!” It was old Mrs. Veeder, Tiny’s mother. She had swooped Ben up in her arms, dropping her cane, teetering around with him in the dining room. He laughed, thought it was a game, the two of them crashing against sideboards and china closets, crystal shattering. One of my mother’s favorite expressions is “Life is fraught with peril.” Mrs. Veeder staggered off with him to her room, where there was another TV, tuned to soap operas, and enough junk on her bed to amuse him for months. Outhouse saltshakers from Texarkana, poodle toilet paper covers, felt sachet bags, bracelets with stones missing. All grimy, in the process of being recycled as Christmas presents. Mrs. Veeder and Ben fell together onto the bed. Ben stayed in there with her for hours, chewing on Jesus statues that glowed in the dark while she wrapped presents with wrinkled paper scraps and tangled ribbon. Singing away, “Jesus loves me, yes I know! Cuz the Bible tells me so!”

The dining room table resembled the ads for smorgasbords on cruise ships. I stood staring at the array of meat platters, salads, barbecued ribs, aspics, shrimp, cheeses, cakes, pies, wondering where it would all go, when it began disappearing before my eyes as Tiny’s relatives darted in, one at a time, making furtive forays and dashing back down to the football game.

Esther was in the kitchen, in a black uniform, stooped over a huge washtub of masa for tamales. Mince pies were baking in the oven. Bella Lynn hugged Esther as if she’d been gone for months.

“Did he call?”

“Course not, honey. He ain’t gonna call.” Esther held her, rocking her. She had taken care of Bella Lynn since she was a baby. Didn’t spoil her though, like everybody else. I used to think she was mean. Well, she is, matter of fact. She greeted me with “Looka here... another empty-headed girl!” She held me too. She was a tiny fine- boned woman, but she enveloped you.

“Where’s that poor baby?” She went in to see Ben, came back and hugged me again. “Blessed love. He’s a blessed child. Are you grateful, girl?” I nodded, smiling.

“We can help you make tamales,” I said. “I just want to say hello to Tyler and Rex. And Aunt Tiny. Is she...?”

“She’s not coming down. She has an electric blanket, a radio, and liquor. No, she’s up there for a while.”

“Praise the Lord,” Bella said. “Go fix some food for those men-children out in the shop. Plenty of shrimp for Rex.”

Tyler’s “shop” was really an old adobe house, with a big den and guest room, a gigantic room full of guns, new ones and antique ones. The den had a big fireplace, animal trophies all over the walls and bearskins on the tile floor. The bathroom was a carpet of breasts, rubber breasts of all colors and sizes. The carpet had been a present to Tyler from Barry Goldwater, who once ran for president of the USA.

It was dark now, cold and clear. I followed Bella Lynn down the walk.

“Hussies! White trash!”

I gasped, startled. Bella laughed.

“That’s just Mama, on the roof.”

Rex and Uncle Tyler were glad to see me. They said when Joe set foot on American soil again to let them know, they’d tear him limb from limb. They were drinking bourbon and making lists. The room was stacked with shopping bags. Every year they took presents to old folks’ homes and children’s hospitals and orphanages. Thousands and thousands, they spent. Only they didn’t just write out checks. The fun was picking out everything and then going to the places with food and Santa Clauses.

This year they had a new scheme, because Rex had a plane now. A Piper Cub he landed in Tyler’s south pasture. On Christmas Eve they were going to air-drop bags of toys and food over Juárez shantytown. The two men were laughing and carrying on about their plans.

“But Daddy,” Bella said, “what will we do about Mama? And Aunt Mary? What about Lou and me here? Tigers went and knocked her up, ran off with my husband.”

“Hope you two have knockout outfits for tomorrow’s party. Caterers are coming, but Esther will still need some help. Rex, how many candy canes you figure for them crippled children?”

“Tiger Bites,” from A MANUAL FOR CLEANING WOMEN: SELECTED STORIES.  
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