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Annabelle's Teeth

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ANNABELLE'S TEETH

We always knew our mother to be as un sentimental as a piece of flint, but this hasn't prepared us for what we've found inside her house the day after her funeral. Or more specifically, for what we haven't found. My sisters and I (we are seven in number) swarm from room to room, but discover no evidence of our childhoods: no plaster of Paris ashtrays, no finger paintings, no ballet trophies or school photographs, not even those of Belle, who came along so much later than the rest of us. I am secretly afraid of finding only Belle's mementos, so finding nothing is a relief in a way.

Our mother's name was Annabelle LaSalle. We, her daughters, are Tonya, Janet (me), Donna, Georgina, Melanie, Pamela, and Belle. That's in order of age, the arrangement least likely to cause disagreement. Don't ever try to line us up by height.

Mother's kitchen is a pale yellow, a color as cool as lemon sorbet, opening into a breakfast nook. At noon, we gather around the glass and wrought-iron table. The only food in the house is a collection of half-hearted casseroles sent by Mother's neighbors, every one of them dotted with black olives. It is no secret that Mother hated black olives, and I wonder what the neighbors are trying to tell us. If she'd been alive, Mother would have sent each of those meals back with a note: *Your gesture says so very much.*

"Look at all that space above the cabinets," Georgina says. She stands on top of the counter and feels around up there. She holds her man-sized hands in the air, like a magician demonstrating empty palms. "Nothing. Not even an old report card. Maybe we were never born," she says. "Whoa! It's like those science fiction movies where somebody goes back in time and mucks around with history, so people end up not existing in the future." She draws her hands close to her face and examines them, as if she suspects her body might be dematerializing.

Tonya tells her, "Stop clowning around up there."

Georgina hates to be called a clown, even if it's true, and I don't blame her. The things we do for attention are better left unnamed. Anyway, we're all tired of Tonya's prickliness, and how she thinks she has each of us pegged.

We aren't hungry: the heat and humidity have dulled our appetites. The air conditioner can't keep up with midday Houston in July.

"I'd forgotten how brutal Texas summers are," I say.

Tonya says, "They're miserable." She visits me in Ann Arbor each August before the fall

term starts at the junior high where she works as a secretary. Every year, she threatens to stay with me, rather than going back to the heat. Now that Greg and I have separated, I might not mind so much.

Donna, who always plays the lead in community theater productions, uncorks a bottle of Mother's best wine. She holds her glass in the air. "Who was this woman? This Annabelle LaSalle?" she says in a hammed-up accent that could offend people in at least three foreign countries.

Melanie waddles back into the room. Eight months pregnant, she spends more time in the bathroom than out of it. She has three children already, and has proven to be a wonderful mommy: patient, generous, and naïve. She says, "Annabelle LaSalle was our beloved mother."

Pamela laughs dryly. "Are we talking about the same person?"

I am not mommy material. Greg and I used to argue over this opinion. "It comes naturally," he'd say. But I know better. Anyway, it hasn't mattered in the end. An abortion I had a few months after our wedding has left me infertile, which I think is fate arguing my point.

Pamela resists the wine for all of three minutes, reminding us how her antidepressants backfire when she drinks. She waits for one of us to try to convince her it's okay to have a few sips. When no one does, she pours herself a goblet of Bordeaux and refills Donna's glass, saying, "What the hell. I'm a mess anyway." She takes a drink, sets down her glass, and asks, "Do you ever wonder why Annabelle had so many of us, given...?" She can't seem to finish the thought.

"Given that she hated children," Tonya says.

"I've wondered," I say.

Melanie braces the weight of her belly with both hands. "Maybe she liked being pregnant."

"How could anyone like being that way?" I say. For the six weeks I was pregnant, I felt bloated and unreal, like a body washed up on a beach. It was surprising that Greg never noticed, never figured it out.

Melanie says. "I hope you get the chance to experience it. Then you'll know."

On Mother's vanity, we find a bottle of My Sin perfume. A few amber-colored drops pool in the bottom. I unscrew the black cap and inhale. The powdery-floral scent brings back a single childhood memory of Mother walking out our front door. She always traveled for her job with the airline, but for whatever reason, I tried to hold onto her that day. She pried my small hands off the nubby raw silk of her skirt. "You're going to muss me, hon"—she called me that when she couldn't think of my name—"Now, try to be a good girl while I'm gone."

I have cherished memories of our father: going deep sea fishing, visiting Santa, making sundaes. Why does this incident with Mother stand out as emblematic of my childhood? I never

told anyone about it, but I thought it meant I was unlovable. Maybe that's why the pregnancy frightened me. Could I love a child? Could a child love me? Or maybe, deep down, I'm just too selfish to be a mother.

Melanie reaches for the perfume bottle. "Let me smell."

I hand it to her. She closes her eyes as she sniffs, one palm laid flat on her belly. "I used to hide in her closet. It smelled just like this." She passes the bottle to Tonya, who passes it on quickly as if it were a dirty sock.

Pamela, who works in advertising, tries to remember the perfume ad's catch words: "Tempting? Teasing?" She adds, "But really, I think it just smells of melancholy."

Georgina sniffs the bottle. "I don't remember this. Do all of you remember? Oh my god, maybe I was never born. Maybe I'll be the first to disappear."

In Mother's bedroom, the ceiling fan whirls in slow motion. Belle sits down on the king-sized bed, which is still made up with a double wedding ring quilt, crossing her legs yoga-style. The light reflected off the ice-blue walls makes her look sickly. She has always been petite and nimble; it's hard to believe she's old enough for graduate school. The news of her acceptance into Rice University surprised me. I'd never realized she was academically gifted. She says, "They stopped making the scent twenty years ago, you know."

"Poor old thing. Maybe she was saving it for a special occasion," Melanie says.

Tonya says, "She wouldn't know a special occasion if it bit her on the ass."

Pamela's eyes go watery. She blinks so rapidly, her eyelids make a clicking sound like a doll's. "If she'd been a different sort of person, maybe things would have turned out differently for some of us."

"There's no sense whining about it," Tonya says.

Georgina stands on a stepstool in Mother's walk-in closet and passes down boxes from the top shelf. Her head keeps bumping the light's pull chain, making it rattle. She hands me a shoebox which, according to its label, once contained size six high heels in the style "Delilah." Even in her seventies, Mother always wore sexy shoes.

The box contains dozens of letters addressed to Annabelle LaSalle. The postmarks span twenty-five years and are from Florida, Minnesota, Maine, and South Carolina. The return addresses reveal them to be from men who were not our father.

Donna says, "Mother had love affairs!" She has dropped the fake accent.

"We don't know that's what they are." Both of Melanie's hands rest on her belly now. Tonya looks at Belle, who still sits on the bed, her back pressed against the headboard.

"Did you know about these men, Tinkerbelle?"

I study Belle—we all do—waiting for an answer. We believe she has a different knowledge of our mother. We were forced to share Annabelle with each other. She wasn't. Somehow, we imagine Annabelle was a real mother to Belle.

"I've told you to stop calling me that." Belle's nostrils, so delicate they looked translucent, flare.

"Should we read them?" Pamela asks. She glances at the only photograph in the room, a picture of Mother and Father on their fortieth anniversary, the year before he died. He was smiling widely, revealing his new dentures, which made his jaw look horse-like. Years later, when Mother got her own dentures, she was very particular about their look and fit.

Tonya says, "Hell, yeah, we should."

The letters refer to our mother as "Dearest Annabelle," or "My Darling, Annabelle." The gentleman from South Carolina called her his "Precious Mimosa Flower."

"How could she?" Pamela asks. Melanie presses a tissue into her hand.

I think of Michael, who was not my husband, and Greg, who was. It's not as difficult as a person might think. It's surprising that none of the letters accuse our mother of being cold or distant. They could have been written to some woman we'd never met.

"Get a load of what else I found." Georgina has climbed back atop the ladder, and is holding another shoebox. When she shakes it, it sounds like a maraca.

"What now?" Tonya says.

Georgina climbs down and hands it to me. "See for yourselves."

I lift the lid. Inside are tiny baby teeth. Milk teeth. Judging from the number of them, Mother kept every tooth that fell from our little mouths. "Oh," is all I can say.

"See?" Melanie says. "She saved something of us, after all."

No one speaks for a while and then Pamela says, "But we're all jumbled together inside that box."

I steal a look at Belle, wondering how she'll react to her teeth being thrown in with the rest of ours. She traces a circular seam on the quilt top, and I can't read her expression.

Tonya says, "We used to get a dollar a tooth from the Tooth Fairy, remember? Mother probably only saved the teeth because she'd paid good money for them."

There is also a midnight-blue velvet bag inside the box, with a drawstring ribbon. Donna pries open the ribbon's knot. She peeks inside and drops the bag as if it held a nest of roaches. It clatters as it lands among the teeth. She says, "This is too much."

I pick it up and look inside. It holds a set of dentures.

"Why?" Pamela asks.

"That is the question." Donna has opened another bottle of Mother's wine—a local merlot she claims is exceptional—and we're sitting around the kitchen table again. The box with the baby teeth and the dentures rests in the center between us.

Belle says, "Once, when we were in Hawaii—"

"I never went to Hawaii," Tonya says. "Did any of you go to Hawaii?"

"You were grown already," Belle says. "I lost a tooth when we were vacationing there, and in the morning I found a piece of paper under my pillow."

We stare at her, not sure we want to know. Finally, Melanie says, "What was it?"

"A twenty-dollar traveler's check. Mother hadn't had any cash."

"You were spoiled," Tonya says.

Belle no longer looks at any of us. "Mother and Father argued over it for the rest of the trip. He said a traveler's check wasn't personal, that it was so businesslike. Mother said, 'Belle's not complaining. She understands.'"

Melanie pats Belle's hand. Pamela reaches into the shoebox and takes a handful of teeth, letting them sift through her fingers.

"Mother hated Father's dentures," Belle says. "She wouldn't kiss him after he got them."

"So why would she keep them?" Georgina says.

I think about the love letters. "What makes you all so sure the dentures are our father's?"

"Oh, God. Oh, God." Pamela lays her forehead on the glass tabletop. Her shoulders shake, first with laughter, then with crying.

I take a wine glass from the cabinet, motion for Donna to fill it. "I cheated the Tooth Fairy."

All my sisters look at me, and I know what they are thinking: Miss-All-A's-In-Conduct wouldn't know how to cheat anyone. I say, "I didn't want to give up my tooth, so I picked through the gravel outside until I found a tiny white stone."

Georgina scoops up a handful of teeth and squints at them. "Here it is." She hands me the stone. "Stupid Tooth Fairy."

I slip it into my pocket. This one, at least, I know is mine.

Belle says, "Maybe none of us really knew her at all."

She is right, I think: we didn't know Annabelle LaSalle anymore than we know each other.

Melanie says in her dreamy-pregnant voice, "I wish we had thought to take Mother's dentures out before they buried her. We could have kept them all together."

Georgina makes a digging motion. "We could—"

"No," Tonya says.

"There's something that has always bothered me," Pamela says. "Remember how Belle was the only one Mother breastfed?"

I have very few memories of Belle as a baby; by then, I managed to stay away from home most of my waking hours. But Pamela was twelve and didn't have the same freedom as we older sisters.

Belle says, "You hold that against me?"

"No, Belle," Pamela says. "Listen. One day, I heard Mother crying in her bedroom. I stopped outside the door. It was open a crack and I peeked in. Mother was feeding the baby... you. You had been teething and my first thought was that you bit her. Then I heard Father's voice, saying everything was going to be okay, but Mother kept saying, 'Why did I want to do this again? I'm no good at it. I hate it.'"

Belle doesn't look surprised at all, but she seems wearier than she did five days ago when she met me at the airport. Until this moment, it has never occurred to me that having Mother to oneself might not be a cause for envy.

Donna is the one who has the idea. We drive to the cemetery at sundown, bearing the box of teeth to leave at Annabelle's grave. I consider slipping my little white pebble back into the bunch, but decide against it. I liked the feel of it in my pocket.

Melanie keeps saying, "I have to believe she did her best. She just wanted to be happy."

Tonya walks beside Belle, who surprises us by pulling the bottle of My Sin from her purse. She holds it up, and we all expect her to sprinkle the last few drops over the freshly-turned earth. Instead, she crashes it down over the granite like a woman christening a ship.

"Annabelle," she says. "Teeth-keeper."

And at least we do know this.