

Leslie
Eight Years After

The boy behind the counter was approximately seventeen years old, attractive in the youthful way that is a transition from what one would call adorable to what could be considered handsome, and heavily pregnant.

He wore, despite the southern heat, a cable knit sweater that was much too big for him, the better to accommodate his ample abdomen. He had pushed the sleeves up above his elbows, but a sheen of sweat was nonetheless visible on his brow. He hummed cheerfully to himself as he went about his work, slipping through the swinging door into the kitchen where I could see him shaving thin slivers of meat from the pork roast, simmering and popping on a spit over a bed of charcoal, and sawing thick slices of brown bread from a lumpy, irregularly shaped loaf that sat on a cutting board beside the wood stove. Artfully assembling the sandwich I had ordered for my lunch.

I was his only customer. Probably the only customer he'd had all week.

"Do you have anywhere to stay tonight?" he asked as he returned to the deserted dining room and set my lunch down in front of me.

I tore my eyes away from his midsection and looked at his face, but my mind still contemplated the impossibility of his situation.

I shook my head.

"You're welcome to stay with us. Or, if you'd prefer to be by yourself, we can put you in one of the empty houses. Let us show you which house, though, because we haven't finished cleaning them all out yet."

I nodded. "That would be fine."

"Which one?"

"Whichever would be the least trouble for you."

"Then you'll stay with us. We keep a spare room ready for any travelers who might pass through."

"Thank you."

My eyes drifted back to the bulbous protrusion under his sweater, which was now pressed against the edge of the counter as he leaned in to speak to me.

He smiled, noticing where I was looking. "My mother thought it was cancer at first."

I hastened my gaze back up to his face. "Oh?"

"It's not, though."

"Oh?" I said again.

"You don't believe me."

"I didn't say that. There are other possibilities."

"Besides the obvious, you mean?"

"The obvious is quite impossible."

"Nothing is impossible for God."

I flicked my eyes over his body again and saw the gold crucifix hanging from his neck. It had escaped my notice before. "I've never heard of God making a man pregnant."

"You've heard of God making a virgin pregnant."

I looked away from him and took a bite of my sandwich. The bread did not quite compare in quality to that which we could make in the city. The texture was coarse. The flavor bitter. But the meat was like nothing I had ever tasted, even before They came. The pig must have been slaughtered that very morning.

The boy nodded. "Not a believer, then?"

"I used to be." I took another bite.

"You lost someone?"

"I lost everyone."

"And your faith went with them?"

Another bite. Salty pork grease coated my bottom lip and I wiped my mouth with the cloth napkin the boy had provided me. I did not answer his question.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"It's all right."

"We don't see visitors often, so I talk too much sometimes."

I smiled at him. "It's really okay. I'll tell you if you want."

"You don't have to."

"I want to."

"Okay."

I took a breath. "I did have faith when I was younger, though not the variety you subscribe to. I would more likely have worn a Star of David than a cross."

"Star of David? That's Jewish, right?"

"It is."

"Oh, then..." He paused, obviously uncomfortable.

"Let me guess. I'm the first Jew you've ever met?"

"No, it's not that. It's just...well...I thought you weren't supposed to eat pork."

I glanced down at my sandwich and realized the source of his unease. I smiled at him. "Oh, no, I'm not kosher," I said.

"Kosher?"

"Obeying the dietary laws."

He smiled and relaxed considerably. "Oh. Good."

"My parents were kosher, but they never forced me to be, so if I was out with friends I could eat what I wanted. I still do."

"Your parents..."

"They were Conservative Jews, and they did their best to ensure I grew up with a strong faith in God."

"So what happened?"

"What do you think happened?"

"I don't know. Everybody went through hard times, but most people I know came through it with stronger faith than they had before."

"I know some people like that too."

"But not you?"

I shook my head. "When They first came and people started dying, I prayed my family would be spared. Then my daughter fell ill and I prayed for her recovery. She didn't recover. I prayed for my husband to survive, but he fell ill too. When they were both gone, I prayed for God to take me as well. When he wouldn't even answer *that* prayer, I stopped praying."

"I'm sorry," said the boy, eyes cast down.

“Everybody lost somebody.”

“I suppose. So, you don’t believe in miracles?”

“Miracles?”

“Well...yes.” With a nod of his head, he indicated his unusual predicament.

“You mean do I think you could be carrying a child?”

“Yes.”

“You’re asking me to accept a pretty unbelievable miracle.”

“All miracles are unbelievable. That’s what makes them miracles.”

“Most can be explained as coincidence.”

“Even this?” He brought a hand to rest just above where I assumed his belly button was.

“As I said, there are other possibilities.”

“Would you like to feel?”

“Feel?”

“Yes. Give me your hand.”

He extended his own hand to me and fixed upon me such an expression of wide-eyed wonder I could hardly help but humor him.

His palm was warm. The skin smooth and baby soft. He was just the age Clara would have been had she lived. I looked into his face again and tried to imagine the daughter I might have today if They had never come, but I did not cry for her. Enough tears had been shed for the lost over the past eight years. I was done crying.

He took my hand and placed it flat against his belly, holding it there with a firm but gentle grip. I wanted to palpate his abdomen, to determine the cause of such an unnatural appendage, but he kept my hand fast within his grasp. There was nothing to do but wait for him to turn me loose.

We passed an awkward moment in which we both remained motionless, I keenly aware of his extreme youth and the inappropriate nature of this prolonged physical contact. He was no patient of mine. I had no business putting my hands on his body.

Seconds ticked by and still he held my hand there. I tried to wriggle my fingers free, but he wrapped his other hand around my wrist. “Wait,” he whispered.

I waited.

I could feel little of the nature of the growth through the thick wool of his sweater. Only that it was firm but not hard. Cancer was a possibility, but not a likely one, given the apparent good health of the subject.

“I don’t think...” I began, but he made a *shushing* sound and focused his attention on his enlarged belly. I *shushed*.

Then it happened. It was small at first. The kind of thing one could easily disregard as a muscle spasm or the natural workings of the digestive system. But it happened again, and this time there was no mistaking what I was feeling. Something close to the size of a walnut, round and hard, pressed against his abdominal wall from the inside and slid across the palm of my hand. The heel of a foot.