

Bread and Bathrooms

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Marjorie believed in omens. As other people studied the stock market or the heavens, Marjorie studied events in her own life for hints of the path she should follow to travel safely through her allotted days. Despite her reliance on omens, however, she was only compulsive about bathrooms. The bread hardly counted. Her daughter understood the bread, but remained confused about the bathrooms.

"Don't forget bread," Marjorie now reminded herself before grocery shopping. Her husband was killed returning to the store for a loaf of bread he'd forgotten. A steel beam, a bolt flung from the heavens, fell from a construction rafter, landing atop Samuel, crushing his back, killing him instantly. His death was a warning: "Beware! Ye who forget the bread will suffer swift and final retribution."

Julianne flippantly dismissed her mother's not so subtle hints about the importance of grocery lists and not forgetting needed foods, especially bread. "Too much trouble, Mama, and not worth it." Still Marjorie persisted with phone reminders timed to coincide with Julianne's Saturday morning shopping.

The bathroom fetish, if fetish it was, began soon after Samuel's death. Twenty-year-old Julianne arranged a shopping trip. After allowing her mother to mourn for six months, she was taking charge. "Now, Mama, you can't stay cooped up in this old house the rest of your life. Daddy's dead and we all miss him, but you know what they say, life goes on." Julianne sprawled on her mother's couch, dangling long legs over the armrest. She was big-boned and blond, as if she had Swedish ancestors and was certainly not related to petite, black-haired, olive-skinned Marjorie and Samuel.

Julianne twisted one arm back and forth to admire the glint of gold bracelets which covered her from wrist to elbow. "I'm cutting my Lit class in the morning, so I'll be free until 2:30. I'll pick you up at 9:00. Be ready."

"But I don't need anything. Besides, I don't feel like shopping." Marjorie protested, even while knowing her protest would be useless. While she and Samuel had tiptoed through life, convinced the next corner hid a mine field, Julianne hurdled forward, embracing each spectacular surprise and creating a few of her own. Unwary spectators were dragged along, willing or not.

"I won't take no for an answer. You need to get out. And, remember, I'm cutting my class so don't crap out on me, love."

"Julianne, please." Marjorie rubbed her hands against the sides of her skirt, as if removing dirt or other specks of uncleanness. She wondered if all late babies—Samuel had been nearly 40, Marjorie 37 when Julianne was born—acted like her daughter. She sighed. Probably not. That was just Julianne's way, her destiny.

Julianne smiled at her mother, flattered by the chastisement. Since becoming an art major at the local university, Julianne had decided most words impeded communication and only language which shocked had value. If that were true, Marjorie was the ideal listener—easily and frequently and shocked.

"You should hear my friends talk."

"I don't want to meet such so-called friends." She sniffed twice. Julianne's major seemed decadent, useless, overly self-indulgent. The friends seemed the same. Marjorie still wished Julianne had taken a one-year secretarial course at the business college and found a steady nine-to-five job after that. She would be okay, or at least headed in the right direction, if she'd done that.

"Don't worry, love, they won't be coming tomorrow. See you at 9:00." Julianne swung her legs off the couch and sashayed out the front door.

Next morning, at 9:25, she pulled in front of Marjorie's house. That, for Julianne, was almost early.

Marjorie had been waiting since 8:30. That, for Marjorie, was almost late. She'd spent the time seated in Samuel's brown recliner which, since his death, she'd boldly appropriated for her own. She thought of Samuel, as she had done almost constantly since his death and almost never before it. If he had not died on April 1, they would have been married thirty years on the 30th of October. That was supposed to be a couple's luckiest year, the anniversary year which corresponded to the date of the marriage — thirty years on the 30th. But now Marjorie would never know, because Samuel had gotten himself killed. She didn't suppose she could legitimately celebrate her anniversary without a husband.

She had few pictures of Samuel. The latest one had been taken on Julianne's ninth birthday. Samuel had been the family photographer,

chronicling the passing years while remaining safely hidden behind the lens. Now, if anyone wanted to know what he looked like, Marjorie could only point to a family album entry which showed a youngish man of forty-nine, his hair, with mere tinges of gray, receding only slightly from his forehead, his stomach protruding almost imperceptibly over his belt, certainly not unsightly enough to be considered a paunch. He looked more like Marjorie's son than her husband. That is not how he looked when he died. But that would soon be all anyone would remember. Already, Marjorie found herself unable to recall certain of his features without assistance from the album. Once she saw him at forty-nine, she could quickly age him in her mind's eye to sixty. Soon, even that would be difficult, then impossible. She would be left with vague memories of an older man and pictures of someone who might have been the son she never had.

Though she had trouble reconstructing Samuel's individual features, Marjorie knew she would never forget his death expression. In his coffin, he'd seemed bewildered at his fate. She had never seen such intense surprise on a corpse. It was almost embarrassing. "All this just for a loaf of bread?" he seemed to ask. Samuel, who never stood out in a crowd, who never had his name in the newspaper, much less on the evening news, suddenly, with his death, became the center of controversy. Did the state have sufficient safety codes for construction? Had the building site been following state code requirements? Was negligence a factor? Should Mrs. Tanner sue the property owners, the state, the city, or all three?

Mrs. Marjorie Tanner sued no one. Despite Julianne's battle cry ("Sue the bastards!"), Marjorie recoiled from that possibility. She would have had to go to court, testify about the bread. It would have reduced Samuel's death to what it was, an insignificant end to an insignificant life. Let him remain a person whose death rendered him newsworthy.

Julianne's insistent honking startled Marjorie. She grabbed her pocketbook and trotted out the door towards the Volkswagen. Maybe neighbors hadn't heard the honking.

"Honking's cheap. I've told you before. You could get down, knock." She tucked her beige cotton skirt next to her thighs and clasped her hands over her pocketbook.

"Relax, Mama. Relax." Julianne glanced at her, then pulled into traffic. "You look nice, Mama. But, really! Stockings and heels? We're going shopping, not out on a hot date." Marjorie blushed. Julianne, dressed in the uniform of the day, faded jeans and t-shirt, laughed. Even as a child, Julianne, with her constant excessiveness, had known exactly how to embarrass Marjorie.

"Where are we going?"

"How about checking out the new Macy's at Cherry Tree Mall? We can have lunch there, if you like."

"You're in charge, not me." Marjorie disclaimed responsibility for most outings. If things didn't turn out as planned, no one could blame her.

Julianne turned up the volume on her radio. Blaring music rocked the beetle. As always, she drove too fast. Marjorie glued her eyes to the speedometer, but said nothing.

"Lucky we're doing this in the middle of the week. Last time I was here, a Saturday I think, I couldn't even get up to the jewelry counter without waiting in line. Guess everybody in the city is checking out the new store." Julianne turned the revolving stand which held pairs of gold earrings in various shapes and sizes—long, danglish beaded strings; tiny knobs which would be barely noticeable on a lobe; convoluted loops. She fingered a pair of four-leaf clovers, but must have decided the earrings were too conservative to deserve serious attention. She motioned her mother to the next department.

"You might not think this is crowded, but I do." Marjorie eyed the shoppers who pressed too closely. At least, though, they were generally properly attired. Despite Julianne's joking admonition, Marjorie was pleased to see most women wearing stockings and small heels. She was not conspicuous.

They had visited most departments, carefully avoiding the men's clothing area, when Julianne suggested lunch. She flipped through sweater racks while her mother made her customary premeal visit to the bathroom.

Marjorie was pleased with the women's room—it seemed designed for ladies in stockings and small heels. The walls of the outer waiting area were papered with burgundy velvet flowers against a pink satin background. Marjorie knew the paper wasn't actually made of velvet and satin. But the wall covering was sufficiently similar to the materials it imitated to give the reassuring illusion of being rare and expensive. Marjorie liked that.

After refurbishing her lipstick and combing her hair, Marjorie left the outer area for the inner one. Three sinks lined one wall. No one would have to wait to wash her hands at this Macy's. Three sinks in such a small bathroom seemed almost excessively opulent. Still, she reasoned, better to err on the side of providing too much to customers than not enough.

She turned from the sinks to the toilet stalls, then took a shocked half step backwards. The fattest woman Marjorie had ever seen, or even imagined, sat on the seat of one toilet. The stall door was open—

otherwise the woman could not have fit in the enclosure. A pair of black polyester pants drooped at her ankles. Her huge buttocks overflowed the toilet seat. Her legs, rooted to the floor, were folds of fat, ripples of flesh undulating like a small ocean. The woman's black hair, streaked with yellowish gray strands, oily from not having been washed, was tightly pulled into a ponytail at the back of her head. She held a peanut butter and jelly sandwich which she chewed between loud grunts. As she bit into the sandwich, portions of the filling squirted out. So, after each bite, she wiped the perimeters of the bread slices and shoved the results into her mouth with her index and middle fingers.

Three young girls, each also chewing a sandwich, stood in a semi-circle in front of the woman's stall. They were miniature versions of the woman, her daughters or perhaps her granddaughters—it was impossible to tell which. The woman could have been any age—thirty, fifty, even seventy. The girls seemed to be studying the fat woman to learn what they would one day become. If the scene had not been so grotesque, it would have been touching—daughters gathered round the maternal altar of knowledge.

The silence was interrupted only by the fat woman's grunts. Her stench filled the small room, overwhelming the deodorizer attached to the wall above the sinks. Marjorie stood transfixed, unobserved, perhaps rendered momentarily invisible. Then, she was noticed, standing bewildered in the entry.

"Girls, get out of the way for the lady, will ya? Kids nowadays have no manners." her voice was deep, gravelly—she probably smoked. Her smile revealed a single gold crown surrounded by cracked, broken, stained teeth. The gums were darkened, as if they bled frequently, surely a sign of disease. The gold seemed foreign.

"Want a sandwich, honey? Plenty more in the bag."

Marjorie, who had made no motion towards one of the empty stalls, was startled to be addressed again. "Go on, take one. With those stick legs of yours, you could use it." She shoved the sandwich, wrapped in wax paper, towards Marjorie.

Marjorie didn't want the sandwich. She wasn't hungry. Even if she had been, she didn't want to eat anything contaminated by this woman. Anyway, she was about to have lunch with Julianne. She should have said that to the fat woman, "I'm about to have lunch with my daughter. There are things I must tell her. You understand." But she could not. She'd been hypnotized, had no will of her own. Instead of politely refusing the sandwich Marjorie grabbed it from the woman who released it somewhat reluctantly. Perhaps she had changed her mind about sharing her bounty. But Marjorie had the

sandwich now. Neither she nor the fat woman could get out of their bargained exchange.

Quickly, Marjorie unwrapped the sandwich and ate. Normally a dainty eater, Marjorie gobbled the sandwich like a woman starved. She broke large chunks, chewed with a rapid circular motion, then swallowed. Within minutes the sandwich was gone. Maybe now she would be allowed to leave.

"See there. Knew you needed that." Again, she smiled.

Still frozen, Marjorie smiled back.

As Marjorie ate, the fat woman had stopped grunting, mesmerized by Marjorie's moving jaws. But now, remembering the main purpose of her bathroom visit, she stared at the pink floor tiles and resumed her grunts, oblivious again to Marjorie.

The spell broke and Marjorie slipped into the waiting area. She collapsed on the loveseat, nauseated. How could she have eaten that filthy woman's sandwich? Even Julianne would have been repulsed. At least Marjorie hoped she would have been. Julianne was, despite their differences, still her daughter, her only child, flesh of her flesh. Julianne belonged to her just like those wiry girls belonged to the fat woman. And, just as those girls were destined to rotund bodies, Julianne was destined. Destined to what? Marjorie jerked erect. It was clear now. Julianne was destined to recognize and obey family omens. Marjorie's role was to study life's warnings, save them for the day Julianne, recognizing their importance, came to her. Until that day arrived, Marjorie would have to be satisfied with following the omens herself.

From that day forward, Marjorie tried never to be in a public place without having emptied her bowels and bladder beforehand. On those rare occasions when she was forced to use a public bathroom, she took appropriate precautions, wiping the toilet seat with crumpled squares of toilet paper, flushing the bowl twice, three times if it seemed especially dirty, guarding against diseases lurking in the toilet, ready to leap upon her. She would not be disgraced by dying from a disreputable disease.

Marjorie heeded the warnings of the fat woman and of Samuel's death, and waited for omens yet to come. She waited to share the knowledge she was accumulating with Julianne. When Julianne asked, Marjorie would be ready with portents for her daughter's proper life. □