

Stains

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Her wrists burn in the icy water. But the water must be cold if she is to get all the stains out. She folds the leg of the jeans, rubs the layers of heavy denim together. With the bar of harsh laundry soap she scrubs the spots over and over. The water darkens with blood. She twists the jeans, wringing out as much water as she can, sets them carefully beside the sink.

When she lifts the tee-shirt a small piece of curled, white skin floats free of the jagged tear, rises to the surface. She swallows, takes a deep breath.

When the clothes – a pair of shorts, a pair of socks, the tee-shirt, and the jeans – are all in the washer she sits down at the kitchen table. She's never been good at waiting. "Go home," they told her, "There's nothing you can do here. We'll call you." She stares at the clock, not sure if she wants the hands to move faster or slower. Should she call one of her friends to wait with her? She couldn't bear to make small talk, couldn't concentrate on anything but the pictures that fill her mind. The image of him – gray, unconscious, his dark blood seeping through the bandage, seeping into the white sheet of the hospital bed. No, she will wait now as she waited seventeen years ago for his birth. Alone. She sees the baby with snowy hair, the five year old in an over-sized hockey uniform, the fourth-grade wise man in the school pageant... thinks of all the hopes she had for him.

She goes to the washer as soon as it stops. There is a circle of red-tinged suds on the inside of the lid. She puts the clothes into the dryer, then with an old towel scrubs the enamel lid. She rinses the towel again and again; when it is clean, she hangs it over the tap to dry.

In the kitchen she fills the kettle and sets it on the burner. She spoons tea leaves into a small brown pot and takes a china mug from the cupboard. When the tea is ready she sits for a moment holding the warm mug in both hands. She drinks two cups but in a few minutes she is thirsty again. Worry parches her mouth; it's always been that way.

She learned to keep a pitcher of water and a glass beside her, the nights she sat up with him when he was sick. With every illness he ran a high fever. When he was a baby and she held him in her arms in the rocking chair all night she wished that she could absorb the heat from his body into her own. Wished him cool – well again – sleeping in his crib with the white quilt tucked around him. When he was three or four, the fevers made him delirious, made him babble nonsense, reach to pluck imaginary balloons from the air. She thought that when he was older, after he'd had all the childhood diseases, everything would be all right. If only this was as simple as a bout of croup or measles.

The fear has been with her for a long time. She realized that when the doorbell rang at 4 a.m. She awoke instantly, went to the door, saw the police officer standing there. "...your son – there's been an accident..." She knew then that, somehow, she'd been waiting for those words.

Noon. He'd be getting up about now if this was an ordinary Saturday. He'd come into the kitchen, bleary-eyed, his hair ruffled, wearing only his wrinkled jeans. He'd go to the fridge, take a drink of milk straight from the carton. She'd say, "For Pete's sake, can't you get a glass?" He'd shrug, both of them knowing she wasn't upset about the milk but about his hangover, his boozing, his friends... A Saturday ritual that had been going on for a year now. Today there is only the faint hum of the dryer and the ticking of the clock.

When she takes the clothes out of the dryer she spreads them on top of the machine, inspects them carefully, satisfies herself that there is no trace of stains. She folds them and puts them in his dresser. Except the shirt. She takes the shirt to the sewing machine. The gash is so long – from the shoulder almost to the hem – that it distorts the Molson logo printed on the chest. Of course, he has other shirts – a red one, a soft silvery gray one, a black one that makes him look even blonder than he is – lots of nice shirts; but he prefers this one. A stretched tee-shirt that shows the world he is a beer drinker – a man.

Booze erases his shyness, gives him confidence. She should have praised him more when he was younger, criticized him less, helped him to have a better self-image. She knows that now. Maybe then he'd have excelled at something – school, sports, drama – wouldn't have needed to booze to make him feel important.

In the sewing room, she takes a cardboard box from the top shelf. She must find material to match the shirt. She turns the box upside down, spills hundreds of odd-shaped scraps onto the floor. She sifts through them carefully, picks up, then rejects, five or six. Finally, she finds a piece of soft cotton that matches exactly the faded blue of the shirt. She pins it carefully in place under the tear and starts sewing. The machine's zigzag stitches pull the edges neatly together. The mend will be almost invisible. But there is still an inch left to sew when the telephone rings.