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JO VAN ARKEL

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## Everyday Living

RUBY SAT UP IN BED and held her eyelids open with her fingers until she was awake. The room was dark and still. The space next to her was empty, the spread untouched.

Ruby got out of bed and pulled on her robe. She tied the belt in a knot, drew the collar up around her neck, and started down the hall.

She caught her eye on the TV going. She saw the grey light of the set flickering against the wall before she saw Cyrus stretched out on the couch, snoring like a bullfrog. There was a black and white comedy on—*I Love Lucy*, where Lucy has a job dipping frozen bananas in chocolate sauce then rolling them in nuts.

Cyrus' mouth was open and his jaw was sagging the way a dead person's might if it wasn't sewn shut. He had his hands folded across his stomach.

"Why don't you sleep on a bed? That's what they're for."

She said this aloud, but she could have said it to herself. Cyrus didn't so much as twitch.

Ruby rubbed her backside and yawned. "You'll get arthritis if you keep sleeping on the couch. Every couch dozer I've ever known came down with arthritis before they were sixty. My uncle's joints got so inflamed they swole up like apples."

Ruby walked behind the couch so she could see both the TV and Cyrus. "Or cancer maybe. You might get cancer," she said.

On the TV, a man was showing Lucy how to do her job. He took a tray of bananas from a freezer. They were all laid out, each with a wooden stick in one end, the bananas steaming with cold. He showed her how to load up a machine with bananas so they came rolling out on a conveyer belt one by one. He showed her how to dip them in a vat of melted chocolate at the end of the belt, roll them in nuts, then stand them up by their wooden sticks in a tray that he placed in another freezer at the other end of the room. He did all of this with a smile and when he was through, he held his hand out to Lucy as if he were turning the whole show over to her.

"Lucy'll mess up," she said. "Then she'll cry. Then everything will work out in the end." Ruby could see the whole program from start to finish. It almost set her teeth on edge.

Ruby looked at Cyrus. The fly of his pajamas was gaping and Ruby reached down to close it so he wouldn't be exposed.

In the grey light of the TV Cyrus' face looked like it was covered with old paste. He had a sore on his neck, right near his adam's apple that seemed to have been there for weeks. He said he'd gotten it shaving, but the sore didn't look like a razor cut. It was the size of a pea, round and maroon-colored. It looked as if someone had pressed the burning end of a cigarette against his skin. She told him she didn't like the looks of it, but he said he'd be goddamned if he was going to pay a doctor sixty bucks to tell him he had a pimple.

Ruby was on the lookout for signs like that—lingering aches and pains, sores that didn't heal. It was the mother in her. Ruby and Cyrus had two sons. The youngest was dead—killed in a car accident ten years ago before the age of seventeen. The other joined the Navy then disappeared. They hadn't heard from him in eight years. When he was at sea, Ruby wrote him every month for three and a half years, though he never wrote back. Then one day she got a letter from the United States Naval Department that said her son had been discharged sixteen months and left no forwarding address and did she know his whereabouts because there were some outstanding fines and such that needed to be cleared up.

Cyrus said if he had raised a son who went off on his own and wasn't coming back so much the better. So he'd die and his only living son wouldn't be there to lay his father's goddamned body to rest. So he had two dead sons. Subject closed.

But Ruby thought he might come back. He might show up any minute right out of the clear blue. The hope of his return set her to making pies and casseroles on holidays. It got her out of bed and dressed in the mornings.

"Maybe—" she said, almost in a whisper, "I should bake something."

She turned—not to the kitchen but the front door—as if she had heard a sound, a step on the porch. . . . But, no. It was nothing at all or the neighbor's cat.

Ruby went into the kitchen to make a cup of herbal tea. She started drinking herbal tea when she read somewhere that some instant coffees used formaldehyde. That's what she used to drink—instant coffee, six or seven cups a day. But she stopped when she found out about the formaldehyde. She started reading labels and found that some shampoos used formaldehyde too. It was like a conspiracy—like someone was slipping small amounts of preserving fluid into people's everyday living. Now Ruby used herbal shampoo too.

Ruby put a pot of water on the stove and turned on the burner. She listened to Cyrus snoring in the other room.

"I've been trying to contact our son," she said outloud. Even if Cyrus didn't wake up and listen, she felt like hearing the sound of her own voice. "I use imagery." She closed her eyes. "I try to picture where he

is—reading a newspaper, standing at a bus stop.” She held her hands out like a medium. “I call to him . . . Sonny! *S-o-n-n-e-e-e!*”

She opened her eyes and listened. She could hear the TV going. Lucy was yelling and the TV was laughing. The sound of applause rose and fell like a wave.

Ruby took a cup from the drying rack in the sink.

“I had that dream again tonight,” she said. “I couldn’t shut it out. Every time I closed my eyes the dream picked up where it left off.”

Ruby had read an article in the newspaper. The article said the city was digging a trench for a new water main when they came across an old coffin. Officials estimated the body had been buried over a hundred years ago in the days when a family sometimes buried their own dead and didn’t always bother to have a body embalmed.

According to the article some of the coffin had rotted away and when the workers lifted the coffin out, they could see the skeleton from the outside. The skeleton was holding in its hands fistfuls of hair. The head was turned, arms and legs twisted about—as if the woman had moved inside her coffin, as if she’d torn the hair from her head!

Experts said she was remarkably well-preserved. They speculated that she had been in a deep coma at the time she was interred.

Someone had made a mistake. Someone had taken a live body and planted it six feet under. The grieving threw fistfuls of dirt on the lid and wept. They went back to their homes, sat in their rooms, and remembered the deceased over potluck and coffee. But sometime, as they walked around on top of the earth, the woman woke up.

Ruby tried to picture what the woman did then. Maybe she pressed her hands against the sides and lid of the box. Maybe she called someone’s name.

That’s what Ruby heard in her dream. There were no pictures, only voices centuries old and words she couldn’t quite make out—last words spoken from the grave like a promise or warning, spoken to her! as if she were one of them—a living dead, a zombie!

At first there were only one or two voices speaking slowly and just beyond her. But with each dream more voices found her. Until at last tonight her head was crammed full of hundreds of voices and ten thousand words. How they talked and talked! Urgent. Unceasing! Some whispered. Some screamed. But they all had plenty to say, and they pounded at their lids and pulled their hair—old men, children, women buried with still-borns cradled in their arms. Ruby heard them all—gasping for air and gnashing their teeth. Some voices she thought she recognized. An ancestor perhaps. Or a son.

Ruby went back to the den with her cup of tea and sat on the edge of the couch, her back against Cyrus’ knees. Most nights when she couldn’t

sleep, she sweetened her tea with honey, but this night she left it bitter. The TV was still going, and she lifted the rim to her lips and blew across the top of the liquid. She felt the steam dampen her forehead as it rose from the cup.

The conveyor belt was moving fast and Lucy had fallen behind. She had frozen bananas piling up at the end of the belt. She was dipping bananas three and four at a time. She'd grab them up in her hands, shove them into the chocolate, then dump them in a pile on the nuts. She had chocolate on her face and smeared over one side of her hairdo. The TV was laughing and the bananas were dropping onto the floor and Lucy was laying across the conveyor belt trying to keep the bananas from falling off.

Ruby switched off the TV, shut it off in mid-laugh with Lucy stranded on the verge of her stupid, terrible disaster. She sat for a long time, the tea growing tepid in its cup, the house still, and her eyes filled with tears.

Cyrus had stopped snoring. His mouth was open, but no sound came out. "Cyrus?" she said. She felt her neck with her fingertips, reached out, almost touching him, and watched his chest rise without a sound.