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The Stone Diaries

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BIRTH, 1905

MY MOTHER'S NAME was Mercy Stone Goodwill. She was only thirty years old when she took sick, a boiling hot day, standing there in her back kitchen, making a Malvern pudding for her husband's supper. A cookery book lay open on the table: 'Take some slices of stale bread,' the recipe said, 'and one pint of currants; half a pint of raspberries; four ounces of sugar; some sweet cream if available.' Of course she's divided the recipe in half, there being just the two of them, and what with the scarcity of currants, and Cuyler (my father) being a dainty eater. A pick-and-nibble fellow, she calls him, able to take his food or leave it.

It shames her how little the man eats, diddling his spoon around in his dish, perhaps raising his eyes once or twice to send her one of his shy, appreciative glances across the table, but never taking a second helping, just leaving it all—for her to finish up—pulling his hand through the air with that dreamy gesture of his that urges her on. And smiling all the while, his daft tender-faced look. What did food mean to a working man like himself? A bother, a distraction, perhaps even a kind of price that had to be paid in order to remain upright and breathing.

Well, it was a different story for her, for my mother. Eating was as close to heaven as my mother ever came. (In our day we have a name for a passion as disordered as hers.)

And almost as heavenly as eating was, the making—how she gloried in it! Every last body on this earth has a particular

notion of paradise, and this was hers, standing in the murderously hot back kitchen of her own house, concocting and contriving, leaning forward and squinting at the fine print of the cookery book, a clean wooden spoon in hand.

It's something to see, the way she concentrates, her hot, busy face, the way she thrills to see the dish take form as she pours the stewed fruit into the fancy mould, pressing the thickly cut bread down over the oozing juices, feeling it soften and absorb bit by bit a raspberry redness. Malvern pudding; she loves the words too, and feels them dissolve on her tongue like a sugary wafer, her tongue itself grown waferlike and sweet. Like an artist—years later this form of artistry is perfectly clear to me—she stirs and arranges and draws in her brooding lower lip. Such a dish this will be. A warm sponge soaking up colour. (Mrs. Flett next door let her have some currants off her bush; the raspberries she's found herself along the roadside south of the village, even though it half kills her, a woman of her size walking out in the heat of the day.)

She sprinkles on extra sugar, one spoonful, then another, then takes the spoon to her mouth, the rough crystals that keep her alert. It is three o'clock—a hot July afternoon in the middle of Manitoba, in the middle of the Dominion of Canada. The parlour clock (adamantine finish, gilded feet, a wedding present from her husband's family, the Goodwills of Stonewall Township) has just struck the hour. Cuyler will be home from the quarry at five sharp; he will have himself a good cheerful wash at the kitchen basin, and by half-past five the two of them will sit down at the table—this very table, only spread with a clean cloth, every second day a clean cloth—and eat their supper. Which for the most part will be a silent meal, both my parents being shy by nature, and each brought up in the belief that conversing and eating are different functions, occupying separate

trenches of time. Tonight they will partake of cold corned beef with a spoonful of homemade relish, some dressed potatoes at the side, cups of sweet tea, and then this fine pudding. His eyes will widen; my father, Cuyler Goodwill, aged twenty-eight, two years married, will never in his life have tasted Malvern pudding. (That's what she's preparing for—his stunned and mild look of confusion, that tender, grateful male mouth dropping open in surprise. It's the least she can do, surprise him like this.) She sets a flower-patterned plate carefully on top of the pudding and weights it with a stone.

A cool place, the recipe says: 'Set the mould in a cool place.' (The book is an old one, printed in England more than thirty years ago, its pages limp, but the author's tone vigorous and pungent.) Yet where on a day like today is Mercy Goodwill to find a cool place? Even the dark stone floor under the cellar steps where she stores her milk and butter and lard has warmed up, giving off this last fortnight a queer sour smell. The Flett family, next door, has recently purchased a Labrador Ice Chest, zinc-lined, and Mrs. Flett has spoken shyly of this acquisition to Mercy, mentioning its features, its ventilating flues, the shining tin provision shelves, how a block of ice is able to last through two warm days or more.

Some sharp thought, the worry over how to keep the pudding cool, or perhaps envy for the Fletts' new ice chest, brings on my mother's first spasm of pain. She gives a little cry. Her eyes pull tight at the corners, as though someone has taken hold of her hair and yanked it upward so that her scalp sings. A witness, had there been a witness present in the little back kitchen, might have feared a fainting spell coming on, even though my mother is not much given to faintness. What she feels is more like a shift in the floor of her chest, rising at first, and then an abrupt drop, a squeezing like an accordion held sideways.

She looks down and observes with wonder how the blue and white stripes of her apron are breaking into coloured flakes. Her hands fly straight out in the air, a reflex meant to hold back the crushing pressure, and she steadies herself by settling her shoulders and placing her palms flat on the table, leaning forward and letting go a long, soft whimper. The sound that comes from her lips is formless, loose, a wavy line of bewilderment. (Later, these words, more than any others, will attach themselves to my image of my mother: looseness, bewilderment.) For a heavy woman she perspires little, even during the height of summer, and she takes, if the truth were known, a shy pride in her bodily dryness—only now a broad band of dampness is spreading beneath her apron and down the channel of her back. She breathes rapidly, blinking as the pain wraps a series of heavy bands around her abdomen. Down there, buried in the lapped folds of flesh, she feels herself invaded. A tidal wave, a flood.

All spring she's been troubled with indigestion. Often in the morning, and then again at night after her young husband has gone to sleep, she's risen from her bed and dosed herself with Bishop's Citrate of Magnesia. When she drinks ordinary milk or sweetened tea or sugary lemonade she swallows it down greedily, but Bishop's cool chalky potion she pours into a china cup and sips with deep, slow concentration, with dignity. She doesn't know what to think. One day she's persuaded her liver's acting up, and the next day her kidneys—she's only thirty years old, but kidney trouble can start early in life, especially for a woman of my mother's unorthodox size. Or perhaps the problem stems from constipation. Mrs. Flett next door has suggested this possibility, recommending rhubarb tablets, or else, speaking confidentially, some woman's trouble. Excessive loss of blood, she tells Mercy, is the cause of discomfort for many

young ladies—has Mercy spoken to Dr. Spears? Dr. Spears is known for his sensitivity to women's complaints; he has a way of squeezing his eyes shut when he phrases his delicate inquiries, of speaking almost poetically of nature's cycles and balances, of the tide of fertility or the consolation of fruit salts.

No, Mercy has not approached Dr. Spears, she would never speak to Dr. Spears of such a thing, she would speak to no one, not even her husband—especially not her husband. Her monthly blood has appeared only twice in her life, springing out of the soft cushions of her genital flesh, staining her underclothes with its appalling brightness, and mocking the small decencies and duties that steady her life: her needlework, her housekeeping, her skill with a flat iron, her preserves and pickles and fresh linens and the lamp chimneys she polishes every single morning.

The doses of Citrate of Magnesia help hardly at all. Fruit salts only make her suffering worse. Her abdominal walls have continued to cramp and heave all spring, and she's wondered at times if her inner membranes might burst with the pressure. Bile rises often in her throat. Her skin itches all over. She experiences scalding attacks of flatulence, especially at night as she lies next to my father, who, out of love, out of delicacy, pretends deep sleep—she can tell from the way he keeps himself curled respectfully to his own side of the bed.

Only bread seems to ease her malaise, buttered bread, enormous slabs of it, what she's heard people in this village refer to as doorsteps. She eats it fresh from the oven, slice after slice, sometimes not bothering with the knife, just tearing it off in handfuls. One day, alone in this kitchen, she consumed an entire loaf between noon and supper. (One of the loaves burned, she explained to her husband, anxious to account for the missing bread—as though a man of my father's dreamy disposition

would notice so small an item, as though any man would notice such a thing.) Frequently she sprinkles sugar on top of the buttered bread. The surface winks with brilliance, its crystals working between her teeth, giving her strength. She imagines the soft dough entering the bin of her stomach, lining that bitter bloated vessel with a cottony warmth that absorbs and neutralizes the poisons of her own body.

Her inability to feel love has poisoned her, swallowed down along with the abasement of sugar, yeast, lard, and flour; she knows this for a fact. She tries, she pretends pleasure, as women are encouraged to do, but her efforts are punished by a hunger that attacks her when she's alone, as she is on this hot July day, hidden away in a dusty, landlocked Manitoba village (half a dozen unpaved streets, a store, a hotel, a Methodist Church, the Canadian Pacific Railway Station, and a boarding house on the corner of Bishop Road for the unmarried men). She seems always to be waiting for something fresh to happen, but her view of this 'something' is obscured by ignorance and the puffiness of her bodily tissue. At night, embarrassed, she gathers her nightdress close around her. She never knows when she blows out the lamp what to expect or what to make of her husband's cries, which are, thankfully, muffled by the walls of the wood-framed company house where she and my father live. Two rooms up, two down, a privy out back. She knows only that she stands apart from any coherent history, separated from the ordinary consolation of blood ties, and covered over and over again these last two years by Cuyler Goodwill's immense, unfathomable ardour. Niagara in all its force is what she's reminded of as he climbs on top of her each evening, a thundering let loose against the folded interior walls of her body.

It's then she feels most profoundly buried, as though she, Mercy Goodwill, is no more than a beating of blood inside the

vault of her flesh, her wide face, her thick doughy neck, her great loose breasts and solid boulder of a stomach.

Standing in her back kitchen, my mother's thighs, like soft white meat (veal or chicken or fatty pork come to mind) rub together under her cotton drawers—which are wet, she suddenly realizes, soaked through and through. There are double and triple ruffles of fat around her ankles and wrists, and these ridged extremities are slick with perspiration. Her large swollen fingers press into the boards of the kitchen table, and her left hand, her wedding ring buried there in soft flesh, is throbbing with poison. She seems to see a weak greenish light unfolding like a fan in front of her eyes. This is worse, far worse, than ever it's been before. She wonders if her body will break apart, the bones drawn out from under the flesh, blood spilling on the floor and walls. She imagines her blood to be yellow rather than red, a thick honey-coloured sludge slowing her down, keeping her from crying out to Mrs. Flett next door.

Mrs. Flett, as it happens, is within easy earshot, no more than forty feet away, pinning her rough sheets and pillowcases on to a clothesline. She would come running if she only knew of Mercy Goodwill's distress; she would be there in a trice, exhorting the poor dear soul to be calm, begging her to lie down on the kitchen couch, bathing her broad, damp, blank face with a cool cloth, easing her clothing, pulling off the tightly laced shoes and heavy stockings. She loves Mercy, loves her ways, her solid concentration, though on the whole (it must be admitted) her love is churned from fascination, and also from pity—pity for that large, soft, slow-flowing body, the blurred flesh at the sides of Mercy's young face, and a blinking prettiness that shows itself in certain lights, in the curve of her upper lip or the tender spilt panic of her hazel eyes. When she looks into Mercy's calf

eyes she does not think 'childish,' but 'child.' Poor thing, poor lost thing. Never a mother to call her own, and now, from the looks of it—though who could tell such things, who can read the future?—no little ones of her own to rock and sing to.

Mrs. Flett—her Christian name is Clarentine—has three grown sons, Simon, Andrew, and Barker, but no daughter. The eldest of these sons, Barker, has gone to Winnipeg to study at the College, and the other two work at the quarry alongside her husband Magnus, a master stonecutter, a cold, lean Orkneyman who immigrated to Canada at the age of nineteen. His Orkney ways have stayed with him. He prefers simple things. A plainly furnished house. A carefully tended garden. Ordinary food on the table, a supper of porridge or smoked fish or even a plate of bread and butter washed down by tea. The sight of a Malvern pudding unmolded on a glass plate and covered with cream would distress him deeply, particularly a pudding set out on what is, after all, an ordinary Monday evening in high summer in the year 1905 (the year of my birth, the day of my birth).

Mrs. Flett, Clarentine, a neat-bodied woman whose skin is the colour of mushrooms and whose memory of her sons' infancy has been washed clear by disappointment, dreams of taking Mercy's large dry hand in hers and saying, 'A woman's life isn't worth a plateful of cabbage if she hasn't felt life stir under her heart. Taking a little one to nurse, watching him grow to manhood, that's what love is. We say we love our husbands, we stand up in church saying as how we'll love them forever and ever, till death do we part, but it's our own blood and sinew we really love.'

She likes giving Mercy things. Only last spring, while cleaning house, she came across an old tinware jelly mould, and this is the vessel Mercy uses today to provide shape for her Malvern pudding. She gives Mercy flowers from her garden, sweet