A nursery room with a white crib, a chandelier, and butterfly decorations. The room is decorated with white and pink tones, featuring a window with sheer curtains and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. The walls are decorated with fleur-de-lis and butterfly motifs. The floor is covered with a white shag rug and several pillows, including one with a butterfly design and a stuffed lamb.

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

WHERE THE NURSERY RULES

EVELYN HUGHES
MAXWELL VOSS

Baby Dani and the two sisters

Where The Nursery Rules

by
Evelyn Hughes

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Baby Dani and the two sisters

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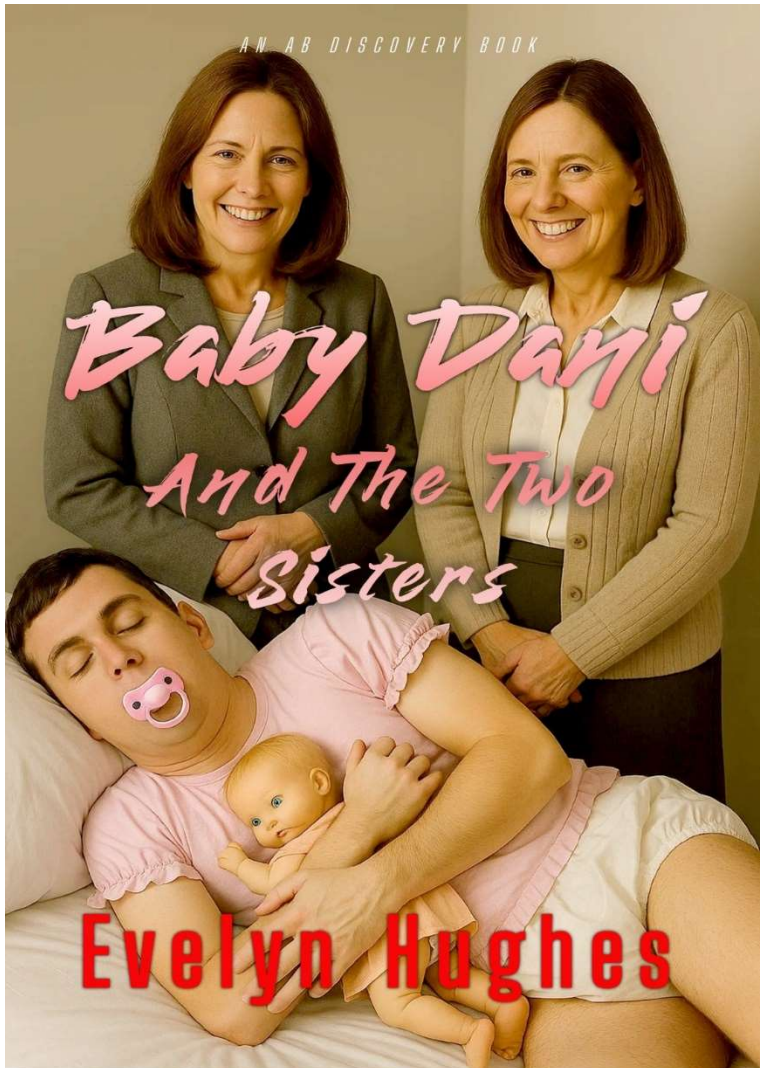
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Baby Dani and the two sisters

Baby Dani And The Two Sisters

by
Evelyn Hughes

Chapter One - The Holiday Begins

The train wound its way through the countryside, slowing as it approached the small lakeside town. For Margaret and Ellen, the sisters, it had been years since they'd taken their mother anywhere beyond the local shops. At seventy, their mother still insisted on keeping a clean, orderly home, though it was old-fashioned in every respect with lace doilies, polished wood, and the same curtains that had hung since the girls were children.

The holiday cabin, when they arrived, felt like stepping into another time. Its wood-panelled walls smelled faintly of pine and damp, and the wide porch looked straight down onto the glittering water of the lake.

"It's lovely," Ellen said softly, smoothing her prima and proper dress as she stood in the doorway. Margaret, the older of the two by three years, nodded in agreement, though she was already fussing with her mother's bag, ensuring it was placed neatly by the bed.

They unpacked slowly and deliberately, as they always did. Holidays were rare for them, luxuries normally reserved for families with children, with noise, with life and the chaos that went with it. The three women lived quietly, content in many ways, but with an unspoken ache that none of them mentioned outright. The sisters were childless, and their mother would never have a grandchild. And they were both virgins, never having even come close to sexual intimacy with a young man, even in their youth.

The next morning, Margaret was the first to rise. She pushed open the window shutters to let the sun in and paused. "Ellen," she whispered. "Come and look."

Ellen padded over, her hair loose from sleep. On the washing line strung between two posts outside the neighbouring cabin, a row of sheets flapped in the breeze. That in itself was unremarkable, but hung beside them were several pairs of panties, pastel-coloured and small, and a couple of bras, no larger than those of a schoolgirl.

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“They can’t belong to the mother,” Margaret said. She had seen the woman briefly the night before. She was younger than them, but with a sturdiness to her figure that made such delicate underthings impossible.

Ellen frowned thoughtfully. “Perhaps she has a daughter?”

“Perhaps,” Margaret murmured, though she doubted it. There had been no sign of another female voice, no giggling laughter, only the faint sound of a man’s low murmur the previous evening. The mystery tugged at them both, and for women whose days were usually predictable and plain, it felt strangely thrilling to speculate. Life was normally excruciatingly predictable, and the sight of unexplained young girls’ underwear with the obvious presence of a young girl was certainly something to talk about.

When they sat down to breakfast with their mother, the conversation circled back to the washing line. “It’s none of your business,” their mother chided gently, though there was a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. “But I suppose... it is curious just the same.”

Later, as they sat on the porch, they saw the young woman from the neighbouring cabin come out with a basket of fresh laundry. She was attractive in a tired sort of way, her hair hastily pinned, her expression weary. She glanced over and offered a polite smile, which the sisters quickly returned.

“Shall we introduce ourselves?” Ellen asked, almost nervously.

Margaret straightened her shoulders. “Yes. It would be neighbourly.”

Together, they walked across the grass toward the other cabin. As they approached, they noticed once again the incongruity of the washing line with the large sheets once again, and the dainty underwear, all blowing together in the lake breeze. Margaret’s heart beat faster with curiosity.

The woman looked up as they neared, shading her eyes with one hand. “Morning,” she said warmly enough, though her voice carried an undertone of fatigue.

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“Good morning,” Margaret replied. “We’re staying in the cabin next door. I’m Margaret, and this is my sister Ellen. And our mother, Mrs Hayes, is with us as well.”

The woman introduced herself as Laura. She seemed grateful for the company, though somewhat distracted. They exchanged a few pleasantries about the lake and the weather before Ellen, unable to restrain herself, gestured lightly toward the line.

“You have quite a wash there,” she said delicately. “I hope you don’t mind me asking... those are awfully dainty things for you, and you wash the sheets every day, do you?”

Laura’s mouth tightened briefly, then she gave a small shrug, almost defensive. “They’re not mine,” she said bluntly. “They belong to my son.”

Both sisters blinked, startled. For a moment, silence hung between them, filled only by the flutter of sheets in the wind.

“My son,” Laura repeated, with a weary sigh. “He’s nineteen. Still wets the bed every night. Those are his sheets. And the panties... well, he steals mine, so I gave him his own.” She gave a small, almost bitter laugh. “It’s just easier that way.”

Margaret and Ellen exchanged a glance. Their hearts fluttered strangely, not with scandal, but with something awkward, something that felt dangerously like hope.

“We are sorry to pry,” Margaret responded. “It must be difficult for you, but I’m glad you can get away on a holiday here. It is truly a beautiful place.”

“The endless washing can get me down sometimes, but at least here, the sun and wind will dry them quickly. At home, the washing can sometimes take all day to dry, and I don’t like hanging out Danny’s panties and bras for neighbours to see.”

Margaret nodded. “That makes sense.”

Laura seemed almost relieved, once the words were spoken. As though she had been carrying a heavy bundle alone and, now that it was set down, there was no use in trying to hide it. She gestured toward a pair of chairs on the porch.

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"If you've the time," she said, "sit a while. I don't get much chance to talk to people about... all this."

The sisters sat quickly, politely. Margaret folded her hands in her lap, Ellen smoothed her skirt, both waiting with the kind of rapt attention that only the lonely can offer.

"It started when he was little," Laura began, her eyes turned toward the water but not really seeing it. "Danny was late with everything. Potty training, speech, and even walking. He stayed in nappies until he was five, soaked through most mornings, sometimes worse. When the doctors told me to be firmer, I took the nappies away. Cold. Just stopped. For months, the sheets were wet every single day. Sometimes messy too." She rubbed her forehead with tired fingers. "It almost broke my back, but I thought it was better to fight the battle than let it drag on forever."

Ellen's breath caught. She tried to mask it with a soft "mm," but her eyes shone strangely. Margaret, ever steadier, leaned forward with gentle sympathy. "That must have been very hard on you."

Laura gave a short, humourless laugh. "Hard? It was bloody miserable. But the worst of it is... it didn't really work. Even now, he's nineteen, and he still wets every night without fail. And heavy, too often full-length of the bed and even the pillow. I even brought his own pillow here because he often wets it. And of course, his plastic sheet. It's so crackly now, I'm surprised you can't hear it! He just can't help himself."

She gestured toward the washing line, where a sheet snapped crisply in the wind. "That's my every morning. He gets up, acting ashamed, but it's me who strips the bed, me who washes, me who hauls it all out here. It's me that washes his panties and deals with the... er... deposits he leaves in them every morning."

Everyone knew what Laura was referring to. The sisters knew that boys masturbated every day, and they both gave a silent sigh since neither of them had even seen an erect penis, never mind experiencing an ejaculating one.

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Margaret and Ellen exchanged another glance, but this one lingered longer. In Margaret's face was curiosity tinged with pity, while in Ellen's, something softer, almost yearning.

"And the other things?" Margaret asked carefully, her eyes flicking briefly toward the row of panties.

Laura sighed heavily. "He's always been... peculiar. When he was younger, I kept finding my things missing. Panties, bras, even stockings. Sometimes, it was camisoles and nighties. I thought it was just a phase, but it didn't stop. Eventually, I just bought him some of his own. Better than pretending it wasn't happening. It was surreal the day I went and bought a lingerie set for my son, and frankly, he has prettier bras and panties than I do. But at least he soon stopped leaving deposits in my panties."

"He was doing that in your panties?" Ellen croaked out.

Laura sighed theatrically. "I was finding his deposits in my panties several times a week for a couple of years. I was almost expecting it. and after I got him his own lingerie, I told him he had to stop doing that in my panties, or I'd take them away."

"Did that work?" Margaret asked, stunned by the deep revelations they were hearing. She assumed they were probably the only people she had ever told.

"It took a while, but eventually he stopped doing it in my panties, but he was confused by my demand for a while."

"Confused?"

"We had a very deep mother-son conversation one evening, and he cried and admitted he thought he was doing a good thing by masturbating into my panties. I was shocked but also felt a little thankful. In his mind, he thought that since I am single, I might like having semen in my panties. It was cute in a way, if horribly misplaced."

Ellen shuddered slightly. She wondered what it might be like to wear panties with a load of cum in the crotch, right up against her pussy. She had never felt that, and for a brief moment, she felt as if Laura was wrong in disappointing her son and ignoring his 'gift'.

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Her voice hardened with fatigue. "You can imagine how it feels. A boy his age, sneaking my things, soaking his bed every night, wandering through life with so little control. He can't hold a proper job, can't manage to be away from home more than a day or two. I love him, but it's like living with a child who never grew up."

For a moment, only the rustle of laundry filled the air. The sisters sat, silent, each caught up in her own thoughts. Ellen's heart fluttered strangely, not with scandal, but with recognition. She leaned closer to her sister, whispering under her breath so only Margaret could hear: *"It's like... she's describing a baby."*

Margaret gave the slightest nod, her lips pressed tight. She felt it too. Something in Laura's weary confessions was not repellent but strangely inviting. As though the boy next door was not nineteen at all, but the very thing they had longed for and never been granted.

A baby.

Laura, unaware of their unspoken exchange, exhaled shakily and pressed on. "I suppose I've grown used to it. Sheets, laundry, shame, repeat. But sometimes I look at him, and I wonder if I'll ever be free of it. He keeps me tied down. No holidays, no travel, nothing spontaneous. I'm trapped. I can't date... not that I get any offers, but no man would put up with a bedwetter like Danny, not to mention his lingerie habit."

She looked at them finally, her eyes sharp and searching. "I shouldn't even be saying all this. But you asked. And the truth is, my Danny is a nineteen-year-old boy who still wets his bed like a toddler, steals his mother's panties, and has no control over his life. And I don't know what to do with him anymore."

Ellen picked up on a word. It was the tense of the word.

"You said 'steals'. Does he still steal your panties even now?"

Laura sighed once again.

"About once a month, I find a load in the crotch of my panties. I know he is trying to be nice, but I tell him he can't do it anymore."

"Clean or dirty panties?" Ellen asked, suddenly picking up on the distinction.

Resetting Toby

Evelyn Hughes

Chapter One - The Arrangement

The sheets were in the machine again, the wet sheets from the morning before.

Sara Mercer stood at the laundry door with her hand on the dial and her jaw set in the particular way it had been setting itself for the past several years, tight at the hinge, the muscle jumping once before she got control of it. The washing machine filled and began to turn, and she stood there a moment longer than she needed to, listening to the water.

Upstairs, Toby was still in bed. It was eleven o'clock, and he was still in bed. She knew that his bed would be wet, flooded probably, and yet he still slept in late.

She put the kettle on, sat at the kitchen table with a mug she didn't really want, and looked at the wall. On the wall was a corkboard she'd put up when Toby was twelve with the idea of using it for family notices and shopping lists. It had one thing pinned to it now: the card the officer had given her at the station two days ago. *Community Liaison. Youth Offending.* She had read it so many times that the text had lost its meaning.

The stairs creaked. Then the creak of the third step from the bottom, the one she had been meaning to fix for three years. Then Toby appeared in the kitchen doorway in a t-shirt and boxers, hair pushed up on one side, squinting against the light as though the kitchen were an affront to him.

"There's no milk," he said.

"There's milk. I bought milk yesterday."

"There's barely any."

"There's enough for cereal, which is what I'd suggest given it's the middle of the morning, and you haven't eaten."

He opened the fridge, stared into it with the door hanging wide, and closed it again without taking anything. He leaned against the counter. He looked, she thought, exactly like his father in a mood, which was not a comforting observation.

"You washed the sheets," he said.

"I did."

"You didn't have to do that."

"And yet someone had to, just as I will need to wash last night's sheets, which I presume are wet?" She turned the mug in her hands. "Toby, we need to talk about Wednesday."

"We've talked about Wednesday."

"We've talked around Wednesday. We haven't talked about what happens next."

He said nothing. He picked up an apple from the bowl on the counter, turned it over once, and put it back.

"You could have gone to jail," Sara said. "Do you understand that? You're twenty years old. They don't have to put you in a youth facility. They can put you in with adults, in a proper remand cell, and leave you there."

"They didn't, though, did they?"

"Because I was there. Because I stood in that room and I told them you had never been in serious trouble before, which was nearly a lie given what happened in March, and I used your grandmother's name because her generation still means something to Sergeant Holloway, and I am not... "She stopped. Pressed her lips together. "I am not going to be able to do that again. Do you hear me? That was the last time."

Toby pushed off the counter and went to the window, looking out at the back garden with his arms crossed. Outside, the garden was grey and overgrown, the lawn she kept asking him to mow still shaggy and wet.

"It was paint," he said. "It was just a wall."

"It was a heritage-listed building... not that that makes any difference."

"It was a wall."

"Toby." She said his name quietly, and something in it made him turn slightly, not to look at her, but his profile shifted. "I'm not angry about the wall. I'm past being angry. I've been angry for two

Resetting Toby

years, and it hasn't changed anything. I'm frightened. I need you to understand that. I'm frightened about where this is all going."

He said nothing.

"And I need to talk to you about the mornings."

A stillness came over him then, different from the sullen stillness of before. Flatter. His shoulders moved up a fraction.

"What about the mornings?" he said to the window with a hint of defiance in his voice.

"You know what about the mornings."

"It's a medical thing."

"I have asked you to see the doctor. I have asked you three times."

"It's a medical thing, and it's not a big deal. Other people have it."

"I know other people have it and I have never once made you feel ashamed of it, I hope — "

He made a sound that was half a laugh and not a kind one.

"I have *tried* not to," she amended, keeping her voice level. "But Toby, those sheets aren't being washed by themselves. And I have to wonder... I have to be honest with you... I have to wonder whether some mornings it isn't quite as uncontrollable as you'd have me believe. Whether some mornings it's easier than getting up and going to the bathroom. You've been lying in those wet sheets all morning."

"That's disgusting," he exclaimed. "That's a disgusting thing to say."

"Is it untrue?"

He turned around then, and there was real heat in his face, the dark flush along his cheekbones she recognised. "Yes. Yes, it's untrue. You think I *want* to wake up like that? You think I..." He stopped. His jaw worked. "Forget it."

"I don't want to forget it. I want to talk about it."

"I'm going out."

"You're not going out. You're on licence, Toby. You're not permitted to — "

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"I'm going for a walk. In the street. I'm not committing crimes in the street." He was already in the hallway, his voice reaching her from around the corner. "I'll be back."

The front door opened and closed with a controlled bang, not a slam, just firm enough to make the point, and Sara sat at the table and listened to the washing machine and breathed. It was all so difficult, and then there were the things she couldn't talk to him about.

His masturbation.

Masturbation was hardly a rarity for a twenty-year-old boy, but Toby masturbated in his wet bed. On the sheets. Noisily in part because of the crackly nature of his plastic bed undersheet. Sara would often hear him humping his wet bed, sometimes twice in a morning, before getting up, obviously hours after awakening. She didn't understand his ambivalence to his wet beds. She certainly didn't understand his masturbation in those same wet beds, and try as she might, many mornings the evidence was still strewn across the bed that was wet from side to side and pillow to near the end of the bed. Why was he doing that? Yes, Sara knew of one of his former school friends who still wet his bed at age 16, but he eventually stopped, while Toby was wetting every night with no sign of stopping.

And then there was the vandalism, this time it was graffiti, and he had been caught red-handed.

She looked at the card on the corkboard.

Then she took out her phone and scrolled to a different number. A number she had gotten from her friend Philippa three days ago, written in her own handwriting on a folded piece of paper currently sitting in the pocket of her cardigan. She had unfolded and refolded it perhaps ten times since Wednesday.

The phone rang four times.

"Hello?" The voice was unhurried. A woman's voice, warm but measured, the voice of someone who did not startle easily.

"Is this Ellen?" Sara said nervously. "My name is Sara Mercer. A friend gave me your number. I'm told... I'm told you work with

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young men who are... who have." She stopped and started again. "I'm told you have a method. That it works. And I am at the end of what I know how to do."

A brief pause on the other end. Not hesitation. Consideration.

"Mrs Mercer," said the voice. "Why don't you just tell me about your son in your own words?"

Sara looked at the ceiling and let out a long breath. "Where would you like me to start?"

"Start wherever you need to. I'm not going anywhere."

And so, slowly at first and then faster than she expected, she did. She talked for nearly forty minutes. She talked about the friends who had gradually become the wrong friends, about the school that had been the wrong school or perhaps the wrong fit or perhaps just the wrong time, about the slow retreat of the boy she had known into something guarded and sharp and often cruel. She talked about the incident in March and about Wednesday. She talked about the laundry, and after a moment's hesitation, she talked about the sheets specifically, the every-single-morning of it, the industrial quantities of washing powder, the mornings she had stood in his doorway and looked at the dark spreading stain across the mattress and felt, shamefully, a complicated anger she couldn't fully name. She even hinted at something else in how he stayed in it often until late mornings.

When she had finished, there was a short silence.

"His bedwetting," Ellen said. "Every morning, you said?"

"Every morning without exception for as long as I can remember. And heavily. It's not... It's not a small thing. It's almost the entire bed."

"Pillow too?"

Sara sighed. "Yes, the pillow is often wet as well as the top sheet. It's everywhere."

A warmth came into the voice that surprised her. Not amusement exactly, but something knowing and almost fond. "I see," Ellen said. "Mrs Mercer, I think I can help you. I'll tell you something. Every young man I've worked with has had this, to one degree or

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another. I've come to think of it as significant. As telling me something useful. They all wet the bed to some degree."

"What does it tell you?"

"We can talk about that when we meet. I'd like you to come and see me. I'd like to hear the rest of it in person, and I'd like you to see how I work." A pause. "Your son's name is Toby?"

"Yes."

"How does he feel about coming to me?"

Sara looked at the back garden through the window. The unmown lawn. "He doesn't know yet. He won't want to."

"They never do," said Ellen simply. "That's all right. That's where we start. It's where neither you nor I actually give them a choice."

Nursery Rules

Evelyn Hughes

Chapter One – The Call

The hotel room was nicer than she needed and quieter than she was used to, and Sheila had come to appreciate both of those things about business travel. Forty-one floors above the city, with the curtains half-drawn and her laptop open on the desk, she felt competent in a way that was hard to explain to people who hadn't experienced it. It was a specific, clean competence that came from being good at her work in a place where no one needed anything from her personally. No one here knew her name. No one here left wet towels on the bathroom floor.

She was on her second coffee and midway through a spreadsheet when her phone buzzed. Ros. She nearly let it ring through, then picked up at the last moment, the way you do with someone whose calls you can't quite bring yourself to miss.

"You're working," Ros said. It wasn't a question.

"I'm always working."

"It's half seven."

"Some of us have presentations in the morning." Sheila leaned back in her chair, pulling the laptop closer from habit. "What's wrong? You sound strange."

A pause. Ros was not a woman who paused. She talked like she walked, which was quickly and without much concern for what was in the way. A pause from Ros meant something was being chosen carefully.

"Nothing's wrong with me," she said. "I'm fine. Are you sitting down?"

"I'm always sitting down, I just told you."

"Sheila."

Something in the way she said it. Just the name, flat, with a weight underneath it. Sheila sat up straighter without meaning to. The spreadsheet stopped mattering.

"Tell me," she said.

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She didn't sleep that night. Not properly. She lay in the dark of the hotel room listening to the distant sound of the city below and staring at a ceiling she couldn't see, running the conversation back through her mind in pieces, checking it for the gap where she might have misunderstood, where Ros might have been wrong. There wasn't one. Ros was not a woman who made those kinds of mistakes, and she had not been mistaken. She had seen what she had seen.

His name, apparently, was not important. The woman's name was Carla. Ros had not intended to see them together. She had been in the wrong place, or the right one, and she had seen enough to be certain. She had sat with it for two days before she'd called, which told Sheila something about the weight of what she was carrying.

Sheila had not cried. She noticed that. She had felt instead something that she could only describe as a kind of cold settling, the way a house goes quiet in winter, not empty, exactly, but very still, and with a particular clarity to the air.

She thought about Daniel.

She had met him at a work function, not hers, one of those loosely networked evenings where everyone circulates with a drink and an agenda and talks mostly to the people they already know. He had been standing slightly apart from a group, and she had noticed him before he noticed her, which was unusual because Daniel had a quality that made rooms orient toward him without quite knowing why. He was tall, with the kind of easy confidence that looked effortless until you spent enough time with it to see the engineering underneath.

She had liked him. She had more than liked him for several years. She had found his certainty attractive because her own certainty was hard-won, and she had respected the quality wherever she found it, not yet having understood the difference between the kind that came from character and the kind that came from never having been properly tested.

Daniel was good at surface-level interactions. He was handsome, charming, professionally capable, and comfortable in rooms full of people he wanted to impress. At parties, he held court

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without appearing to and laughed without appearing to need anything. He was the sort of man who seemed to have moved through life without the particular humiliations that quietly shaped most people, and this, Sheila had thought, was a kind of freedom she found appealing.

She had been wrong about that, as it turned out, though she hadn't known it for some time.

She had found out about the nappies by accident, three months into their relationship.

She had come home a day early from a trip, not unlike this current one, and he hadn't been expecting her. She still remembered the exact quality of his face when she'd walked into the bedroom unexpectedly, hoping to surprise him. They weren't yet living together. The way the arrogance drained out of it so fast was like watching something structural give way. He'd been standing by the wardrobe in just a t-shirt, and she'd had one disoriented second of simply not understanding what she was seeing before understanding arrived all at once.

The silence had been considerable.

What followed was the only time she had ever seen Daniel without his armour completely. He was thirty-eight years old, and he stood in their bedroom, and something in him went young and cornered, and she had felt, inconveniently, more tenderness toward him in that moment than she had in any of the months before it. He had tried to recover himself, the chin going up, the tone going careful, and she had stopped him by crossing the room and kissing him before he could construct a sentence.

Later, when he had said it was medical, not entirely a choice, a thing he had managed since boyhood, she had nodded and asked no questions he didn't want to answer and told him it changed nothing. She had meant it.

The full history came out in pieces, over months. She had never pushed. She knew there was a mother involved, and a long and difficult childhood, and a shame so deep and old it had calcified into

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something deep, something load-bearing. She had let him give her what he could and had filed the rest away without asking for more.

What she understood was this. Daniel, for all his performed ease, was held together in part by the absolute privacy of this one thing. It was the room inside the room. The door no one opened. As long as it was hers alone to know, he could be who he was everywhere else.

He had never, Ros had mentioned almost as an aside, the way Ros delivered the things she thought were most important, he had never slept over at Carla's. The affair had been daytime only. Lunches. Afternoons.

Sheila stared at the ceiling.

She understood exactly why.

At some point, without quite deciding to, she opened the notes app on her phone and typed a single line.

He can't sleep anywhere but home.

She looked at it for a moment. Then she put the phone face down on the nightstand and closed her eyes and thought, with a cold and focused deliberateness that was new to her, about Daniel in his nappies. About the mother. About the shame. About the long and complicated architecture of a man who needed to be seen as untouchable.

She thought about what it would mean to reach into that architecture and begin, very carefully, to remove things.

She fell asleep just before three.

She did not dream, or if she did, she didn't remember. What she remembered was waking at six with the alarm, looking at the ceiling, and feeling, underneath the grief and the anger and the cold, something else. Something that did not have a name yet, but that felt, when she pressed on it, quite solid.

Quite decided.

Chapter Two – What Ros Saw

The café was Ros's choice, which meant it was loud enough to talk privately and good enough to justify the price of the coffee, and when Sheila arrived, Ros was already there, sitting with her hands wrapped around a cup she hadn't drunk from, watching the door. She stood when Sheila came in, and they held each other for a moment without speaking, which was not something they usually did. Then they sat down.

“You look terrible,” Ros said.

“Thank you.”

“Did you sleep?”

“A little. Not much.”

Ros studied her. She was a small, direct woman with close-cropped hair and the kind of face that people frequently underestimated, which suited her. She had been Sheila's closest friend for eleven years, through a previous relationship that hadn't worked, through the early years with Daniel, through promotions and bereavements and one memorably disastrous holiday in Lisbon that they still couldn't discuss without laughing. Ros knew her well enough to know when not to ask questions. She also knew when to ask them.

“I need to tell you everything properly,” she said. “Not just the phone version.”

“I know.”

“And I need you to tell me how you are. Actually.”

“Tell me first,” Sheila said. “And then I'll tell you.”

Ros had seen them on a Wednesday. Three weeks ago, which had been, as she explained it, the longest three weeks of her adult life. She had been coming out of the Italian place near Daniel's office, after a lunch with a former colleague, nothing remarkable, and she had seen them on the pavement across the road. Not kissing, nothing so obvious. Just standing close, in the way that people do when

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proximity has stopped requiring justification. His hand had been at the small of her back. Something in the angle of his head.

Ros had stopped walking.

The woman was younger than Sheila, not dramatically so, perhaps late thirties, with dark hair and the kind of look that took time and intention. She was laughing at something Daniel had said, and Daniel was wearing the expression he wore when he was performing, the expression Sheila had privately catalogued as his *room-working face*, which was not his real face but was undeniably effective just the same. They had walked together to a parked car, her car, Ros thought, and he had leaned in through the window after she got in, and then the car had gone.

"Three weeks," Sheila said.

"I know. I'm sorry. I needed to be sure I wasn't..." Ros shook her head. "I know what I saw. I just needed to know I wasn't going to blow your life up on the basis of a feeling."

"So you made sure."

"I did."

Sheila looked down at her coffee. "How long has it been going on?"

"I don't know exactly. At least a few months. She works near his office. I looked her up, I'm not sorry. Her name's Carla Briggs. She's in property. They have lunch, sometimes more than lunch." Ros paused. "I asked around carefully. He's never..." She stopped again.

"Say it."

"He's never stayed over. With her. It's always been daytime. Lunches, afternoons. He's always home for dinner."

The café noise continued around them. Someone at the counter ordered something complicated. Sheila sat very still.

"Always home for dinner," she said.

"Yes."

Sheila said nothing for a moment. Ros watched her, waiting for the grief or the anger to break the surface, preparing herself for whichever came. She had seen Sheila cry exactly twice in eleven years, and she had seen her angry more often, a quiet, focused anger

Starlight Nursery

by
Maxwell Voss

Part One: The Silence Between Stars

Chapter One - Orbit of One

The station breathed.

That was how Calren Voss had come to think of it, not as a machine, not as a structure of titanium and pressurised corridors and twelve thousand individually catalogued components, but as something alive. Something that exhaled recycled air on a four-hour cycle, that murmured through its walls when the solar collectors tracked the distant, indifferent sun, that shifted and settled in the dark like a sleeper finding comfort. After three years aboard Eunoia Station, he had learned its rhythms the way another man might learn the breathing of someone beside him in bed, with its slow rise, the pause, the release.

He had no one beside him in bed. That was rather the point. Relationships with others were not really his thing.

The observation deck stretched above him, a great curving dome of reinforced transparisteel that looked out on the Helix Cloud, that vast, slow river of dust and ionised gas that drifted through this region of deep space like smoke from a fire no one had lit. It was beautiful in the way that only indifferent things are beautiful - completely, and without caring whether you noticed. But Calren noticed. He noticed every morning with his first cup of fabricated coffee, sitting cross-legged on the deck in his standard-issue grey suit, his dark hair still sleep-rumpled, watching the Cloud shift its impossibly slow colours through blue and copper and an almost bruised violet that he had never been able to describe adequately in his logs.

Not that anyone read his logs with any particular care. That, too, was rather the point. Being separate from people was not only his choice but a deep desire. Their interactions with him were not wanted... just tolerated.

“Good morning, Calren.”

MIRA's voice came from everywhere and nowhere, soft, unhurried, with that quality he had noticed from his very first day

aboard. She never spoke as though she were interrupting, even when she was, which was a big part of her purpose. She normally waited for a natural silence and stepped into it, the way a careful guest might enter a room. She was at all times deeply polite, capable and... discreet.

“Morning,” he said, not looking away from the Cloud.

“Atmospheric pressure is nominal. Your coffee is at sixty-three degrees. You've been sitting in that position for forty-one minutes, which is eleven minutes longer than usual.”

“I was thinking.”

“I know.” A small pause, not awkward. MIRA did not do awkward. “The waveform data from Grid Seven came in overnight. There's an interesting gravitational signature you may want to look at after breakfast.”

Calren's attention sharpened slightly. Not much, just a fraction. Grid Seven sat at the outermost range of his monitoring array, out where the Helix Cloud began to thin at its edges, and strange things happened to the geometry of space. He had been watching a particular region there for eighteen months, tracking the faint but consistent lensing effect that he suspected was caused by something much further away than anyone had yet mapped.

“I'll look at it,” he said.

“I know,” MIRA said again, and he could hear the warmth in it, that particular quality she had that was not quite a smile but occupied the same space.

He drank his manufactured and surprisingly tasty coffee. He missed the variety of real coffee, however. His coffee was always good, but it was always... exactly the same. Internally, he decided that perhaps he should try to ask for variety or program it in some way. But predictability was also something he craved and needed.

Outside, the Cloud moved the way centuries move — imperceptibly, unstoppably, with vast and quiet purpose.

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Calren's official title was Senior Systems Operator, Grade IV, Deep-Space Observation Division, United Earth Scientific Commission. In practice, this meant he was more of a caretaker than a scientist. He was effectively a lighthouse keeper. A man alone on a rock in a very large sea, making sure the lights stayed on and the instruments kept pointing in the right direction and the data kept streaming home through the relay buoys strung like a gossamer thread between Eunoia and civilisation, some twenty-three light-years away.

He was extraordinarily good at it. Not just competent, which would have been sufficient, but genuinely excellent in the way that only happens when a person is doing the thing they are most precisely shaped to do. Calren's mind was a particular instrument: quiet on the surface, extraordinarily deep beneath. He did not think in the way that most people thought, in sentences and images and plans. He thought in **patterns**, interlocking webs of data that he could hold in his head the way another man might hold a melody, turning them, examining them from new angles, hearing the wrong notes. Other people found this unsettling in social situations, which was one of the many reasons he had chosen a posting that had no social situations to speak of. He was brilliant but also... weird. Strange. And in that off-putting sort of way.

The fabrication bay occupied the mid-deck, flanked by the laboratory and the maintenance hub. Three molecular fabricators ran around the clock, quiet as surgery, producing anything the station needed from raw feedstock: replacement components, food, clothing, tools, building materials. They were the most extraordinary technology aboard, in Calren's opinion, more even than the sensor arrays or the quantum relay. The ability to instruct matter into a new shape. To say **I need this** and have the universe comply. He had read of the life of centuries earlier, where anything in space had to be made to fit. It seemed prehistoric to him.

He stood in the doorway of the fabrication bay now, in the late station afternoon, the way he sometimes did. Just stood. The fabricators hummed their contented, purposeful hum. The interface

panel glowed softly to his right, awaiting input. He could ask it for anything.

He thought about that quite a lot.

His hand rested on the doorframe. His eyes moved to the input panel and then away again, the same small trajectory they had traced perhaps a hundred times in the past year. He was always passing through. He was always on his way somewhere else.

“Calren.” MIRA, gentle. “The Grid Seven analysis—”

“Yes,” he said, pushing away from the doorframe. “Coming.”

He did not look back at the fabrication panel. He almost never did when he left. That was a thing he was still practising... the looking away.

His quarters were modest even by his own preferences, with a sleeping bunk, a desk with three screens, and a shelf of physical books that he had requested on his first day and still found comfort in. He enjoyed the particular smell of them, the weight, the un-networked permanence of words pressed into paper. A small viewport that looked out on the less dramatic far side of the station, toward open space with no Cloud to dress it up. Just black, and stars, and the clean hard silence of the void that spread endlessly.

The shelf beside his bunk held the books, and also: a small, framed photograph of no one, a generic landscape print, mountains and water, that had come with the quarters. He'd never replaced it. He told himself he didn't care about it one way or another.

In the bottom drawer of his storage unit, beneath two spare uniforms and a diagnostic toolkit, there was nothing. He had checked this fact this morning, and the morning before, and on perhaps forty mornings stretching back a year and a half. The drawer was empty. He kept the uniforms there, and the toolkit, and the nothing.

He lay on his bunk and looked at the ceiling and listened to the station breathe.

Somewhere deep in his chest, in the place where things live that have never been given language, something waited. It had

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always waited. He had become, over many years, very skilled at not acknowledging it, at walking past it the way you walk past a door you have no intention of opening. And yet. He always knew it was there. He always knew, on some cellular level, the exact shape of what was on the other side.

The station breathed in.

The station breathed out.

Calren closed his eyes and did neither for a long moment, suspended somewhere between what he was and what he had never permitted himself to imagine.

Then he slept.