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Susan L. Lin

The Shrouded Parent at Midnight

1

Mother once said I was born bald, but she couldn't find the pictures to prove it. "Appreciate that full head of hair now," she said, and rapped her knuckles against the wooden tabletop, "because one day, those strands will fall right out again."

I nearly bawled. Sister and I learned many things from mother: how to read an analog clock, how to listen in rapt attention to any wild story, how to hoard candy wrappers and leave them lying around the house.

I discovered some balled up in the medicine cabinet, but most she pressed flat between the pages of a clothbound dictionary. Sometimes I wondered if those shiny foil squares missed the days their bodies wrapped neatly around nuggets of chocolate, or if they enjoyed the lazy daze of retirement.

2

Someone did snap a photo at the hospital after my birth—a Polaroid that clearly shows me, never bald. In it, father wore what looks like a blue shower cap as his raised fist rapped against the open air.

Cradled in mother's arms, a baby bawled. Sister and I watched, rapt, as mother started collecting precious hours of sleep in the drawer of her bedside table.

She balled them up, winding the long tails around themselves until the globes fit perfectly in the basin of her cupped hand. Every night, she deposited the unused ZZZ on our pillows like wrapped gifts.

3

Before long, bald patches began appearing on mother's scalp. I rapped my knuckles against every wooden surface, but deep down I knew superstition wouldn't save us.

In the safety of my bedroom, I bawled and bawled. When I tried to stockpile sleep the way she had, I discovered the hours rolled right out of my rapt palm.

I was too ashamed to ask her how she balled them into spheres that behaved more like cubes. She was too ashamed to tell me how she'd pilfered all the wrapped chocolate from my Halloween bucket.

4

The Polaroid is blurry, so maybe I was once bald after all, and I'm realizing now the blue shower cap thing was probably just father's hair. I asked him once whether he had ever dyed his hair, and also, why was he making that strange gesture to the cameraman, but instead of answering rapped lyrics of a song yet to be written.