

BASEMENT MAGIC

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Ellen Klages has collaborated with science columnist Pat Murphy and others on four books of hands-on science activities for the Exploratorium museum in San Francisco. Her short fiction has been published previously in Bending the Landscape, Lady Churchill's Rosebud Wristlet, and Strange Horizons, and has garnered nominations for the Nebula, Hugo, Campbell, and Spectrum Awards. She is currently working on a YA novel about the Manhattan Project. Her first story for us is a Cinderella tale for the Space Age.

MARY LOUISE WHITTAKER believes in magic. She knows that somewhere, somewhere else, there must be dragons and princes, wands and wishes. Especially wishes. And happily ever after. Ever after is not now.

Her mother died in a car accident when Mary Louise was still a toddler. She misses her mother fiercely but abstractly. Her memories are less a coherent portrait than a mosaic of disconnected details: soft skin that smelled of lavender; a bright voice singing "Sweet and Low" in the night darkness; bubbles at bath time; dark curls; zwieback.

Her childhood has been kneaded, but not shaped, by the series of well-meaning middle-aged women her father has hired to tend her. He is busy climbing the corporate ladder, and is absent even when he is at home. She does not miss him. He remarried when she was five, and they moved into a two-story Tudor in one of the better suburbs of Detroit. Kitty, the new Mrs. Ted Whittaker, is a former Miss Bloomfield Hills, a vain divorcee with a towering mass of blond curls in a shade not her own. In the wild, her kind is inclined to eat their young.

Kitty might have tolerated her new stepdaughter had she been sweet and cuddly, a slick-magazine cherub. But at six, Mary Louise is an odd, solitary child. She has unruly red hair the color of Fiestaware, the dishes that might have been radioactive, and small round pink glasses that make her blue eyes seem large and slightly distant. She did not walk until she was almost two, and propels herself with a quick shuffle-duckling gait that is both urgent and awkward.

One spring morning, Mary Louise is camped in one of her favorite spots, the window seat in the guest bedroom. It is a stage set of a room, one that no one else ever visits. She leans against the wall, a thick book with lush illustrations propped up on her bare knees. Bright sunlight, filtered through the leaves of the oak outside, is broken into geometric patterns by the mullioned windows, dappling the floral cushion in front of her.

The book is almost bigger than her lap, and she holds it open with one elbow, the other anchoring her Bankie, a square of pale blue flannel with pale blue satin edging that once swaddled her infant self, carried home from the hospital. It is raveled and graying, both

tattered and beloved. The thumb of her blanket arm rests in her mouth in a comforting manner.

Mary Louise is studying a picture of a witch with purple robes and hair as black as midnight when she hears voices in the hall. The door to the guest room is open a crack, so she can hear clearly, but cannot see or be seen. One of the voices is Kitty's. She is explaining something about the linen closet, so it is probably a new cleaning lady. They have had six since they moved in.

Mary Louise sits very still and doesn't turn the page, because it is stiff paper and might make a noise. But the door opens anyway, and she hears Kitty say, "This is the guest room. Now unless we've got company--and I'll let you know--it just needs to be dusted and the linens aired once a week. It has an--oh, there you are," she says, coming in the doorway, as if she has been looking all over for Mary Louise, which she has not.

Kitty turns and says to the air behind her, "This is my husband's daughter, Mary Louise. She's not in school yet. She's small for her age, and her birthday is in December, so we decided to hold her back a year. She never does much, just sits and reads. I'm sure she won't be a bother. Will you?" She turns and looks at Mary Louise but does not wait for an answer. "And this is Ruby. She's going to take care of the house for us."

The woman who stands behind Kitty nods, but makes no move to enter the room. She is tall, taller than Kitty, with skin the color of gingerbread. Ruby wears a white uniform and a pair of white Keds. She is older, there are lines around her eyes and her mouth, but her hair is sleek and black, black as midnight.

Kitty looks at her small gold watch. "Oh, dear. I've got to get going or I'll be late for my hair appointment." She looks back at Mary Louise. "Your father and I are going out tonight, but Ruby will make you some dinner, and Mrs. Banks will be here about six." Mrs. Banks is one of the babysitters, an older woman in a dark dress who smells like dusty licorice and coos too much. "So be a good girl. And for god's sake get that thumb out of your mouth. Do you want your teeth to grow in crooked, too?"

Mary Louise says nothing, but withdraws her damp puckered thumb and folds both hands in her lap. She looks up at Kitty, her eyes expressionless, until her stepmother looks away. "Well, an-y-wa-y," Kitty says, drawing the word out to four syllables, "I've really got to be going." She turns and leaves the room, brushing by Ruby, who stands silently just outside the doorway.

Ruby watches Kitty go, and when the high heels have clattered onto the tiles at the bottom of the stairs, she turns and looks at Mary Louise. "You a quiet little mouse, ain't you?" she asks in a soft, low voice.

Mary Louise shrugs. She sits very still in the window seat and waits for Ruby to leave. She does not look down at her book, because it is rude to look away when a grownup might still be talking to you. But none of the cleaning ladies talk to her, except to ask her to move out of the way, as if she were furniture.

"Yes siree, a quiet little mouse," Ruby says again. "Well, Miss Mouse, I'm fixin to go downstairs and make me a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch. If you like, I can cook you up one too. I make a

mighty fine grilled cheese sandwich."

Mary Louise is startled by the offer. Grilled cheese is one of her very favorite foods. She thinks for a minute, then closes her book and tucks Bankie securely under one arm. She slowly follows Ruby down the wide front stairs, her small green-socked feet making no sound at all on the thick beige carpet.

It is the best grilled cheese sandwich Mary Louise has ever eaten. The outside is golden brown and so crisp it crackles under her teeth. The cheese is melted so that it soaks into the bread on the inside, just a little. There are no burnt spots at all. Mary Louise thanks Ruby and returns to her book.

The house is large, and Mary Louise knows all the best hiding places. She does not like being where Kitty can find her, where their paths might cross. Before Ruby came, Mary Louise didn't go down to the basement very much. Not by herself. It is an old house, and the basement is damp and musty, with heavy stone walls and banished, battered furniture. It is not a comfortable place, nor a safe one. There is the furnace, roaring fire, and the cans of paint and bleach and other frightful potions. Poisons. Years of soap flakes, lint, and furnace soot coat the walls like household lichen.

The basement is a place between the worlds, within Kitty's domain, but beneath her notice. Now, in the daytime, it is Ruby's, and Mary Louise is happy there. Ruby is not like other grownups. Ruby talks to her in a regular voice, not a scold, nor the singsong Mrs. Banks uses, as if Mary Louise is a tiny baby. Ruby lets her sit and watch while she irons, or sorts the laundry, or runs the sheets through the mangle. She doesn't sigh when Mary Louise asks her questions.

On the rare occasions when Kitty and Ted are home in the evening, they have dinner in the dining room. Ruby cooks. She comes in late on those days, and then is very busy, and Mary Louise does not get to see her until dinnertime. But the two of them eat in the kitchen, in the breakfast nook. Ruby tells stories, but has to get up every few minutes when Kitty buzzes for her, to bring more water or another fork, or to clear away the salad plates. Ruby smiles when she is talking to Mary Louise, but when the buzzer sounds, her face changes. Not to a frown, but to a kind of blank Ruby mask.

One Tuesday night in early May, Kitty decrees that Mary Louise will eat dinner with them in the dining room, too. They sit at the wide mahogany table on stiff brocade chairs that pick at the backs of her legs. There are too many forks and even though she is very careful, it is hard to cut her meat, and once the heavy silverware skitters across the china with a sound that sets her teeth on edge. Kitty frowns at her.

The grownups talk to each other and Mary Louise just sits. The worst part is that when Ruby comes in and sets a plate down in front of her, there is no smile, just the Ruby mask.

"I don't know how you do it, Ruby," says her father when Ruby comes in to give him a second glass of water. "These pork chops are the best I've ever eaten. You've certainly got the magic touch."

"She does, doesn't she?" says Kitty. "You must tell me your secret."

"Just shake 'em up in flour, salt and pepper, then fry 'em in Crisco," Ruby says.

"That's all?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, isn't that marvelous. I must try that. Thank you Ruby. You may go now."

"Yes, ma'am." Ruby turns and lets the swinging door between the kitchen and the dining room close behind her. A minute later Mary Louise hears the sound of running water, and the soft clunk of plates being slotted into the racks of the dishwasher.

"Mary Louise, don't put your peas into your mashed potatoes that way. It's not polite to play with your food," Kitty says.

Mary Louise sighs. There are too many rules in the dining room.

"Mary Louise, answer me when I speak to you."

"Muhff-mum," Mary Louise says through a mouthful of mashed potatoes.

"Oh, for god's sake. Don't talk with your mouth full. Don't you have any manners at all?"

Caught between two conflicting rules, Mary Louise merely shrugs.

"Is there any more gravy?" her father asks.

Kitty leans forward a little and Mary Louise hears the slightly muffled sound of the buzzer in the kitchen. There is a little bump, about the size of an Oreo, under the carpet just beneath Kitty's chair that Kitty presses with her foot. Ruby appears a few seconds later and stands inside the doorway, holding a striped dishcloth in one hand.

"Mr. Whittaker would like some more gravy," says Kitty.

Ruby shakes her head. "Sorry, Miz Whittaker. I put all of it in the

gravy boat. There's no more left."

"Oh." Kitty sounds disapproving. "We had plenty of gravy last time."

"Yes, ma'am. But that was a beef roast. Pork chops just don't make as much gravy," Ruby says.

"Oh. Of course. Well, thank you, Ruby."

"Yes ma'am." Ruby pulls the door shut behind her.

"I guess that's all the gravy, Ted," Kitty says, even though he is sitting at the other end of the table, and has heard Ruby himself.

"Tell her to make more next time," he says frowning. "So what did you do today?" He turns his attention to Mary Louise for the first time since they sat down.

"Mostly I read my book," she says. "The fairy tales you gave me for Christmas."

"Well, that's fine," he says. "I need you to call the Taylors and cancel." Mary Louise realizes he is no longer talking to her, and eats the last of her mashed potatoes.

"Why?" Kitty raises an eyebrow. "I thought we were meeting them out at the club on Friday for cocktails."

"Can't. Got to fly down to Florida tomorrow. The space thing. We designed the guidance system for Shepard's capsule, and George wants me to go down with the engineers, talk to the press if the launch is a success."

"Are they really going to shoot a man into space?" Mary Louise asks.

"That's the plan, honey."

"Well, you don't give me much notice," Kitty says, smiling. "But I suppose I can pack a few summer dresses, and get anything else I need down there."

"Sorry, Kit. This trip is just business. No wives."

"No, only to Grand Rapids. Never to Florida," Kitty says, frowning. She takes a long sip of her drink. "So how long will you be gone?"

"Five days, maybe a week. If things go well, Jim and I are going to drive down to Palm Beach and get some golf in."

"I see. Just business." Kitty drums her lacquered fingernails on the tablecloth. "I guess that means I have to call Barb and Mitchell, too. Or had you forgotten my sister's birthday dinner next Tuesday?"

Kitty scowls down the table at her husband, who shrugs and takes a bite of his chop.

Kitty drains her drink. The table is silent for a minute, and then she says, "Mary Louise! Don't put your dirty fork on the tablecloth. Put it on the edge of your plate if you're done. Would you like to be excused?"

"Yes ma'am," says Mary Louise.

As soon as she is excused, Mary Louise goes down to the basement to wait. When Ruby is working it smells like a cave full of soap and warm laundry.

A little after seven, Ruby comes down the stairs carrying a brown paper lunch sack. She puts it down on the ironing board. "Well, Miss Mouse. I thought I'd see you down here when I got done with the dishes."

"I don't like eating in the dining room," Mary Louise says. "I want to eat in the kitchen with you."

"I like that, too. But your stepmomma says she got to teach you some table manners, so when you grow up you can eat with nice folks."

Mary Louise makes a face, and Ruby laughs.

"They ain't such a bad thing, manners. Come in real handy someday, when you're eatin with folks you want to have like you."

"I guess so," says Mary Louise. "Will you tell me a story?"

"Not tonight, Miss Mouse. It's late, and I gotta get home and give my husband his supper. He got off work half an hour ago, and I told him I'd bring him a pork chop or two if there was any left over." She gestures to the paper bag. "He likes my pork chops even more than your daddy does."

"Not even a little story?" Mary Louise feels like she might cry. Her stomach hurts from having dinner with all the forks.

"Not tonight, sugar. Tomorrow, though, I'll tell you a long one, just to make up." Ruby takes off her white Keds and lines them up next to each other under the big galvanized sink. Then she takes off her apron, looks at a brown gravy stain on the front of it, and crumples it up and tosses it into the pink plastic basket of dirty laundry. She pulls a hanger from the line that stretches across the ceiling over the washer and begins to undo the white buttons on the front of her uniform.

"What's that?" Mary Louise asks. Ruby has rucked the top of her uniform down to her waist and is pulling it over her hips. There is a

green string pinned to one bra strap. The end of it disappears into her left armpit.

"What's what? You seen my underwear before."

"Not that. That string."

Ruby looks down at her chest. "Oh. That. I had my auntie make me up a conjure hand."

"Can I see it?" Mary Louise climbs down out of the chair and walks over to where Ruby is standing.

Ruby looks hard at Mary Louise for a minute. "For it to work, it gotta stay a secret. But you good with secrets, so I guess you can take a look. Don't you touch it, though. Anybody but me touch it, all the conjure magic leak right out and it won't work no more." She reaches under her armpit and draws out a small green flannel bag, about the size of a walnut, and holds it in one hand.

Mary Louise stands with her hands clasped tight behind her back so she won't touch it even by accident and stares intently at the bag. It doesn't look like anything magic. Magic is gold rings and gowns spun of moonlight and silver, not a white cotton uniform and a little stained cloth bag. "Is it really magic? Really? What does it do?"

"Well, there's diff'rent kinds of magic. Some conjure bags bring luck. Some protects you. This one, this one gonna bring me money. That's why it's green. Green's the money color. Inside there's a silver dime, so the money knows it belong here, a magnet--that attracts the money right to me--and some roots, wrapped up in a two-dollar bill. Every mornin I gives it a little drink, and after nine days, it gonna bring me my fortune." Ruby looks down at the little bag fondly,

then tucks it back under her armpit.

Mary Louise looks up at Ruby and sees something she has never seen on a grownup's face before: Ruby believes. She believes in magic, even if it is armpit magic.

"Wow. How does--"

"Miss Mouse, I got to get home, give my husband his supper." Ruby steps out of her uniform, hangs it on a hanger, then puts on her blue skirt and a cotton blouse.

Mary Louise looks down at the floor. "Okay," she says.

"It's not the end of the world, sugar." Ruby pats Mary Louise on the back of the head, then sits down and puts on her flat black shoes.

"I'll be back tomorrow. I got a big pile of laundry to do. You think you might come down here, keep me company? I think I can tell a story and sort the laundry at the same time." She puts on her outdoor coat, a nubby, burnt-orange wool with chipped gold buttons and big square pockets, and ties a scarf around her chin.

"Will you tell me a story about the magic bag?" Mary Louise asks. This time she looks at Ruby and smiles.

"I think I can do that. Gives us both somethin to look forward to. Now scoot on out of here. I gotta turn off the light." She picks up her brown paper sack and pulls the string that hangs down over the ironing board. The light bulb goes out, and the basement is dark except for the twilight filtering in through the high single window. Ruby opens the outside door to the concrete stairs that lead up to the driveway. The air is warmer than the basement.

"Nitey, nite, Miss Mouse," she says, and goes outside.

"G'night Ruby," says Mary Louise, and goes upstairs.

WHEN RUBY GOES to vacuum the rug in the guest bedroom on Thursday morning, she finds Mary Louise sitting in the window seat, staring out the window.

"Mornin, Miss Mouse. You didn't come down and say hello."

Mary Louise does not answer. She does not even turn around.

Ruby pushes the lever on the vacuum and stands it upright, dropping the gray fabric cord she has wrapped around her hand. She walks over to the silent child. "Miss Mouse? Somethin wrong?"

Mary Louise looks up. Her eyes are cold. "Last night I was in bed, reading. Kitty came home. She was in a really bad mood. She told me I read too much and I'll just ruin my eyes--more--reading in bed. She took my book and told me she was going to throw it in the 'cinerator and burn it up." She delivers the words in staccato anger, through clenched teeth.

"She just bein mean to you, sugar." Ruby shakes her head. "She tryin to scare you, but she won't really do that."

"But she did!" Mary Louise reaches behind her and holds up her fairy tale book. The picture on the cover is soot-stained, the shiny coating blistered. The gilded edges of the pages are charred and the corners are gone.

"Lord, child, where'd you find that?"

"In the 'cinerator, out back. Where she said. I can still read most of

the stories, but it makes my hands all dirty." She holds up her hands, showing her sooty palms.

Ruby shakes her head again. She says, more to herself than to Mary Louise, "I burnt the trash after lunch yesterday. Must of just been coals, come last night."

Mary Louise looks at the ruined book in her lap, then up at Ruby. "It was my favorite book. Why'd she do that?" A tear runs down her cheek.

Ruby sits down on the window seat. "I don't know, Miss Mouse," she says. "I truly don't. Maybe she mad that your daddy gone down to Florida, leave her behind. Some folks, when they're mad, they just gotta whup on somebody, even if it's a little bitty six-year-old child. They whup on somebody else, they forget their own hurts for a while."

"You're bigger than her," says Mary Louise, snuffling. "You could--whup--her back. You could tell her that it was bad and wrong what she did."

Ruby shakes her head. "I'm real sorry, Miss Mouse," she says quietly, "But I can't do that."

"Why not?"

"'Cause she the boss in this house, and if I say anythin crosswise to Miz Kitty, her own queen self, she gonna fire me same as she fire all them other colored ladies used to work for her. And I needs this job. My husband's just workin part-time down to the Sunoco. He twin to get work in the Ford plant, but they ain't hirin right now. So my paycheck here, that's what's puttin groceries on our table."

"But, but--" Mary Louise begins to cry without a sound. Ruby is the only grownup person she trusts, and Ruby cannot help her.

Ruby looks down at her lap for a long time, then sighs. "I can't say nothin to Miz Kitty. But her bein so mean to you, that ain't right, neither." She puts her arm around the shaking child.

"What about your little bag?" Mary Louise wipes her nose with the back of her hand, leaving a small streak of soot on her cheek.

"What 'bout it?"

"You said some magic is for protecting, didn't you?"

"Some is," Ruby says slowly. "Some is. Now, my momma used to say, 'an egg can't fight with a stone.' And that's the truth. Miz Kitty got the power in this house. More'n you, more'n me. Ain't nothin to do 'bout that. But conjurin--" She thinks for a minute, then lets out a deep breath.

"I think we might could put some protection 'round you, so Miz Kitty can't do you no more misery," Ruby says, frowning a little.

"But I ain't sure quite how. See, if it was your house, I'd put a goopher right under the front door. But it ain't. It's your daddy's house, and she married to him legal, so ain't no way to keep her from comin in her own house, even if she is nasty."

"What about my room?" asks Mary Louise.

"Your room? Hmm. Now, that's a different story. I think we can goopher it so she can't do you no harm in there."

Mary Louise wrinkles her nose. "What's a goopher?"

Ruby smiles. "Down South Carolina, where my family's from, that's just what they calls a spell, or a hex, a little bit of rootwork."

"Root--?"

Ruby shakes her head. "It don't make no never mind what you calls it, long as you does it right. Now if you done cryin, we got work to do. Can you go out to the garage, to your Daddy's toolbox, and get me nine nails? Big ones, all the same size, and bright and shiny as you can find. Can you count that many?"

Mary Louise snorts. "I can count up to fifty," she says.

"Good. Then you go get nine shiny nails, fast as you can, and meet me down the hall, by your room."

When Mary Louise gets back upstairs, nine shiny nails clutched tightly in one hand, Ruby is kneeling in front of the door of her bedroom, with a paper of pins from the sewing box, and a can of Drano. Mary Louise hands her the nails.

"These is just perfect," Ruby says. She pours a puddle of Drano into its upturned cap, and dips the tip of one of the nails into it, then pokes the nail under the edge of the hall carpet at the left side of Mary Louise's bedroom door, pushing it deep until not even its head shows.

"Why did you dip the nail in Drano?" Mary Louise asks. She didn't know any of the poison things under the kitchen sink could be magic.

"Don't you touch that, hear? It'll burn you bad, cause it's got lye in it. But lye the best thing for cleanin away any evil that's already been here. Ain't got no Red Devil like back home, but you got to use what you got. The nails and the pins, they made of iron, and iron keep any new evil away from your door." Ruby dips a pin in

the Drano as she talks and repeats the poking, alternating nails and pins until she pushes the last pin in at the other edge of the door.

"That oughta do it," she says. She pours the few remaining drops of Drano back into the can and screws the lid on tight, then stands up.

"Now all we needs to do is set the protectin charm. You know your prayers?" she asks Mary Louise.

"I know 'Now I lay me down to sleep.'"

"Good enough. You get into your room and you kneel down, facin the hall, and say that prayer to the doorway. Say it loud and as best you can. I'm goin to go down and get the sheets out of the dryer.

Meet me in Miz Kitty's room when you done."

Mary Louise says her prayers in a loud, clear voice. She doesn't know how this kind of magic spell works, and she isn't sure if she is supposed to say the God Blesses, but she does. She leaves Kitty out and adds Ruby. "And help me to be a good girl, amen," she finishes, and hurries down to her father's room to see what other kinds of magic Ruby knows.

The king-size mattress is bare. Mary Louise lies down on it and rolls over and over three times before falling off the edge onto the carpet. She is just getting up, dusting off the knees of her blue cotton pants, when Ruby appears with an armful of clean sheets, which she dumps onto the bed. Mary Louise lays her face in the middle of the pile. It is still warm and smells like baked cotton. She takes a deep breath.

"You gonna lay there in the laundry all day or help me make this bed?" Ruby asks, laughing.

Mary Louise takes one side of the big flowered sheet and helps Ruby stretch it across the bed and pull the elastic parts over all four corners so it is smooth everywhere.

"Are we going to do a lot more magic?" Mary Louise asks. "I'm getting kind of hungry."

"One more bit, then we can have us some lunch. You want tomato soup?"

"Yes!" says Mary Louise.

"I thought so. Now fetch me a hair from Miz Kitty's hairbrush. See if you can find a nice long one with some dark at the end of it."

Mary Louise goes over to Kitty's dresser and peers at the heavy silver brush. She finds a darker line in the tangle of blond and carefully pulls it out. It is almost a foot long, and the last inch is definitely brown. She carries it over to Ruby, letting it trail through her fingers like the tail of a tiny invisible kite.

"That's good," Ruby says. She reaches into the pocket of her uniform and pulls out a scrap of red felt with three needles stuck into it lengthwise. She pulls the needles out one by one, makes a bundle of them, and wraps it round and round, first with the long strand of Kitty's hair, then with a piece of black thread.

"Hold out your hand," she says.

Mary Louise holds out her hand flat, and Ruby puts the little black-wrapped bundle into it.

"Now, you hold this until you get a picture in your head of Miz Kitty burnin up your pretty picture book. And when it nice and strong, you spit. Okay?"

Mary Louise nods. She scrunches up her eyes, remembering, then spits on the needles.

"You got the knack for this," Ruby says, smiling. "It's a gift."

Mary Louise beams. She does not get many compliments, and stores this one away in the most private part of her thoughts. She will visit it regularly over the next few days until its edges are indistinct and there is nothing left but a warm glow labeled RUBY.

"Now put it under this mattress, far as you can reach." Ruby lifts up the edge of the mattress and Mary Louise drops the bundle on the box spring.

"Do you want me to say my prayers again?"

"Not this time, Miss Mouse. Prayers is for protectin. This here is a sufferin hand, bring some of Miz Kitty's meanness back on her own self, and it need another kind of charm. I'll set this one myself."

Ruby lowers her voice and begins to chant:

*Before the night is over,
Before the day is through.
What you have done to someone else
Will come right back on you.*

"There. That ought to do her just fine. Now we gotta make up this bed. Top sheet, blanket, bedspread all smooth and nice, pillows plumped up just so."

"Does that help the magic?" Mary Louise asks. She wants to do it right, and there are almost as many rules as eating in the dining room. But different.

"Not 'zactly. But it makes it look like it 'bout the most beautiful

place to sleep Miz Kitty ever seen, make her want to crawl under them sheets and get her beauty rest. Now help me with that top sheet, okay?"

Mary Louise does, and when they have smoothed the last wrinkle out of the bedspread, Ruby looks at the clock. "Shoot. How'd it get to be after one o'clock? Only fifteen minutes before my story comes on. Let's go down and have ourselves some lunch."

In the kitchen, Ruby heats up a can of Campbell's tomato soup, with milk, not water, the way Mary Louise likes it best, then ladles it out into two yellow bowls. She puts them on a metal tray, adds some saltine crackers and a bottle of ginger ale for her, and a lunchbox bag of Fritos and a glass of milk for Mary Louise, and carries the whole tray into the den. Ruby turns on the TV and they sip and crunch their way through half an hour of *As the World Turns*.

During the commercials, Ruby tells Mary Louise who all the people are, and what they've done, which is mostly bad. When they are done with their soup, another story comes on, but they aren't people Ruby knows, so she turns off the TV and carries the dishes back to the kitchen.

"I gotta do the dustin and finish vacuumin, and ain't no way to talk over that kind of noise," Ruby says, handing Mary Louise a handful of Oreos. "So you go off and play by yourself now, and I'll get my chores done before Miz Kitty comes home."

Mary Louise goes up to her room. At 4:30 she hears Kitty come home, but she only changes into out-to-dinner clothes and leaves and doesn't get into bed. Ruby says good-bye when Mrs. Banks comes at 6:00, and Mary Louise eats dinner in the kitchen and goes

upstairs at 8:00, when Mrs. Banks starts to watch Dr. Kildare.

On her dresser there is a picture of her mother. She is beautiful, with long curls and a silvery white dress. She looks like a queen, so Mary Louise thinks she might be a princess. She lives in a castle, imprisoned by her evil stepmother, the false queen. But now that there is magic, there will be a happy ending. She crawls under the covers and watches her doorway, wondering what will happen when Kitty tries to come into her room, if there will be flames.

Kitty begins to scream just before nine Friday morning. Clumps of her hair lie on her pillow like spilled wheat. What is left sprouts from her scalp in irregular clumps, like a crabgrass-infested lawn. Clusters of angry red blisters dot her exposed skin.

By the time Mary Louise runs up from the kitchen, where she is eating a bowl of Kix, Kitty is on the phone. She is talking to her beauty salon. She is shouting, "This is an emergency! An emergency!"

Kitty does not speak to Mary Louise. She leaves the house with a scarf wrapped around her head like a turban, in such a hurry that she does not even bother with lipstick. Mary Louise hears the tires of her T-bird squeal out of the driveway. A shower of gravel hits the side of the house, and then everything is quiet.

Ruby comes upstairs at ten, buttoning the last button on her uniform. Mary Louise is in the breakfast nook, eating a second bowl of Kix. The first one got soggy. She jumps up excitedly when she sees Ruby.

"Miz Kitty already gone?" Ruby asks, her hand on the coffeepot.

"It worked! It worked! Something bad happened to her hair. A lot of it fell out, and there are chicken pox where it was. She's at the beauty shop. I think she's going to be there a long time."

Ruby pours herself a cup of coffee. "That so?"

"Uh-huh." Mary Louise grins. "She looks like a goopher."

"Well, well, well. That come back on her fast, didn't it? Maybe now she think twice 'bout messin with somebody smaller'n her. But you, Miss Mouse," Ruby wiggles a semi-stern finger at Mary Louise, "Don't you go jumpin up and down shoutin 'bout goophers, hear? Magic ain't nothin to be foolin around with. It can bring sickness, bad luck, a whole heap of misery if it ain't done proper. You hear me?"

Mary Louise nods and runs her thumb and finger across her lips, as if she is locking them. But she is still grinning from ear to ear.

Kitty comes home from the beauty shop late that afternoon. She is in a very, very bad mood, and still has a scarf around her head.

Mary Louise is behind the couch in the den, playing seven dwarfs. She is Snow White and is lying very still, waiting for the prince.

Kitty comes into the den and goes to the bar. She puts two ice cubes in a heavy squat crystal glass, then reaches up on her tiptoes and feels around on the bookshelf until she finds a small brass key. She unlocks the liquor cabinet and fills her glass with brown liquid. She goes to the phone and makes three phone calls, canceling cocktails, dinner, tennis on Saturday. "Sorry," Kitty says. "Under the weather. Raincheck?" When she is finished she refills her glass, replaces the key, and goes upstairs. Mary Louise does not see her again until

Sunday.

Mary Louise stays in her room most of the weekend. It seems like a good idea, now that it is safe there. Saturday afternoon she tiptoes down to the kitchen and makes three peanut butter and honey sandwiches. She is not allowed to use the stove. She takes her sandwiches and some Fritos upstairs and touches one of the nails under the carpet, to make sure it is still there. She knows the magic is working, because Kitty doesn't even try to come in, not once.

At seven-thirty on Sunday night, she ventures downstairs again. Kitty's door is shut. The house is quiet. It is time for Disney. Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color. It is her favorite program, the only one that is not black and white, except for Bonanza, which comes on after her bedtime.

Mary Louise turns on the big TV that is almost as tall as she is, and sits in the middle of the maroon leather couch in the den. Her feet stick out in front of her, and do not quite reach the edge. There is a commercial for Mr. Clean. He has no hair, like Kitty, and Mary Louise giggles, just a little. Then there are red and blue fireworks over the castle where Sleeping Beauty lives. Mary Louise's thumb wanders up to her mouth, and she rests her cheek on the soft nap of her Bankie.

The show is Cinderella, and when the wicked stepmother comes on, Mary Louise thinks of Kitty, but does not giggle. The story unfolds and Mary Louise is bewitched by the colors, by the magic of television. She does not hear the creaking of the stairs. She does not hear the door of the den open, or hear the rattle of ice cubes in an empty crystal glass. She does not see the shadow loom over her

until it is too late.

It is a sunny Monday morning. Ruby comes in the basement door and changes into her uniform. She switches on the old brown table radio, waits for its tubes to warm up and begin to glow, then turns the yellowed plastic dial until she finds a station that is more music than static. The Marcells are singing "Blue Moon" as she sorts the laundry, and she dances a little on the concrete floor, swinging and swaying as she tosses white cotton panties into one basket and black nylon socks into another.

She fills the washer with a load of whites, adds a measuring cup of Dreft, and turns the dial to Delicate. The song on the radio changes to "Runaway" as she goes over to the wooden cage built into the wall, where the laundry that has been dumped down the upstairs chute gathers.

"As I walk along...," Ruby sings as she opens the hinged door with its criss-cross of green painted slats. The plywood box inside is a cube about three feet on a side, filled with a mound of flowered sheets and white terry cloth towels. She pulls a handful of towels off the top of the mound and lets them tumble into the pink plastic basket waiting on the floor below. "An' I wonder. I wa-wa-wa-wa-wuh-un-der," she sings, and then stops when the pile moves on its own, and whimpers.

Ruby parts the sea of sheets to reveal a small head of carrot-red hair.

"Miss Mouse? What on God's green earth you doin in there? I like to bury you in all them sheets!"

A bit more of Mary Louise appears, her hair in tangles, her eyes red-

rimmed from crying.

"Is Kitty gone?" she asks.

Ruby nods. "She at the beauty parlor again. What you doin in there? You hidin from Miz Kitty?"

"Uh-huh." Mary Louise sits up and a cascade of hand towels and washcloths tumbles out onto the floor.

"What she done this time?"

"She--she--" Mary Louise bursts into ragged sobs.

Ruby reaches in and puts her hands under Mary Louise's arms, lifting the weeping child out of the pile of laundry. She carries her over to the basement stairs and sits down, cradling her. The tiny child shakes and holds on tight to Ruby's neck, her tears soaking into the white cotton collar. When her tears subside into trembling, Ruby reaches into a pocket and proffers a pale yellow hankie.

"Blow hard," she says gently. Mary Louise does.

"Now scooch around front a little so you can sit in my lap." Mary Louise scooches without a word. Ruby strokes her curls for a minute. "Sugar? What she do this time?"

Mary Louise tries to speak, but her voice is still a rusty squeak. After a few seconds she just holds her tightly clenched fist out in front of her and slowly opens it. In her palm is a wrinkled scrap of pale blue flannel, about the size of a playing card, its edges jagged and irregular.

"Miz Kitty do that?"

"Uh-huh," Mary Louise finds her voice. "I was watching Disney

and she came in to get another drink. She said Bankie was just a dirty old rag with germs and sucking thumbs was for babies--" Mary Louise pauses to take a breath. "She had scissors and she cut up all of Bankie on the floor. She said next time she'd get bigger scissors and cut off my thumbs! She threw my Bankie pieces in the toilet and flushed, three times. This one fell under the couch," Mary Louise says, looking at the small scrap, her voice breaking.

Ruby puts an arm around her shaking shoulders and kisses her forehead. "Hush now. Don't you fret. You just sit down here with me. Everything gonna be okay. You gotta--" A buzzing noise from the washer interrupts her. She looks into the laundry area, then down at Mary Louise and sighs. "You take a couple deep breaths. I gotta move the clothes in the washer so they're not all on one side. When I come back, I'm gonna tell you a story. Make you feel better, okay?"

"Okay," says Mary Louise in a small voice. She looks at her lap, not at Ruby, because nothing is really very okay at all.

Ruby comes back a few minutes later and sits down on the step next to Mary Louise. She pulls two small yellow rectangles out of her pocket and hands one to Mary Louise. "I like to set back and hear a story with a stick of Juicy Fruit in my mouth. Helps my ears open up or somethin. How about you?"

"I like Juicy Fruit," Mary Louise admits.

"I thought so. Save the foil. Fold it up and put it in your pocket."

"So I have someplace to put the gum when the flavor's all used up?"

"Maybe. Or maybe we got somethin else to do and that foil might

could come in handy. You save it up neat and we'll see."

Mary Louise puts the gum in her mouth and puts the foil in the pocket of her corduroy pants, then folds her hands in her lap and waits.

"Well, now," says Ruby. "Seems that once, a long, long time ago, down South Carolina, there was a little mouse of a girl with red, red hair and big blue eyes."

"Like me?" asks Mary Louise.

"You know, I think she was just about 'zactly like you. Her momma died when she was just a little bit of a girl, and her daddy married hisself a new wife, who was very pretty, but she was mean and lazy. Now, this stepmomma, she didn't much like stayin home to take care of no child weren't really her own and she was awful cruel to that poor little girl. She never gave her enough to eat, and even when it was snowin outside, she just dress her up in thin cotton rags. That child was awful hungry and cold, come winter.

"But her real momma had made her a blanket, a soft blue blanket, and that was the girl's favorite thing in the whole wide world. If she wrapped it around herself and sat real quiet in a corner, she was warm enough, then.

"Now, her stepmomma, she didn't like seein that little girl happy. That little girl had power inside her, and it scared her stepmomma. Scared her so bad that one day she took that child's most favorite special blanket and cut it up into tiny pieces, so it wouldn't be no good for warmin her up at all."

"That was really mean of her," Mary Louise says quietly.

"Yes it was. Awful mean. But you know what that little girl did next? She went into the kitchen, and sat down right next to the cookstove, where it was a little bit warm. She sat there, holdin one of the little scraps from her blanket, and she cried, cause she missed havin her real momma. And when her tears hit the stove, they turned into steam, and she stayed warm as toast the rest of that day. Ain't nothin warmer than steam heat, no siree.

"But when her stepmomma saw her all smilin and warm again, what did that woman do but lock up the woodpile, out of pure spite. See, she ate out in fancy rest'rants all the time, and she never did cook, so it didn't matter to her if there was fire in the stove or not.

"So finally that child dragged her cold self down to the basement. It was mighty chilly down there, but she knew it was someplace her stepmomma wouldn't look for her, cause the basement's where work gets done, and her stepmomma never did do one lick of work.

"That child hid herself back of the old wringer washer, in a dark, dark corner. She was cold, and that little piece of blanket was only big enough to wrap a mouse in. She wished she was warm. She wished and wished and between her own power and that magic blanket, she found her mouse self. Turned right into a little gray mouse, she did. Then she wrapped that piece of soft blue blanket around her and hid herself away just as warm as if she was in a feather bed.

"But soon she heard somebody comin down the wood stairs into the basement, clomp, clomp, clomp. And she thought it was her mean old stepmomma comin to make her life a misery again, so she scampered quick like mice do, back into a little crack in the wall.

'Cept it weren't her stepmomma. It was the cleanin lady, comin down the stairs with a big basket of mendin."

"Is that you?" Mary Louise asks.

"I reckon it was someone pretty much like me," Ruby says, smiling.

"And she saw that little mouse over in the corner with that scrap of blue blanket tight around her, and she said, "Scuse me Miss Mouse, but I needs to patch me up this old raggy sweater, and that little piece of blanket is just the right size. Can I have it?"

"Why would she talk to a mouse?" Mary Louise asks, puzzled.

"Well, now, the lady knew that it wasn't no regular mouse, 'cause she weren't no ordinary cleanin lady, she was a conjure woman too. She could see that magic girl spirit inside the mouse shape clear as day."

"Oh. Okay."

Ruby smiles. "Now, the little mouse-child had to think for a minute, because that piece of blue blanket was 'bout the only thing she loved left in the world. But the lady asked so nice, she gave over her last little scrap of blanket for the mendin and turned back into a little girl.

"Well sir, the spirit inside that blue blanket was powerful strong, even though the pieces got all cut up. So when the lady sewed that blue scrap onto that raggy old sweater, what do you know? It turned into a big warm magic coat, just the size of that little girl. And when she put on that magic coat, it kept her warm and safe, and her stepmomma never could hurt her no more."

"I wish there really was magic," says Mary Louise sadly. "Because

she did hurt me again."

Ruby sighs. "Magic's there, sugar. It truly is. It just don't always work the way you think it will. That sufferin hand we put in Miz Kitty's bed, it work just fine. It scared her plenty. Trouble is, when she scared, she get mad, and then she get mean, and there ain't no end to it. No tellin what she might take it into her head to cut up next."

"My thumbs," says Mary Louise solemnly. She looks at them as if she is saying good-bye.

"That's what I'm afraid of. Somethin terrible bad. I been thinkin on this over the weekend, and yesterday night I call my Aunt Nancy down in Beaufort, where I'm from. She's the most powerful conjure woman I know, taught me when I was little. I ask her what she'd do, and she says, 'sounds like you all need a Peaceful Home hand, stop all the angry, make things right.'"

"Do we have to make the bed again?" asks Mary Louise.

"No, sugar. This is a wearin hand, like my money hand. 'Cept it's for you to wear. Got lots of special things in it."

"Like what?"

"Well, first we got to weave together a hair charm. A piece of yours, a piece of Miz Kitty's. Hers before the goopher, I think. And we need some dust from the house. And some rosemary from the kitchen. I can get all them when I clean today. The rest is stuff I bet you already got."

"I have magic things?"

"I b'lieve so. That piece of tinfoil from your Juicy Fruit? We need

that. And somethin lucky. You got somethin real lucky?"

"I have a penny what got run over by a train," Mary Louise offers.

"Just so. Now the last thing. You know how my little bag's green flannel, 'cause it's a money hand?"

Mary Louise nods.

"Well, for a Peaceful Home hand, we need a square of light blue flannel. You know where I can find one of those?"

Mary Louise's eyes grow wide behind her glasses. "But it's the only piece I've got left."

"I know," Ruby says softly.

"It's like in the story, isn't it?"

"Just like."

"And like in the story, if I give it to you, Kitty can't hurt me ever again?"

"Just like."

Mary Louise opens her fist again and looks at the scrap of blue flannel for a long time. "Okay," she says finally, and gives it to Ruby. "It'll be all right, Miss Mouse. I b'lieve everything will turn out just fine. Now I gotta finish this laundry and do me some housework. I'll meet you in the kitchen round one-thirty. We'll eat and I'll fix up your hand right after my story."

At two o'clock the last credits of *As the World Turns* disappear from the TV. Ruby and Mary Louise go down to the basement. They lay out all the ingredients on the padded gray surface of the ironing board. Ruby assembles the hand, muttering under her breath

from time to time. Mary Louise can't hear the words. Ruby wraps everything in the blue flannel and snares the neck of the walnut-sized bundle with three twists of white string.

"Now all we gotta do is give it a little drink, then you can put it on," she tells Mary Louise.

"Drink of what?"

Ruby frowns. "I been thinkin on that. My Aunt Nancy said best thing is to get me some Peaceful oil. But I don't know no root doctors up here. Ain't been round Detroit long enough."

"We could look in the phone book."

"Ain't the kind of doctor you finds in the Yellow Pages. Got to know someone who knows someone. And I don't. I told Aunt Nancy that, and she says in that case, reg'lar whiskey'll do just fine. That's what I been givin my money hand. Little bit of my husband's whiskey every mornin for six days now. I don't drink, myself, 'cept maybe a cold beer on a hot summer night. But whiskey's strong magic, comes to conjurin. Problem is, I can't take your hand home with me to give it a drink, 'long with mine."

"Why not?"

"'Cause once it goes round your neck, nobody else can touch it, not even me, else the conjure magic leak right out." Ruby looks at Mary Louise thoughtfully. "What's the most powerful drink you ever had, Miss Mouse?"

Mary Louise hesitates for a second, then says, "Vernor's ginger ale. The bubbles are very strong. They go up my nose and make me sneeze."

Ruby laughs. "I think that just might do. Ain't as powerful as whiskey, but it fits, you bein just a child and all. And there's one last bottle up in the Frigidaire. You go on up now and fetch it."

Mary Louise brings down the yellow and green bottle. Ruby holds her thumb over the opening and sprinkles a little bit on the flannel bag, mumbling some more words that end with "father son and holy ghost amen." Then she ties the white yarn around Mary Louise's neck so that the bag lies under her left armpit, and the string doesn't show.

"This bag's gotta be a secret," she says. "Don't talk about it, and don't let nobody else see it. Can you do that?"

Mary Louise nods. "I dress myself in the morning, and I change into my jammies in the bathroom."

"That's good. Now the next three mornings, before you get dressed, you give your bag a little drink of this Vernor's, and say, 'Lord, bring an end to the evil in this house, amen.' Can you remember that?"

Mary Louise says she can. She hides the bottle of Vernor's behind the leg of her bed. Tuesday morning she sprinkles the bag with Vernor's before putting on her T-shirt. The bag is a little sticky.

But Mary Louise thinks the magic might be working. Kitty has bought a blond wig, a golden honey color. Mary Louise thinks it looks like a helmet, but doesn't say so. Kitty smiles in the mirror at herself and is in a better mood. She leaves Mary Louise alone.

Wednesday morning the bag is even stickier. It pulls at Mary Louise's armpit when she reaches for the box of Kix in the

cupboard. Ruby says this is okay.

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By Thursday, the Vernor's has been open for too long. It has gone flat and there are no bubbles at all. Mary Louise sprinkles her bag, but worries that it will lose its power. She is afraid the charm will not work, and that Kitty will come and get her. Her thumbs ache in anticipation.

When she goes downstairs Kitty is in her new wig and a green dress. She is going out to a luncheon. She tells Mary Louise that Ruby will not be there until noon, but she will stay to cook dinner. Mary Louise will eat in the dining room tonight, and until then she should be good and not to make a mess. After she is gone, Mary Louise eats some Kix and worries about her thumbs.

When her bowl is empty, she goes into the den, and stands on the desk chair so she can reach the tall books on the bookshelf. They are still over her head, and she cannot see, but her fingers reach. The dust on the tops makes her sneeze; she finds the key on a large black book called Who's Who in Manufacturing 1960. The key is brass and old-looking.

Mary Louise unlocks the liquor cabinet and looks at the bottles. Some are brown, some are green. One of the green ones has Toto dogs on it, a black one and a white one, and says SCOTCH WHISKEY. The bottle is half-full and heavy. She spills some on the floor, and her little bag is soaked more than sprinkled, but she thinks this will probably make up for the flat ginger ale.

She puts the green bottle back and carefully turns it so the Toto dogs face out, the way she found it. She climbs back up on the chair and puts the key back up on top of Manufacturing, then climbs down.

The little ball is cold and damp under her arm, and smells like medicine. She changes her shirt and feels safer. But she does not want to eat dinner alone with Kitty. That is not safe at all. She thinks for a minute, then smiles. Ruby has shown her how to make a room safe.

There are only five nails left in the jar in the garage. But she doesn't want to keep Kitty out of the dining room, just make it safe to eat dinner there. Five is probably fine. She takes the nails into the kitchen and opens the cupboard under the sink. She looks at the Drano. She is not allowed to touch it, not by Kitty's rules, not by babysitter rules, not by Ruby's rules. She looks at the pirate flag man on the side of the can. The poison man. He is bad, bad, bad, and she is scared. But she is more scared of Kitty.

She carries the can over to the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room and kneels down. When she looks close she sees dirt and salt and seeds and bits of things in the thin space between the linoleum and the carpet.

The can is very heavy, and she doesn't think she can pour any Drano into the cap. Not without spilling it. So she tips the can upside down three times, then opens it. There is milky Drano on the inside of the cap. She carefully dips in each nail and pushes them, one by one, under the edge of the dining room carpet. It is hard to push them all

the way in, and the two in the middle go crooked and cross over each other a little.

"This is a protectin' hand," she says out loud to the nails. Now she needs a prayer, but not a bedtime prayer. A dining room prayer. She thinks hard for a minute, then says, "For what we are about to receive may we be truly thankful amen." Then she puts the Drano back under the sink and washes her hands three times with soap, just to make sure.

Ruby gets there at noon. She gives Mary Louise a quick hug and a smile, and then tells her to scoot until dinnertime, because she has to vacuum and do the kitchen floor and polish the silver. Mary Louise wants to ask Ruby about magic things, but she scoots.

Ruby is mashing potatoes in the kitchen when Kitty comes home. Mary Louise sits in the corner of the breakfast nook, looking at the comics in the paper, still waiting for Ruby to be less busy and come and talk to her. Kitty puts her purse down and goes into the den. Mary Louise hears the rattle of ice cubes. A minute later, Kitty comes into the kitchen. Her glass has an inch of brown liquid in it. Her eyes have an angry look.

"Mary Louise, go to your room. I need to speak to Ruby in private."

Mary Louise gets up without a word and goes into the hall. But she does not go upstairs. She opens the basement door silently and pulls it almost shut behind her. She stands on the top step and listens.

"Ruby, I'm afraid I'm going to have to let you go," says Kitty. Mary Louise feels her armpits grow icy cold and her eyes begin to sting.

"Ma'am?"

"You've been drinking."

"No, ma'am. I ain't--"

"Don't try to deny it. I know you coloreds have a weakness for it. That's why Mr. Whittaker and I keep the cabinet in the den locked. For your own good. But when I went in there, just now, I found the cabinet door open. I cannot have servants in my house that I do not trust. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Mary Louise waits for Ruby to say something else, but there is silence.

"I will pay you through the end of the week, but I think it's best if you leave after dinner tonight." There is a rustling and the snap of Kitty's handbag opening. "There," she says. "I think I've been more than generous, but of course I cannot give you references."

"No, ma'am," says Ruby.

"Very well. Dinner at six. Set two places. Mary Louise will eat with me." Mary Louise hears the sound of Kitty's heels marching off, then the creak of the stairs going up. There is a moment of silence, and the basement door opens.

Ruby looks at Mary Louise and takes her hand. At the bottom of the stairs she sits, and gently pulls Mary Louise down beside her.

"Miss Mouse? You got somethin you want to tell me?"

Mary Louise hangs her head.

"You been in your Daddy's liquor?"

A tiny nod. "I didn't drink any. I just gave my bag a little. The

Vernor's was flat and I was afraid the magic wouldn't work. I put the key back. I guess I forgot to lock the door."

"I guess you did."

"I'll tell Kitty it was me," Mary Louise says, her voice on the edge of panic. "You don't have to be fired. I'll tell her."

"Tell her what, Miss Mouse? Tell her you was puttin your daddy's whiskey on a conjure hand?" Ruby shakes her head. "Sugar, you listen to me. Miz Kitty thinks I been drinkin, she just fire me. But she find out I been teachin you black juju magic, she gonna call the po-lice. Better you keep quiet, hear?"

"But it's not fair!"

"Maybe it is, maybe it ain't." Ruby strokes Mary Louise's hair and smiles a sad smile, her eyes as gentle as her hands. "But, see, after she talk to me that way, ain't no way I'm gonna keep workin for Miz Kitty nohow. It be okay, though. My money hand gonna come through. I can feel it. Already startin to, maybe. The Ford plant's hirin again, and my husband's down there today, signin up. Maybe when I gets home, he's gonna tell me good news. May just be."

"You can't leave me!" Mary Louise cries.

"I got to. I got my own life."

"Take me with you."

"I can't, sugar." Ruby puts her arms around Mary Louise. "Poor Miss Mouse. You livin in this big old house with nice things all 'round you, 'cept nobody nice to you. But angels watchin out for you. I b'lieve that. Keep you safe till you big enough to make your own way, find your real kin."

"What's kin?"

"Fam'ly. Folks you belong to."

"Are you my kin?"

"Not by blood, sugar. Not hardly. But we're heart kin, maybe. 'Cause I love you in my heart, and I ain't never gonna forget you. That's a promise." Ruby kisses Mary Louise on the forehead and pulls her into a long hug. "Now since Miz Kitty already give me my pay, I 'spect I oughta go up, give her her dinner. I reckon you don't want to eat with her?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. I'll tell her you ain't feelin well, went on up to bed. But I'll come downstairs, say good-bye, 'fore I leave." Ruby stands up and looks fondly down at Mary Louise. "It'll be okay, Miss Mouse. There's miracles every day. Why, last Friday, they put a fella up in space. Imagine that? A man up in space? So ain't nothin impossible, not if you wish just hard as you can. Not if you believe." She rests her hand on Mary Louise's head for a moment, then walks slowly up the stairs and back into the kitchen.

MARY LOUISE SITS on the steps and feels like the world is crumbling around her. This is not how the story is supposed to end. This is not happily ever after. She cups her tiny hand around the damp, sticky bag under her arm and closes her eyes and thinks about everything that Ruby has told her. She wishes for the magic to be real.

And it is. There are no sparkles, no gold. This is basement magic, deep and cool. Power that has seeped and puddled, gathered slowly, beneath the notice of queens, like the dreams of small awkward girls. Mary Louise believes with all her heart, and finds the way to her mouse self.

Mouse sits on the bottom step for a minute, a tiny creature with a round pink tail and fur the color of new rust. She blinks her blue eyes, then scampers off the step and across the basement floor. She is quick and clever, scurrying along the baseboards, seeking familiar smells, a small ball of blue flannel trailing behind her.

When she comes to the burnt-orange coat hanging inches from the floor, she leaps. Her tiny claws find purchase in the nubby fabric, and she climbs up to the pocket, wriggles over and in. Mouse burrows into a pale cotton hankie that smells of girl tears and wraps herself tight around the flannel ball that holds her future. She puts her pink nose down on her small pink paws and waits for her true love to come.

Kitty sits alone at the wide mahogany table. The ice in her drink has melted. The kitchen is only a few feet away, but she does not get up. She presses the buzzer beneath her feet, to summon Ruby. The buzzer sounds in the kitchen. Kitty waits. Nothing happens.

Impatient, she presses on the buzzer with all her weight. It shifts, just a fraction of an inch, and its wire presses against the two lye-tipped nails that have crossed it. The buzzer shorts out with a hiss. The current, diverted from its path to the kitchen, returns to Kitty. She begins to twitch, as if she were covered in stinging ants, and her eyes roll back in her head. In a gesture that is both urgent and



awkward, she clutches at the tablecloth, pulling it and the dishes down around her. Kitty Whittaker, a former Miss Bloomfield Hills, falls to her knees and begins to howl wordlessly at the Moon.

Downstairs, Ruby hears the buzzer, then a crash of dishes. She starts to go upstairs, then shrugs. She takes off her white uniform for the last time. She puts on her green skirt and her cotton blouse, leaves the white Keds under the sink, puts on her flat black shoes. She looks in the clothes chute, behind the furnace, calls Mary Louise's name, but there is no answer. She calls again, then, with a sigh, puts on her nubby orange outdoor coat and pulls the light string. The basement is dark behind her as she opens the door and walks out into the soft spring evening.



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