

# FICTION

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LAURA BEST

## The Bread Poultice

SOAK THE BREAD IN A LITTLE hot water, then cool it to the right temperature. My mother says she can tell just by looking. She sits at the table, kneading it with a teaspoon, blows on it.

"This won't hurt," she says. Her hand is tight about my wrist. She was never one for tender touches—those are my grandmother's words. Moulding it, melding it in her fingers, she shapes the soggy bread, covering the very end of my thumb where it is festered.

"Ouch!" I cry, trying to remove my hand from her grip. She ignores my protests. Instead, ties the bread poultice fast with a thin strip of cotton she tore from an old bedsheet.

"Do I have blood poisoning?" I ask.

"Don't be so silly. It was just a little splinter. The bread poultice will draw out the poison and you'll be fine. Now it's off to bed with you."

I crawl beneath the covers and wait for the walls to fade into grains of twilight. Holding my breath, I squeeze my eyes tight, trying to make it stop, trying to keep the sun from going down. It never works. As many times as I have tried I cannot keep the shadows from coming into the room. There are many things to think about in the dark, many thoughts that shove their way in bed beside you and whisper, whisper, whisper as soon as the lights go out.

*Shhh .... Curl up tight. Tuck the blankets in around your head. Pull your knees close.*

*Pull your knees so very close. Shhh.*

This is what I do on those nights when I cannot sleep, when the only sound I hear is my own breathing and the silent screams that burst unheard inside me. And now there is a bread poultice tied fast to my thumb, wrapped and concealed in my grandmother's eerie warnings of blood poisoning, amputation and, in some cases, she said, wagging her finger at me—death. Blood poisoning. Until this day I had not heard of its existence.



We were scattered around like chicken feed after my father walked out on us. Mum gathered us together one evening after supper.

“Your father’s gone. Took off,” she said, waving her hands in the air as she said the words, “*took off*,” as if he was a bird that had escaped its cage—*took off*. “There’s another woman.”

I was attuned to that particular tone in my mother’s voice. It was the same tone she used when my uncle died, the day we went to the funeral home, leaving my father behind. He was sitting with one leg stretched out on the cot in the kitchen, the other dangling lifelessly over the edge, fiddling with the curtain.

“You need to come. I need you to come,” my mother said, moving her feet uncomfortably in the high-heeled shoes she so seldom had reason to wear. “He’s your brother. It wouldn’t be right,” she added, making one last effort to change his mind.

“He won’t even know I’m there,” my father cried out. “How could *he* know?”

So she walked into the undertaker’s parlour all alone. Cornelius said he was old enough but my mother looked at him and closed her eyes. “I wouldn’t go in myself if I didn’t have to,” she said. I reached out to grab her as she slipped through the doorway but my fingers barely brushed the hem of her skirt before the door went shut.

I cannot say why I felt compelled to move off the thick upholstered chair my mother had told me to sit on, only that I was drawn for some unknown reason toward the double glass doors. Jane and Daisy sat, legs swinging back and forth, admiring the paintings hanging on the walls and murmuring about the white lace centrepieces on the little wooden tables on either side of the couch. Cornelius, who was pacing the length of the narrow atrium, stopped in front of the door. I thought he was about to barge in but instead he stood with his hand resting on the gold doorknob, the other he placed on top of my head.

Inside, Clifford and Dylan were wearing suits and ties, their hands clasped in front of them. Stiff. Tall. Serious. I did not know my cousins for they were much older and were scarcely around on the few occasions I could remember going to visit. I sometimes caught glimpses of them as they darted into the house looking for a particular wrench or screwdriver, their only interest being some old car sitting in the driveway that they were planning to fix up. They were handsome young men with tanned features

and sun-bleached hair, an indication of the hours they spent outdoors. They were standing beside Aunt Maggie, looking down at the floor, Dylan with his hand resting gently on her shoulder.

My mother touched each one of them on the cheek and, bending down toward Aunt Maggie, she whispered in her ear. When she straightened up and walked toward the coffin, I heard her gasp. Even though I was standing on the other side of the door I could hear. Her hand trembled as she brought it toward her mouth. I turned and ran for the outdoors, jumping the wooden steps two at a time, my feet digging into the gravel stones as I raced down the long drive. I did not stop until I had reached the very end.

I dreamed that night of Uncle Harland, saw his flesh washed white by the water's current and his eyes, two bulging orbs staring up at me from between two rocks. Loons were swimming and diving, circling the area where his body had sunk. And I dreamed that I was the one who found him, that it was my duty to remove his body from the lake, to reach into the water and find the rope, slip it from his neck.

"You shouldn't have done this," I scolded.

"I know that now, Blanche," he answered, and then I woke up screaming.



Cornelius wanted to know the woman's name. "I'll find him and smash his face in for you," he said. "He needs to pay for this." Cornelius straightened his shoulders back, at the same time producing a fist that he twisted into his open palm.

"Sarah Burton, if you must know, and you'll do no such thing. She is young and pretty and smarts up to all the men. And some day she's going to bring something home that won't be so pretty. And I hope it's your father she gives it to. I hope to God it's him."

My mother's mouth shifted slightly upward and I wondered if she wasn't secretly pleased with Cornelius's offer to defend her dignity. "You just listen to what I'm saying," she continued. Her hands were clasped together in her lap and she was looking down at them while she spoke.

"You have to be grown up now. Make some grown-up decisions. It's just the way things are." Her throat bulged outward when she swallowed. And then she told us which relatives were willing to take us in. None of them, she said, would see us out in the rain.

"All for what it looks like to the rest of the world," she said. "I hated to ask but what else could I do?"

Jane said right away that she'd go to Aunt Rhoda's. Aunt Rhoda grew beautiful flowers in her garden. "I love flowers," she said to Mum.

"Suit yourself. But the nearest store is Jim Denny's. Let's see how much you love flowers once you've lugged her groceries all the way back the Fenton Young Road." Still Jane did not hesitate. "I'm good and strong. I'll be all right. Besides, Aunt Rhoda smiles a lot," she added.

"A smile can be a deadly as a fist," said Mum with a tiny laugh. "But then you'll find that out for yourselves. All of you." She looked at each one of us as if *imagining the worst*.

Cornelius packed his clothes and went down the road to Mum's Uncle Dougie and Aunt Ruth. Mum didn't have a word to say against Uncle Dougie, although she did warn Cornelius that Aunt Ruth had a sharp tongue in her head.

"Try not to eat them out of house and home and make sure you help out around. Just do as you're told," she said finally, smoothing down a lock of his unruly hair.

Daisy went to stay with Lula. None of us knew exactly how Lula figured in the family, for no one ever said. She was someone's daughter or cousin or aunt, that much we knew. It was always just Lula. Lula in that little house with the grey shutters at the top of the hill, or Lula who can't be expected to know any better and don't pay any attention to what Lula has to say. I can't remember ever visiting Lula's house, although I had seen her at my grandparents' house on many occasions. My grandmother calls her "Lulie" and tells her not to slouch when she's sitting up to the table, and most times when Lula opens her mouth to speak my grandmother rolls her eyes and makes tsk-tsk sounds with her mouth.

In the Timber Creek Cemetery there is a white wooden cross close to the fence. Lula put the white cross there for her dead baby, Mum told us.

"That's so sad," sighed Daisy.

Because I was the youngest Mum said that I should stay with her. "I got to keep someone with me," she said half-smiling as she looked in my direction.

The day we arrived at my grandparents' home, carrying an old brown suitcase between us, my grandmother looked at my mother and said, "You should have got rid of that no-good lazy buggler years ago. Good riddance to bad rubbish."

"Now don't start in, Violet," my grandfather said as he sat by the wood stove, filling his pipe with tobacco. "Don't start in." My grandmother puckered up her face and reached for her knitting. I clung to the brown

suitcase hoping Mum would take us back home. Instead she motioned for me to follow her up the stairs.

"The little room," my grandmother called out to us. "It'll be easier to heat once winter comes." I prayed then we would not be there long enough to see the cold weather.

The first weeks I missed Cornelius and Daisy and Jane, but Jane most of all. It was Jane who would curl up with me in bed at night when my fears started settling in. She'd rub my back and ask, "What are you afraid of?"

"I don't know," I'd whisper, hoping she might guess the source of my trepidation, allowing me then to say, "Yes, yes. That's it."

"Do you want me to get Mum?" she'd sometimes ask. I knew Mum could never help me. Mum was too rigid in her thinking, too quick to get on with the business of living—scrubbing, washing, and mixing bread—to ever find the right words to comfort me. Besides, what was there to tell her, that my greatest fear was caused from something I knew nothing about? That I dreamed at night about a dead man lying in the lake? I used to try and figure what death was like: this was after my uncle drowned, but as much as I thought on it I could not come up with anything concrete, not one small thought or word that would put my mind at rest.

One night Jane told my father that I was crying. He crawled into bed beside me and asked what was wrong.

"Dying," I whispered, feeling awkward at finally naming this nemesis, hoping at the same time that he might be able to explain the unexplainable, pull the wrinkles out, and smooth my worries away to nothing. "I'm afraid of dying."

"Everyone's afraid of something. There's nothing you can do about it. We're all going to die one day," he said, kissing my forehead. I tried not to move then, tried not to give myself away while tears streamed down my face. "Why don't I stay here until you fall asleep," he said. Only I had no desire to sleep, to close my eyes and see if Uncle Harland was in the water waiting for me to fish him out again. After a time my father whispered my name. I did not answer and so he left.



There are faces in the clothes hanging on the wall in the bedroom where I sleep. The first time I woke in the night and saw their dark shadowy creases I screamed. Mum sat upright in bed and placed her hand across my mouth. I struggled even more, unsure as to exactly who or what had me in their grip.

"Shut up, Blanche," came Mum's voice in the dark, shaking me to my senses. I lay back down in bed, quivering. "Lay still and be quiet. There's nothing in the dark that'll hurt you. Not while I'm here." She placed a hand on my back, making shushing noises. I lay in the dark crying, wishing my mother would take the clothes down off the nails and put them in one of the dresser drawers.

"Drawers are for people who plan on staying a long time," she said the day we moved in with my grandparents. But I knew she was wrong. Where else would we go? I wanted to ask.



When I wake in the morning the bread poultice is wet and cold against my thumb. Mum sits by the kitchen table and slowly removes the cotton. Yellow pus lies on a bed of cold, soggy bread.

"It broke," she says letting my thumb out into the air. I dance right there on the kitchen floor in front of my mother and grandmother." Don't act so silly," my mother scolds, swatting at my bare legs. But I don't care. My grandmother's stories have suddenly lost their great power over me and I am free once again.

I run off to show Cornelius and Daisy my thumb. Daisy says, "Yuck," and makes a horrible face. Cornelius grabs it and twists it around to get a closer look. I cry out, afraid that he'll squeeze it too hard.

"That's from sucking your thumb," he says laughing. "Blanche is a baby," he sings looking over at Daisy.

"I *am* not!" I cry, charging into Cornelius. He grabs me by the waist and swings me around in the air. I kick the air with my feet, laughing and laughing.

"You'll always be our baby," Cornelius says setting me back down on the ground. "I missed you, pip-squeak."

"Will Daddy ever come back?" I ask.

"If he does I'll kill him," said Cornelius with a fierceness I have never seen before.

On a day that Mum takes me to see Jane I shove my thumb in her face. "It was festered and Mum put a bread poultice on it," I say, unable to think of anything else to say to her. Only days before I'd imagined all the things I would tell Jane, rattling on in my head as if she was standing next to me.

"It looks good now," Jane says and then asks me if I want to go look at Aunt Rhoda's flowers. "I like the petunias the best," she says as we ap-

proach the garden. "Aunt Rhoda says that the colours are just lovely." We both laugh at the word. Lovely. Lovely is not a word that we have heard very often and it sounds standoffish. Jane tells me the names of all the flowers in the garden. I laugh again when she shows me the snapdragons. I don't know why everything makes me feel like laughing, even looking at Jane.

We run around the garden, Jane pretending that she is unable to catch me. Jane stops and pulls out some weeds. She tells me that the small round rocks that surround the flower garden came all the way from the Bay of Fundy. I do not know where the Bay of Fundy is but it sounds as though it must be very far away. The rocks are bright yellow and I ask Jane if they came that way.

"No, silly. Aunt Rhoda painted them," she says.

It feels as though I don't know Jane anymore, that she is a part of Aunt Rhoda's place now, just like the flowers and the horrible yellow rocks.

"Do you like it here?" I ask. Jane smiles and says, yes.

"It's fun looking after the flowers with Aunt Rhoda," she says, and I don't know why but I wish she would not smile when she says this.

"Granddad smells like liniment," I blurt out suddenly. "And he wants to die all the time. 'If only the Lord would only see fit to put me out of my misery'," I say, standing before Jane, imitating my grandfather.

"He's just old," says Jane. "Don't mind what he has to say."

"Mum says he talks like he's a horse with a broken leg and Grandma tells him to just die and get it over with." I look up at Jane and she gives me a strange look, one that tells me she doesn't know what to say. "I get scared sometimes," I say. Jane puts her arms around me. She smells like honey and I bury my face in her striped green dress.

"You must try not to be afraid," she says. "Afraid is the very worst thing to be." I make a promise to her that I will try my best. She smiles and picks me up. "We'll always be together," she said, "even when you can't see me. Just close your eyes and think real hard and I'll be there any old time you want." I ask Jane if that really works. "It works for me," she says smiling.

We walk back toward the garden and Jane breaks off a petunia and puts it in my hair. "Now you're a princess," says Jane. "You're a princess and this is your garden,"

Before we leave Aunt Rhoda shows Mum the flower garden. She walks around and points to this flower and that, telling little stories about them. She tells Mum what a good helper Jane has been with the garden.

"I brought them up to know their place," Mum says.

"I told Jane she's the best thing that ever happened to the garden.

I swear she's going to turn into a flower herself someday. Don't you think she'd make a good rose?" We all laugh at Aunt Rhoda's silly talk. Aunt Rhoda picks some red dahlias, wraps the stems in a piece of wet cotton and gives them to Mum to take home.

On the way home my mother tells me that Aunt Rhoda has Jane spoiled. "She gives in to her. You can just tell. All that digging in the ground. I knew this would happen. Right from the start I knew. This is your father's fault, him and that Sarah Burton."

All the way home Mum complains about Aunt Rhoda. She talks about things that happened many years ago. She tells me that Aunt Rhoda's husband drank himself to death because Aunt Rhoda harped at him day and night.

"She'd rather have flowers than a man any day," she sputters. Before we get back to my grandparents' home she throws the dahlias in the ditch. I go back later to find them. I hold them up by the stems, clutching the damp cotton. They droop beneath their own weight; their bright red heads sagging toward the dirt and I feel like crying.

In bed that night I think about Jane living all the way down the Fenton Young Road with Aunt Rhoda, watching the petunias and mums, the bluebells and snapdragons spread out across the garden. I can see Cornelius and Daisy any old time I want, but it is not the same with Jane.

I don't know why my father had to leave, why we had to be scattered out like this. As the room begins to darken I look toward the clothes that are hanging on the wall: my mother's clothes, the ones she pulled out of the little brown suitcase. Slowly the clothes begin to transform. Their creases produce shapes that resemble eyes and mouths. I lie there watching the daylight disappear, and the room becomes an eerie cavern. I squirm beneath the covers, resisting the urge to pull them over my head. They are only clothes, I think, clothes that are not planning on staying too long. Jane has said I should try not to be afraid.

I snuggle down beneath the covers, imagine that I am rolled in warm bread from head to toe, wrapped up like a cocoon with white strips of cotton. And as I look more closely at the faces hanging there on the wall I begin to laugh. It is Jane's face that I see first, then Cornelius's and Daisy's. I can see my father too; he smiles at me and waves his hand.

Slowly, so very slowly, the images become crystal clear. I don't know why I couldn't see it before. I laugh then at the clothes, the ones that are not staying too long. Jane is right I think. Afraid *is* the very worst thing.