

# Better

TENILLE BROWN

RUTHIE CALLS TO ME FROM HER BEDROOM upstairs as I am standing in the kitchen over a sink of dishes. The sound of her voice causes me to drop the heavy kitchen knife I have been pulling carefully through the washcloth and splash soapy water all over my yellow top.

“Bernie!”

I want to let her calls go unanswered and show her, finally, that Bernice is not here. It is not Bernice who brings her banana custard breakfast every morning in a compact baby food jar. It is not Bernice who holds her and talks her into her elastic-waisted trousers. I toss the washcloth down on the counter instead and move to the door.

“Bernie!” she beckons in her unsteady voice. “I did it again.”

I give myself three guesses as to what “it” is and take the beige carpeted stairs two at a time. I am secretly hoping that fate has performed some miracle and Ruthie will be sitting there fully dressed, underwear on her bottom instead of tossed into a corner and she will not fight me when I tried to buckle her shoes.

When I arrive, I am out of breath and she is standing gripping the rail with one hand and pulling at her soiled underpants with the other.

“Ruthie,” I say, “It took me less than thirty seconds to get up here. You mean to tell me you couldn’t sit in it another second when you’ve gone hours before and not even said a word to me about it?”

She looks at me with the gray flecks of unfamiliarity in her eyes and I touch her shoulder. “It’s me, Ruthie,” I say. “Claudette. Bernice is on her way.”

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I walk with her until we are closer to the mattress and I reach for the moist cloth on the nightstand and wipe her softly and swiftly.

“Remember,” I whisper, “She’s coming to give us a ride over.” I do not mention that her precious Bernice is over an hour late and has not even called.

“Bernie,” she breathes, and lays back on the powder blue comforter. “I sure missed you, Bernie, baby.”

She touches my hair, then proceeds to run her thin fingers through it and pat the top of my head like I am Bernice, the one born first with careful planning, not the one who snuck up on her smack dab in the middle of menopause.

I am about to tell her that Bernice misses her, too, that she cares about us even though she comes around only every other month to pick up the important mail or meet the yardman.

Bernice does not hear my bare feet on the carpet behind her as she is sifting through a stack of mail. She is wearing the same navy skirt suit I last saw her in. Her cellular phone sits firmly attached to her matching leather handbag, and she pats it subconsciously as if making sure it has not fallen off somewhere.

I inhale her perfume the way I did when Ruthie and Daddy first bought it for her as a special surprise for her birthday. I would sneak it off of her white vanity and squirt it onto my skin when she wasn’t looking and then make up far fetched stories about where the rash came from when anybody asked. My skin was not made for wearing perfume, they told me. I could not smell as good as Bernice; I could not be as good as her, ever.

“It’s not there,” I say. “The bill doesn’t come until next month.”

Bernice is scanning the house and I am thankful I took the extra hour to scrub the kitchen floor. Then she glares at my hips a second longer than I’m comfortable with, and I suddenly feel as if I can’t take another breath.

“I need help getting her stuff down.” I bend down and concentrate on making the double loop in my sneakers perfect as I wait for her to speak.

She shifts in those navy pumps and says, “No, Claudette. Mama’s stuff can stay right where it is.” She moves over to the couch and I follow her.

I lick my lips. “I told you all of this on the phone last night. I told you that we have to take Ruth down there and let her stay a while or else my job won’t be there when I get back.” My hands are fists in my pockets.

“That’s right,” she says, “you did. You wait until the last damned minute

to break the news to me that *you've* given up on our mother as if what I have to say about it doesn't count for shit."

"I have stuff to take care of, too, you know," I say. I notice the higher pitch in my voice and clear my throat. I will not cry in front of Bernice.

"No, I don't know about the *stuff* you have to take care of," Bernice says. "All I know is that you're acting like it's your signature on the Power of Attorney and you have some say so in the matter. I don't know what's your hurry to get back to that dead end job, anyway, and I certainly don't know what's your hurry to get rid of your own damned mother."

Her hands are shaking and I know she wants to pull out one of those mile long cigarettes she loves to puff on, but she fusses with her hair tightly knotted at the nape of her neck instead.

"She's not going," she says. "This is her house and this is where she will stay and recover." Her voice has a sense of finality that makes me turn away from her.

"Recover, Bernice?" I ask, surprised that I can speak after that blow of words hit me in the stomach like a fist. "You don't recover from Alzheimer's. You don't get better."

I am standing before her now, and I sense her discomfort in the quivering of her burgundy lips. "You know what you do when you have Alzheimer's, Bernice?" I ask, but do not wait for her to answer. "You wait," I continue. "You wake up every morning disappointed that last night was not your lucky night. You lie for hours in your own piss and shit because you are too scared that when you call for someone to help you, no one will answer." I cross my arms over my meager chest.

Bernice is holding onto the sofa now, but I continue. "And you know what else? You call on your oldest daughter when you have Alzheimer's because that's the one you remember even though your youngest daughter, the one that's there taking care of you every day, would rather not take another breath than see you in pain."

The tears flow from my eyes, down my cheeks and into the corners of my mouth. I hear the distant bell of the neighborhood ice cream truck and think about how Bernice and I used to race to the end of the street to catch it. Bernice's hands move to her face in a gesture of shock as she turns towards the stairs.

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“Mama!” she cries, and I spin around to see Ruthie shuffling down the steps and to the front door moving past both Bernice and myself in a blur.

“Mickey Mouse!” Ruthie screams in delight. She has detected the sound of the vehicle that carries her favorite ice cream bar from upstairs. She fumbles with the doorknob only a second before it is wide open. Then she is out the door, and I am pushing Bernice so hard that her legs move out from under her and she lands face first on the sofa.

“Ruthie!” I scream as I reach the door and run to my mother who has landed spread eagle on the wet grass, having lost her balance somewhere between the first and the second step.

I do not take a breath until I see her eyelids flutter open and her ashen lips move to speak.

“Claudette,” she says so low that I lean in closer to hear her.

“Say that again, Mama” I ask.

“Claudette,” she says again, “I wanna go home. Can we go home?” Her hand is soft as it touches my face and rubs the wetness like an elixir onto my flushed cheeks.

“Yes,” I say, making brief eye contact with Bernice, who has finally come to the door. “We can go home, Mama.”

I lift Ruthie and brush past my sister, guiding her inside the home she prayed for, that my father died in. I tell my sister, “Go home, Bernice. We’ll be fine. I think Mama is feeling much better now.”

I do not watch her walk away.