

MOLLY MCNETT

The Baby Cage

We lived among poor people, and my mother was interested in them. “Two men sleep in that haymow,” she’d say as we took the gravel road to town. “Not gay, just retarded.” Or, “That’s where the pedophile lives, the one who uses our creek—remember that catfish I fried on Sunday?” She once drove me to a house where she’d made a delivery for the food bank so that I could see the porch. It was clogged with furniture and an old piano whose keys had turned brown. *They have to enter from the rear*, she whispered, and you could see that the front door was held on with bungee cords, and magazines stuck out the edges as if the house itself was bursting at the seams. “Isn’t it interesting?” my mother asked, and I said yes, because I had not yet reached the point where I was irritated by everything she said.

That happened at fifteen, the year I developed a set of perfect breasts. They appeared suddenly—one day I took off my shirt in front of the mirror and gasped. I might be exaggerating the neatness of that. But there was a moment when I became aware of them, so white and trembly, and full even near the sternum, like you see in famous paintings. I observed myself for a long time, turning side-to-side, arms overhead, arching my back, cupping one in a hand to take its measure.

But all of this was an opening act. The breasts had to be noticed by an outside party to become real. And touched by them, too.

But boys were not interested in me. No one called me, or lingered at my locker or asked me to slow dance at the dances. And then, in one of those turning points that seem to gather importance as time goes by, my best friend and I liked the same boy and he chose her. Why? I tried to answer this by going through our school yearbooks, where we are in many of the same clubs and groups, but that was confusing. My mother called me photogenic, which I took to mean that I was not pretty but could look that way in pictures. My body looked shorter and thicker than my friend’s, but really only when I was closer to the camera. I know all this sounds ridiculous. Sometimes people can’t even say why they love one person over another. In any event, that boy did not pick me. If he had, things might have turned out differently.

Another factor—everyone stopped touching me, once the breasts came. My mother stopped hugging. My father said I cried too much; he’d long ago stopped taking me on his lap. Well. As it should have been, I suppose. But I stood naked in front of the mirror feeling delirious and lonely at

the same time, in freefall somehow. I remember thinking, if nobody touches me I'll *die*.

Around this time my father hired the Snodgrass boy to make round bales for him. The Snodgrass boy was actually an adult. He and his wife had a son and once the cold weather came and the last cutting of hay was done, they asked me to babysit for them. They lived on Devil's Backbone. That was my mother's favorite road name, because she loved making fun of religion. The road itself was all gravel, narrow and hilly, with sharp turns, and you'd often get surprised by a truck headed right at you, driving squarely in the middle—my mother would give a “whoop” and weave off and on the road again, laughing, “Well, praise the Lord,” she'd say in a country accent, “We'll live to see another day.” But what she really liked were all the old white farmhouses along Devil's Backbone. They were falling apart, and the worse they were, the more interesting she found them. The Snodgrasses lived in one of these, but it was not white anymore—it was gray because all the paint had peeled off. There were all sorts of cats, and a mean, thin dog, and a dead raccoon at the front step in a pool of bright pink ice, just shot there and left to freeze. But my mother's favorite thing about the Snodgrass place was an empty pen of about six square feet that sat on the front lawn. It was made of chicken wire nailed to planks and wound around an old storm door that leaned into the cage precariously. “Heavens to Pete,” she said, when she drove me there the first time, “Is that a playpen?” Frozen into the mud was what she thought was a Fischer-

Price barn, and some other plastic objects.

The Snodgrass house looked big, but they had closed off the upstairs and most of the other rooms because it didn't have central heat, just a Franklin stove in the living room. Their bed was in this room too, with a large TV in front of it. Miles Snodgrass, my charge, slept in a den off the main room with a hook and eye lock on the outside of the door, because he liked to jump out of his crib and sneak in with his parents. Anyway that's what Mrs. Snodgrass told me. Mrs. Snodgrass was twenty. Twenty seemed old to me then and so did she—she was thin, with prominent hipbones and a spine like a question mark, and she slurred her words as if she were too tired to announce.

“He can't aim right,” she sighed, showing me the bathroom, “that's how come it stinks of piss . . .” Mrs. Snodgrass rolled her eyes, as if Miles' childishness were ridiculous, and a great burden. I'd done some babysitting, but I was used to a soliciting smile from parents, one that asked, “Isn't my child adorable?”

Miles was, in fact, adorable, with blond curly hair and a little farmer costume of John Deere cap and flannel shirt and tiny brown Wellingtons. Right away he stretched his hands out to me, and I picked him up. He tugged on the buttons of my shirt.

“Stop that,” said Mrs. Snodgrass. “He's a boob man,” she told me. “You have to watch him every minute.”

At least that's what I remember of it, that she warned me of it, as if it had happened with her

or even someone else. People like Mrs. Snodgrass didn't breastfeed, so it was not a question of nursing.

The Snodgrass boy's grandfather, old Mr. Snodgrass, lived in the gray house too—great-grandpop, they called him, because that's what he was to Miles. He was blind and he walked back and forth on the porch holding on to a nylon clothesline. At the corner of the house the line was tied around a fence post with heavy iron feet soldered onto it, like a tetherball stand. It turned out old Mr. Snodgrass spent most of his time walking like this—his goal was four miles a day. Miles would look out of the window in the Franklin room and yell at him: "Go, Bo, Go!" Bo was not old man Snodgrass' name. Miles just used it for emphasis. If there was something he really wanted, for example. "Miwky Bo!" "Cookie Bo!" Or he'd use it after names—"Mousey Bo!" for me, Marcy, or "Mite Muwigan, Bo!"

Mike Mulligan and his Steam Shovel was his favorite story. It was the one he wanted the very first night, after I put him in his footie pajamas. We sat on his parents' bed because there was no sofa. At some point early in the story—before the electric shovels come along, when Mary Anne the steam shovel is in her prime, "straightening the curves to make the long highways for the automobiles"—Miles' hands began poking around at the top of my chest. Under my button-down shirt, instead of a bra, I wore a pink Lycra leotard. I'm not sure why. It was the era, I want to say, of these smooth aerobic-wear fabrics. Anyway as I read, his hand found the little triangle where

my shirt opened.

"Siney!" he said, rubbing the Lycra where it covered my sternum. I removed his hand, but he wriggled and flipped there on my lap to investigate, and this time he shoved his hand down my shirt and the buttons popped open and his hand was on my breast. I removed it; he put it back. "No, no," I said, and suddenly he dipped under the shirt with great gusto and squeezed them both, yelling "Siney peetees!"

I stood up. "No. No peachiees."

All this time Old Man Snodgrass had been sitting by the Franklin stove with a basket of hickory nuts and a nutcracker on his lap. He would crack one and pick at it with the pointed end of some nail scissors. Now and then he swore under his breath. He did not seem to notice Miles and me.

"Wan up!" said Miles, standing in front of me with his arms lifted. I picked him up and carried him to the bathroom and to bed, and all the while he was trying for the shiny peachiees, paddling and reaching, until finally I lifted him up over the crib wall and safely into bed and shut the door, locking the hook and eye on the outside as Mrs. Snodgrass had shown me.

Old man Snodgrass was gone when I got back to the Franklin stove. He must have made his way up the back stairs and into his unheated bedroom. I opened the stove door and put some logs in and fastened it. Then I went to the kitchen, snuck some cookies, and lay down on the bed to eat them. No boy had ever touched my breasts. And nobody had wanted to before this one, who

was as eager as I'd expected everyone else to be. There was some relief in it. Though it seemed to me (and I went to the bathroom mirror, lifting the button shirt to inspect the breasts in the pink leotard) that everyone should want these shiny peachies, everyone should be asking, no one should choose my best friend over me, and I was crying, asking, maybe even out loud what was wrong with me. That boy, for example. He took me to a movie and ran his hands through my hair and started to kiss me and then thought better of it, it had been a bad idea, and as I ran this through my mind, I threw myself down on the Snodgrass' bed on top of the fakey silk acetate comforter, crying and feeling sorry for myself, stopping only long enough to try the cookies. But I had to throw them out. There were pieces of hickory nut shell in them.

That's about when I heard the thunk. It was Miles, who had vaulted out of his crib. Boom boom boom—his little feet on the wooden floor, and boom, boom, fists banging on the latched door.

"Mousey Bo! No wan go bed! Wan goin big bed!" Then there was so much crying and wailing. I'd never had experience with letting a child cry like that, the way Mrs. Snodgrass wanted me to. He couldn't very well cry himself to sleep on the floor on such a cold night, in a house where every room was freezing except the one with the Franklin stove.

If I had put him back in the crib he would probably have jumped out again. But I didn't try. I opened the door and let Miles get in the

Snodgrass' bed and lie beside me, sucking his thumb. I don't know if I *knew* I wouldn't remove his hand when he put it on my breast. I just lay there imagining myself as tired and worn down as Mrs. Snodgrass somehow, just putting up with it. My eyes were shut. I could have been asleep, to any observer. But the grandfather had gone up the back staircase to his unheated bedroom. And anyway, he was blind.

When they came home, Mrs. Snodgrass saw Miles asleep in their bed and rolled her eyes.

"You let him in with you?" she asked.

Yes, I told her, he'd kept crying. He'd gotten out of bed, over and over.

"Little con man," she said, putting him back in his crib, "you'll get it for this." She fanned a blanket over him and tucked it under his chin.

Mr. Snodgrass ducked his head into the den. "Next time he does that, Marcy, just put him outside in that chicken wire cage."

"Really?" I asked. "But it's so cold outside."

Mr. Snodgrass had a raspy smoker's laugh. There was something aggressive about it. "That'll teach him to jump out the bed," he said.

Mrs. Snodgrass was laughing, too, and I suppose I tried to join in.

"He's lucky he's cute or he'd be murdered five times over by now," Mrs. Snodgrass said. That was the way they talked. So they were kidding probably, about putting him that baby cage, at least about putting him there at night, in the winter.

Mr. Snodgrass took me home then. He wore a seed corn cap so you couldn't see his face too

well, but he looked like every young farmer to me, one of those rural men with blue eyes and blank good looks that sour around the mouth, like they might turn nasty if you crossed them. I could smell something on his breath. And I looked at him hunched over the steering wheel with a sort of consideration that I wouldn't have felt before. It was like a door had opened.

The next time I babysat I wore that pink leotard. And then too I noticed something different in myself. When Miles wanted to be picked up—"Picky Bo!" There was something coy in my behavior, a desire to prolong the moment—to test the interest in my breasts, or even to increase it.

"Weed! Weed Bo!"

"No, we can read when you finish your Spaghetti O's. No, we can read after you pick up your toys."

In the end we did settle down on the bed to read, and the same thing happened, the touching and the taking the hand away. I noticed his fingernails were very long and dirty, so I took the old man's nut scissors and Miles sat on the closed toilet with his little legs swinging, offering his limp sticky hand and gazing up at me.

"Wead, Mousey!"

"I'm cutting your nails."

"Why ya wan cutum?"

"Because," I said, "they're dirty."

"I wan *wead*, Mousey."

"When we're finished."

"Wead Bo!"

"Hold still."

I didn't bother to lock his door from the outside. I simply put him in his crib with Raggedy Andy and shut the door and lay down in the big bed. Pretty soon came the creak of his crib as he jumped over it, the thunk of a landing, and then the door opened, and he was there beside me, rubbing. The room with the Franklin stove was very smoky. But there was a dusty unwashed-hair smell in the bed, and something like urine and sweetness, probably from Miles' diaper.

From then on—every weekend that winter—I babysat, and I wore the leotard, and he pried apart my shirt, peachy, peachy, and rubbed the breast and sucked his thumb as I lay there. After he got to sleep, I lifted him back into his crib.

Sometimes his parents asked: "He jump out that crib?"

"Not this time." I wasn't trying to lie, I told myself. I just didn't want him punished—set out into the cold in the baby cage.

Then they seemed pleased, and if they were drunk, they would laugh and cheer me on: "Atta girl, lay down the law on him. Don't take no nonsense!"

I never touched him. I never handled his body in any way, except for getting his diapers and pajamas on, which I was careful about, even careful not to look at anything any longer than I had to. And I thought about other things, during the rubbing—usually the dry text of a book my mother bought me called *Girls and Sex*, especially the chapter called "Petting," a word that aroused me in its babyishness and condescension.

I also thought of the boy who had chosen

my friend and not me, why, why, of the night in his car when he played with my hair and then stroked my inner thigh, up around the edge of my hipbone in some arresting way and put his mouth at my ear and breathed there until I thought I might go out of my mind. These mild images were enough to get me there—I'm not sure how many times because I hardly admitted it to myself. In my own mind I was just lying passively. I'm sure Miles didn't know I was doing anything. He was rubbing me, breathing deeply, sometimes sighing and turning and spreading out prone in the bed—at which point I'd go still—then returning his hand to the shiny breast. After it was done—I mean the masturbating part—I cried sometimes. But it was my friend's boyfriend I was crying over. It was that question again.

Once during this, old man Snodgrass came downstairs and stood by the door of the living room. I slid my hand out from under the covers and lay quietly. Then there was only the sound of Miles sucking his thumb.

"Mr. Snodgrass?" I asked, and when he did not move, I sat up in bed. "Do you need anything?"

"Mousey Bo," Miles said sleepily, groping at the bed. I put the shirt over my leotard and buttoned it up.

Finally old Mr. Snodgrass turned and shuffled off. When the door of the back staircase shut and my pulse had quieted I lay down again, to resume what the book called "petting:" *stroking of the breasts or genitals, through the clothing, initially.*

After that night they didn't ask me to babysit anymore.

When you're a teenager in the country, you can sometimes feel like there's nothing to do at all, especially in spring. The air smells like creeks, like manure and carcasses melting; there is that restlessness, there are parties, but you don't want to go for some reason. Your friend is always with her boyfriend. You've gained weight. More than that, it's like something is really wrong with you. People will see it, or anyway that's how you feel.

I haven't mentioned that my best friend and her boyfriend went to the same college and got married eventually. And had children. I didn't know that would happen, of course. I only felt that I was in a spot that was temporary but dangerous, like a soft spot on a baby's skull, a spot that must be minded. But who should mind it? It was like expecting someone to come along and love me—to save me, really, at exactly the right time.

After dinner one night, I overheard my mother and father talking.

"She's dee-pressed."

"What's she dee-pressed about now?"

"I think it's the Snodgrasses. Maybe they found some girl with a license that they don't have to drive home. Can you ask him?"

It turned out that my father had seen Mr. Snodgrass a few weeks back, and he'd told my dad that he was too busy to hay for him anymore. That was strange, they agreed, that he'd decide already when summer was so far away.

Later, my mother cornered me in the kitchen, where I was microwaving a plate of nachos. "Are you still hungry?" she asked me.

When I didn't answer she made herself some tea and sat down at the table. "I know this is hard to talk about," she said. "But you can tell me if something happened."

"Like what?"

She stirred her tea though she didn't take sugar in it. "If Mr. Snodgrass tried something with you. You could tell me about that."

"That's ridiculous," I yelled.

"You're dee-pressed—"

"Not about that!"

"Ever since they stopped calling."

"I don't want to babysit in that hell-hole anyway!" I dumped the nachos in the wastebasket and ran off to my room and cried. It was not unusual behavior during that time, and my parents mostly ignored it, but this time my mother followed me. She sat next to me on the bed. "They could have lost custody of that child for all you know," she said, patting my head. "Putting him outside in a rusty cage like that. What a way to treat a human being." But she was not as cheerful as she usually was when discussing such matters.

My birthday came in the end of March, and the driver's ed teacher took a picture of those who'd passed so far and sent it to the local paper ("Driven to Success!") and the Snodgrasses still didn't call me to babysit. After school I'd go out driving along the river, or up the old roads my mother loved, past the yards with old cars and junk in them, caved in barns and sheds and rusted out trailers that nobody could possibly be happy in. I had the interest in it that my mother

did, some morbid fascination, but also, in a weird way, a sense of belonging. There was a dullness behind my eyes, and I seemed to be outside of my body, observing myself. When I went down Devil's Backbone I didn't bother to slow down or honk at the blind turns, the way they told us in driver's ed, and it occurred to me that by leaving my hands as they were, by not turning, I could drive off the road as a kind of passive act.

Once after this kind of thought, I drove by the Snodgrass house and I saw a blue lump on the porch. It was old Mr. Snodgrass, lying on his back. I parked the car and ran to him.

"Mr. Snodgrass?"

"They're all off at her folks," he said. "I thought I'd lay here all week."

I helped him to his feet.

"Are you okay?" His eyes were red-rimmed, and he looked so much older than he had even a few months before. The blood seemed to have drained from his skin and left it rubbery and yellowed.

"I think I'm almost to the railing," he said, as if we were both blind, and trying to navigate across the porch together. Once he'd gotten up, he still held onto my hands, breathing hard. It was a cloudy day, with the sun breaking through in tiny beams. Beyond the porch the wheat field slanted in the wind.

"Who are you?" he asked.

I thought about lying. And who knows why I didn't, because I lied, then. Sometimes I still do. But I notice when I don't, it's because I want the relief of being known.

"I'm Marcy," I said. "I used to babysit for Miles."

"Oh, Miles," he said.

I had things to ask him—all the questions I'd been asking myself, I suppose. But what I really wanted to know was if I could be forgiven. As if Mr. Snodgrass himself was the Lord come down. Which is how they say it around here, a language my mother used with irony and derision. Not that I'm a believer now. That's not the point of all this. But somehow it felt as if Mr. Snodgrass had fallen in order to help me. Anyway, it *did* help me. Some possibility opened. Beyond us, in the wheat field, a glowing spot lifted into relief, like a paper figure in a child's book.

"Do you want to go inside?"

"No, no," he said. "I'll finish my four miles if it kills me."

I put his cold hand on the rope and got back in my car and watched him walking for some time, since he could not know I was doing it.

"You're too damn sensitive," my father always told me. And he was right.

Some people are born to take things hard. But if you are one of them, something might come to you one day, even without your asking. You walk out the door, and a hundred birds are singing in the spring morning. This is the world, this is the world, they sing—joyfully, urgently—this is the world, too. 