

# souvenirs

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Albert grows fat in no time from all the food and attention heaped on him. Everyone says he is the spitting image of Naomi's father, only fatter. In Stonybrook every baby born looks like someone else, although no one seems too sure who Andrew favours. Most likely it's his mother, probably because she dotes on him. To Naomi they say, *I guess that little one takes after you.*

Jeff wonders why she isn't pregnant yet. It's not for any lack of his, of that he's sure. Naomi shrugs and blushes when he asks her straight so maybe it's a woman's thing and not for him to understand.

"It's because she's stubborn," Nadine tells him. "She just doesn't want to be."

"Nadine says it's you," he reports. "You're not pregnant because you don't want to be."

"That sister of yours!" Naomi sniffs. "If women could just will themselves, there would be no babies born, and the human race would end."

"What do you think it is then?"

"I think something inside me went wrong with the twins. I don't think I can have any more. I asked the doctor," she lies, "and he said I could be right."

She turns her back and stirs the soup simmering since morning. Lifts the ladle to her lips and slurps. Adds salt. Jeff feels himself stirring too, watching his wife glide around her kitchen.

"Would that be so bad?" she asks.

He can't see her face, what's written on it. "You're my wife," he says.

"And?"

"I just want for us to be a family."

"We are."

"Don't you even want a girl?"

Naomi tosses her ladle into the sink. "There is no use for girls," she says tightly. The ladle splatters soup grease as it bounces.

Sons are for men, but mothers should want girls. He bites his tongue while she wipes up. He is rising with his woman moving like a dancer through this room. But he's never even seen her dance, so why he would imagine that is a mystery to him. He shakes the thought from his head.

"When will that soup be done?" he asks, remembering how he once heard about a man who took his woman in the kitchen while food was cooking. Right there. But anyone could walk through this door, Nadine or his own mother or Naomi's father, anyone. Find him with his pants down in their kitchen stuffing his sausage into his wife, now wouldn't that be something? But even the fear of discovery can't quiet his desire.

He sidles up behind Naomi cutting bread, and rubs his calloused hand around in suggestive circles on her back. Presses his mouth against her neck. Feels her clenched and tense.

"What?" she says sharply, pulling back.

"I was just thinking ..." He clears his throat, and moves a little closer.

"Maybe that soup could wait a bit."

"Why?" she asks stubbornly. Her face is red, but not from steam.

He rubs the hollow of her back to the swelling cheek below. "I was just thinking. Maybe we could ... take a little rest."

"For heaven's sake!" explodes Naomi. "It's the middle of the day!"

"Other people do it," he says sullenly.

"How would you know?"

His hand falls. "Men talk," he says.

Naomi's voice is high. "Bring the boys to the table now," she orders.

That leaves nothing out.

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They plan a big first birthday celebration. Nadine offers to make the cake but Naomi insists on doing it herself. That sister-in-law of hers always manages to get her hands all over everything. Since Naomi insisted on doing all the baking and the cooking for eleven, plus the twins - her father, Jessie, Jeff's mother, and Nadine, her husband Pete and their four kids - Nadine takes the boys off her hands for the afternoon.

Jeff sticks around the house to help with man's work, like putting extra leaves into the dining table and collecting extra chairs.

His constant grumbling gets on Naomi's nerves. "I told your sister to bring more chairs," she shouts. "If that table is ready, you could come and get the plates."

"My old man never set a table in his life," he says counting out the forks.

"You could have taken the kids. Then Nadine would be helping me with this."

"Kids are women's work."

"Then I guess you're stuck."

Jeff glares but takes the dishes.

Jessie lags behind Father, quiet as a country mouse. She is practically the same age as Naomi but, although she has never even had one baby, she looks used up. Her dress bags at the knees, her hollow cheek is bruised.

Father's iron-grey beard scratches. He's got a new eye in too.

Naomi gestures, trying not to get too close. "Supper's ready on the table in the other room," she says.

The six kids have already had too many sweets, which makes it easier for the adults because they're kept too busy to talk to one another.

When the meal is done, Naomi and Nadine clear the table while Jeff lights candles on two matching cakes. One for Albert, another one for Andrew. Naomi holds Andrew's cake for him while Jeff serves Albert.

Father lifts his camera, aims and shoots. "Smile," he coaxes.

Then Andrew shoves his finger deep into the pastry and all hell breaks loose.

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If women could choose there wouldn't be any babies, or so Naomi says. Andrew as a toddler is tearing up the house, into every blessed thing. She moves things he might break high up and out of reach.