

Womb Treasures

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“Mommy, where’s Lady Jane? Have you seen Lady Jane?” I asked, slamming the porch door behind me as I came in from searching the farmyard for our gray cat.

Mom was pouring fresh frothy milk from the stainless steel milking bucket into gallon jars resting in the sink. Her long black hair was pulled back in a faded red paisley scarf.

“She was heading into the barn with a mouse as I was coming out from milking.”

“Did she have her kitten yet?” I shoved a stool up next to the sink and climbed up, so I could stroke Mom’s thick hair.

I couldn’t stop thinking about how fat Lady Jane had been the day before and how Mom had gently pressed my little five-year-old hand into the cat’s white belly. My fingers had slipped across something small and round, like a walnut.

“That’s a kitten’s head,” Mom had told me, her breath warm against my cheek. I’d kept pressing my hands into the purring cat until Mom had said to stop or I’d hurt her.

Last night I’d stared into the dark wondering about Lady Jane and the baby kitty inside of her. Would she be waiting on the porch with the kitten in the morning? Would the baby be gray with a white chin and belly like the mommy cat? Would it be my kitten? My very own kitten that I wouldn’t have to share with my pouty little brother or my bossy older sister? I’d felt the kitten first. I tossed back my purple blanket, padded over to the window and pressed my hands against the cool glass.

“It will be my kitten,” I’d declared to the full moon.

Mom finished filling the milk jars and clanged the bucket down on the counter. “Why don’t you go look in the barn?”

I jumped off the stool, banged out the porch door, and didn’t stop

running until I'd crossed the sunlit driveway, rolled the heavy door open and entered the dark hush of the barn.

Resting my hands on my knees, I waited for my breathing to slow so I could call, *here kitty-kitty*. A tiny sound drew me toward a stack of hay bales at the back of the barn. Another noise, no louder than the little smack my lips made whenever I chewed gum, came from a dark opening near the bottom of the stack. I folded myself down on the powdery dirt, stared into the narrow tunnel, then stretched my arm in so far that the hay poked into my neck and side. There, my finger tips brushed the velvety paw of a big kitty. Lady Jane's purr rumbled out of the tunnel.

It would be several endless weeks before the gray mama cat finally brought out her kittens. I was amazed to see that instead of just one kitten, there were four. I chose the calico one and named her Calico.

Later that summer my mom sat on her stool and gathered my curly-haired older sister, my rough-headed little brother, and me—with my long blonde ponytails—around her.

"Here," she said and pressed my hand into her ballooned-out belly. I could feel something round in there like a grapefruit. I stared up at her and then pressed my hand into her again and again.

"Careful," Mom said. "That's your baby sister or brother in there." My older sister lightly tapped her own chest, then touched my arm, my brother's head and Mom's stomach. Her eyes opened wide.

"Mommy," she said, "Mommy, now you'll have four babies just like Lady Jane."

"Four babies just like Lady Jane," I echoed in a whisper and made purring noises as I kneaded Mom's belly with both hands.

My sister and brother giggled and joined me until Mom said, "Oh for Pete's sake, that's enough of that." They got down on all fours and made mewling noises as they crawled off across the linoleum, but I couldn't get enough of the warm roundness. I laid my cheek against it and kissed it.

"Mommy, can it be my baby? Only mine?" I whispered.

"Sure," she said and cupped my own round head in her hand.

"Sure."