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The Great Stain Remover

by Christine Witkowski

"Mom...", a whining voice sails through the grocery store aisles. I look down to see my runny-nosed five year old sister staring up at me, dark circles outlining her light blue eyes, pale skin to match her icy fingers.

"Can we go home? I wanna go home, puleez?"

My mother snuffles and quickly wipes her sore nose on a red fleece sleeve, sighs and takes Kayla's hand, saying nothing in response.

I ignore them both, shuffling through different types of Dimetapp's and multi-colored bottles of orange and purple cold syrups. Which one will work the best, which one will cost the least...?

I swipe back loose strands of hair from my forehead and shift my weight, holding different boxes in each hand, as if weight determined which to buy. I haven't yet mastered the understanding of cold medicines. At six thirty this morning, Kayla's shuffling steps came towards my room. I watched her struggling attempts to open the door for a good ten minutes, each time the knob turned half way under her tiny grasp, then fell back. Finally, I pulled my limp legs from under the warmth of covers and let her in. A tear-streamed face and flushed cheeks told me the words "I don't feel good" were coming before she even opened her mouth.

"M-o-m..."

Screw it. I throw them both into the silver metal grocery cart and push down the aisles, yank Kayla's small arm with me.

I feel strangely annoyed by the brightly-lit store and synthesized rendition of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" as I weave my way through parents and employees, looking for the short line that doesn't exist.

We make our way through large holiday greetings displays, and announcements blurring in through the music to say, "*'Tis the season to be*

jolly! Pick up a bargain-priced bottle of Cheer! Guaranteed to take out any stain." I smile impatiently at the women behind the counter. Her old tobacco stained hands slowly glide groceries past the flashing light of the electronic scanner.

I bite my bottom lip, let my face stare blankly at the clerk's slow moving hands; the wails from Kayla evaporate into the ambient noise. I have never been this tired. But that history project is due tomorrow, and I haven't even started it. Of course, that is just because I am a procrastinator. "Maybe if you didn't wait until the last minute, you wouldn't be so stressed out..." I already hear my mother's exasperated voice scolding me tonight when I am still up past midnight doing homework. Maybe if I didn't have to clean up after both of you all the time, take out the trash by myself, feed the dogs, scrub the dishes, help Kayla with her homework, make her dinner, shovel the driveway, vacuum every room so that the dust mites don't bother her allergies. Maybe if you didn't work so much, if Dad was still alive, if I was smart, maybe then I would be able to get everything done, and I wouldn't be struggling with school, or staying up until two a.m. to get all of my homework done, then falling asleep in class. Maybe if you didn't make everything my fault.

I clench my fist around the now crumpled twenty, trying to control a seething anger. Why is she taking so long?

"Twenty-two fifty's the total," she mutters under a voice worn with age.

My mother pushes me out of the way, snaps open her purse and hastily throws change on the counter. When I protest that I have a twenty to pay for it, she shakes her head.

The clerk turns around to grab small bifocals and places them on her nose.

"Five..., six..." She drags each coin slowly and painstakingly across the countertop while muttering its value. With each sliding scrape, I feel even more like kicking the counter.

"I don't have the time for this, just hurry up!" My mother grabs the change from the clerk's frail hand, slapping each coin down loudly and deliberately.

"Fifty, and three," she says sharply to the coins.

I pick up my bag of groceries in one arm and Kayla in the other. I want to scream and wish I had an extra set of hands to cover my ears from the cheery music.

My mother walks up closely behind me as we leave through the automatic doors, past the wall of advertisements and "lost" signs. She reaches out to take Kayla.

"I've got her," I say, annoyed.

But she holds her arms out, her long face staring at me. For the first time, I notice how exhausted she looks, her hair tossed up, silver strands weaving into black. Her jeans are worn at the knees, white tennis shoes still stained green from last spring's lawn. You're not supposed to wear white shoes past Labor Day.

"Lindsay," she says with exasperation. I act as though I don't know the name, turn my head over the brown paper bag, behind Kayla's curly hair to check for cars, cross the street.

"Lindsay," this time it's softer. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay."

And with that resolution, we pull out of the parking lot, away from the Christmas carols, the cold syrups, and the clerk. Away from bargain-priced Cheer that can't take any real stains out.