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Demerol, Demerol, Benzedrine, Schnaps

THERE WAS ONE CURE for what ailed the rumpelstil, and that cure was baby. Bouncing, drooling, clinging human baby. Unlike the rest of his miniscule race, the rumpelstil had been born with a surfeit of affection and no one upon whom to bestow it. He'd tried foisting his love onto infants he'd sired during the spring rutting season, but once expelled from the womb, his kind are capable of locomotion and independent thought, and when the rumpelstil attempted to cuddle his children, they begged him to stop suffocating them and let them get on with their lives. More than one bit him. So, the rumpelstil, who had no flair for mischief, who unlike his brethren felt no scorn for humans and was no good at frightening them, decided the only way to satisfy his lust for reciprocated affection was to get his tiny hands on a human child.

In front of his cottage, which stood beside a mountain at the forest's end, the rumpelstil drank Kentucky bourbon whiskey, danced around the fire, and plotted. The world was teeming with cast-off human young, this he knew, but he did not want just any child. Walls and doors were no impediment to the rumpelstil, and he could circumnavigate the globe before you or I could say *Jackrabbit*, and he was well aware of the multitudinous crowds of children whose parents could not or would not care for them. Children of the incarcerated or the poverty-stricken or the addled or the melancholy. Children who'd lost their parents to car accidents or intestinal parasites. Children who, in addition to being alone in the great universe, were themselves sick or maimed or otherwise incapacitated. When he looked at them, the rumpelstil was overwhelmed by the intensity of their need. He was also slightly disgusted. Their sunken eyes and snotty noses and trembling lips struck him as maudlin and oppressive. The rumpelstil preferred healthy, whole children, children whose parents would willingly give their own lives to save them. "I must find myself such a child!" he cried as he emptied the bottle of bourbon and flung it into the fire. The glass shattered, and sparks billowed skyward. The rumpelstil stumbled, falling on his face. He was beginning to suspect that he had a

drinking problem, but he was sure the inherent responsibility of childrearing would pull him out of his downward spiral.

Eight months after he'd come across the girl weeping in a bar called The Waxwing Slain, the rumpelstilz stood on the sidewalk outside a hospital, nursing a mescal hangover, unable to recall whether or not he'd eaten the worm. The girl had roomy, childbearing hips, and she'd promised him her firstborn in exchange for his assistance; they'd sealed the deal with sixteen-year-old single-malt scotch. In the ensuing months, the rumpelstilz had stocked his cottage with diapers and stuffed toys and rubber-nippled bottles, with a playpen and jammies and formula and baby powder, with a contraption called a Jolly Jumper that allowed a harnessed infant to bounce at the end of a tether to his heart's content. The rumpelstilz had pored over parenting magazines and books on child care, and he was certain that he'd forgotten nothing. Now, as he gazed through automatic glass doors into the hospital, where scrub-clad residents and nurses and technicians streamed with purposeful efficiency, reminding him of ancient rivers that, over time, had hollowed out great mountains, his head throbbed. His eyes twitched. Mescal sweat rolled down his back. He was about to meet his baby, the vessel into which he would pour the love that had been accruing in his tiny breast for three hundred years, and he was flooded with a maniacal sense of joy.

"Holy shit," the girl said when the rumpelstilz appeared in the maternity ward waiting area. "I thought you were a figment of my imagination."

He shook his head. "You've given birth."

The girl, whose blond hair was piled like an unruly magpie's nest on top of her head, whose eyes were glassy, who wore sweatpants, nodded. "How did you know?"

The rumpelstilz shrugged. He knew she'd given birth the same way he knew the ancient, spotty woman seated to the girl's left had eaten tuna salad and tapioca pudding for lunch, the same way he knew that on a nearby stretch of I-95, a speeding convertible was about to clip a tractor-trailer while changing lanes, causing a multicar pileup that would stop traffic for the rest of the afternoon. "I guess you know why I'm here," he said.

The girl closed her eyes. She held up a finger. "Give me a minute."

In the recesses of her brain, she sought the memory of her meeting with the rumpelstilz. Perhaps she should have told Dr. Schmidt of her addictive tendencies when he offered her something for the pain, but she had been in pain, actual physical pain, after giving birth a month

and a half before her due date. And ever since, she'd been in severe emotional pain, or maybe she'd been in such pain before the birth, but now, Demerol stood like a soft, feathery barrier between her and discomfort. What was she supposed to be remembering? Oh, yes, the tiny man who'd approached her eight months earlier in *The Waxwing Slain*. She'd been drinking scotch, and he'd asked why she was crying, and instead of telling him about Dale and Riley, she'd spun a line of bullshit about a king who wouldn't marry her unless she first proved she could spin straw into gold. The rumpelstil was no bigger than Riley had been at two, when he'd fit perfectly into her arms, and she'd been sorely tempted to pick up the little man and cradle him, to rock him, to press her cheek to his and say, "shh" and "there now," but she'd known this would only piss him off. In spite of his size, the rumpelstil was clearly full grown, and grown men only like being babied in private. It turned out that he could really hold his liquor, and after a hazy series of misadventures, they'd ended up back at her place with a great quantity of straw and a spinning wheel. The next morning, her apartment had been stocked with bright, shining bars of gold, and there had been no sign of the rumpelstil. Where had they come up with straw and a spinning wheel? Had they slept together? Jesus, had she fucked this homunculus? The girl knew she'd promised him something in exchange for the gold, something that, in addition to making her seem like a monster, was impossible for her to give.

"Where is your husband?" the little man said, his bright eyes roaming the waiting area. "Is he prepared to give me the child?"

"Maybe you should have a seat," the girl said, tapping the chair beside her. The Demerol was making her feel charitable and empathetic; it was also making her yearn to slow dance with a tall, bearded man. Part of her wanted to confess her lies to the rumpelstil, not just the story of the king and the straw and the gold, not just the fact that her firstborn was a four-year-old now living in the desert southwest with his father, who'd won full custody by having her declared unfit, but lies she had not yet told him and those she regularly told herself. As he hopped onto the chair, however, as he launched into a manic diatribe about his burning desire for a child, she knew she couldn't bear to pull the rug out from under him. His words reminded her of the way she herself had felt in the early days of her marriage. Before she'd had Riley. When she'd thought giving birth could change her. When she'd imagined her child would act as a sieve, collecting her faults and shortcomings. That he would distill her, eliminating her yen for Percocets and chilled shots of Jagermeister, her

inability to cook a decent meal, the things that convinced Dale she was crazy. She'd thought Riley's birth would be a catalyst, transforming her into the woman she should have been all along. Tractable. Decent. Normal. Her son was an undeniable gift, but when he turned three, the girl was struck by the unbearable certainty that she was the same person she'd always been. That true change is impossible. That beneath the surface, life is a black void, a sucking vortex against which we struggle pointlessly. She'd been bathing Riley at the time, and when Dale walked into the house that night, he found her folded into the small cabinet beneath the bathroom sink. Every television and radio in the house was blaring. Doors and windows were thrown open despite the February freeze. Riley lay curled, naked and shivering, in the middle of the living room rug.

"Things will be different once I bring home the child," the rumpelstil said as a young resident entered the maternity ward waiting area and strode toward them. "They must be."

The girl tried to pass off the tiny man as a third cousin, a native of New Guinea, but Dr. Schmidt had grown up in the forests of Bavaria, and although he was piloting a Benzedrine-fueled rocket into the thirtieth hour of a thirty-six-hour shift, he knew a rumpelstil when he saw one. The creatures had haunted the cottage of his grandparents, who'd raised him after his father was buried under an avalanche of deceptively feathery-looking snow while attempting to scale the Matterhorn, and his mother crawled into a bottle of Schnaps. From then on, Dr. Schmidt caught only rare glimpses of his *Mutti*, slumped in front of the alehouse. "Fie," his grandmother would say, avoiding the vacant blue eyes of her daughter as she dragged him toward the market, but the boy could not turn away from his mother's gaze. According to his grandmother, Schnaps was manufactured by the devil, and she kept it around the cottage for one reason only—to catch rumpelstils, who could not resist it. At night, she would set out large bowls of the liquor, and the boy often woke to the sound of surprisingly robust singing. Sitting up, he would discover a drunken rumpelstil stumbling across the foot of his bed. His grandmother would bind the incapacitated creature and carry him to the woodpile behind the cottage. "If you let them go, they just keep coming back," she would say in response to her grandson's protestations as she hoisted the great axe over her head, as she swung it down and into the tree stump, cleaving the rumpelstil neatly in two. The boy watched her dispatch hundreds of the creatures in this fashion, and although he usually wept, the sight of the still-animated rumpelstil halves rising briefly to hop on one foot always cheered him.

He hadn't seen a rumpelstilz since he'd left Bavaria for the rapturous rigors of Yale Medical School, but a rumpelstilz was definitely sitting beside the girl who'd given birth to the as-yet-unnamed premature infant in incubator seven of the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Dr. Schmidt found this girl tragically beautiful, and he'd been struggling with the desire to rescue her from herself and from the cold world. Benzedrine gave him a godlike sense of omniscience, and he was certain that beneath her unwashed, glassy exterior, the girl was as pure as the mountainous snow that had buried his *Vati* under the Matterhorn. He was also certain that the rumpelstilz was menacing her, and a surge of protective feeling welled up in his broad Bavarian breast.

"I'm afraid we are not yet out of the woods," Dr. Schmidt said, wishing the words didn't sound so rehearsed and recitative. "Your son still is not producing the agent that helps prevent his lungs from collapsing. We are giving him supplemental oxygen, but we do not know when he will be able to breathe on his own. When a premature newborn stays on a respirator for too long, other complications can arise, and we have to be vigilant about infection. But he is a tough little guy, and we are doing absolutely everything that can be done."

At the sight of the strapping Nordic doctor, instinctual ire had risen in the rumpelstilz. It was what the man said, however, that shook him to his foundation. Something was wrong with the child. His child. The rumpelstilz couldn't understand how the boy's premature birth had escaped his apprehension. He'd always thought of himself as omniscient, but now wondered if he might have a blind spot or two. After dropping his bombshell, squeezing the girl's shoulders for too long, and eyeing the rumpelstilz with suspicion, the blond doctor buzzed from the waiting area like a tightly wound clockwork soldier. The rumpelstilz's hands trembled, and he wished he'd brought along the whiskey flask that fit so perfectly into his tiny pocket. He turned to the girl, who blinked at him, a look of concern smeared across her face.

"Is there a bar?" he said.

"In the hospital?" She shook her head. "No."

"There should be."

"You're probably right."

"What happened?"

"He came too soon," she said. "His lungs aren't fully developed."

"But eventually, he'll be all right. Premature infants don't usually die."

The girl shrugged. "He's not yet out of the woods."

“Is it possible for me to see him?”

She studied the blue linoleum beneath her feet. “If you’d like.”

Even the hospital’s smallest masks and gowns and gloves and booties were far too big for the rumpelstil. Once she’d donned her own protective gear, the girl wrapped a pink gown around him until only his bright eyes were visible. Cradling him like an infant, she carried him into the NICU. In the deathly quiet room, she approached an incubator, one of a flock that stood on tall stands. Inside the clear plastic box, illuminated by a warm overhanging light, lay a child nearly as small as infants the rumpelstil had fathered, children who’d rejected his affection before he’d had a chance to offer it. The boy looked nothing like a healthy newborn. He was far too skinny, and his skin was red and ill-fitting. Tubes and wires tethering him to machines sprouted from his mouth and navel, wrists and ankles, chest and belly. A white cap covered his head. His wrinkled chest inflated and deflated weakly. The rumpelstil expected to feel overwhelmed by the unease that usually descended on him at the sight of damaged children. Instead, longing surged through him, tearing a sob from his throat.

“Shh,” the girl said. “There now.” Holding the rumpelstil reminded her of cradling Riley; in place of the sweet fragrance that had risen continuously from her son, however, was the sour smell of sweat and mescal. But if she closed her eyes and held her breath, she was able to imagine that she held her child. Bouncing the tiny man up and down, she hummed into his ear.

“Why haven’t you named him?” the rumpelstil said.

The girl didn’t answer; she kept humming and jiggling, swaying from side to side.

“Where is your husband?” the rumpelstil said, and even as he said it, he understood that the girl had no husband. That there had never been a king who demanded she spin straw into gold. She had, instead, spun for the rumpelstil a fairy story, and he’d been blind and desperate and drunk enough to fall for it. He’d picked the girl up in a bar, and she was probably of questionable moral character. He’d allowed himself to be hoodwinked. He’d spun straw into gold for no reason, and he’d spent the last eight months waiting and preparing and childproofing his cottage for a damaged, unwanted infant. The girl had probably caused the baby’s premature birth with her irresponsible behavior. She was probably hoping for its death. The rumpelstil wanted to leap from her arms and flee, but she’d wrapped him as tightly as a spider wraps a fly, and he found himself at her mercy.

“Let me go.” The rumpelstilz knew it was within his power to free himself, but struggle as he might, he found that he could not. “Please.”

“Shh,” said the girl. “There now.”

Released from their protective gear, the rumpelstilz and the girl took the elevator to the lobby and wandered through the automatic glass doors. She hadn’t left the hospital since she’d given birth five days earlier, and excitement percolated in the girl at the sight of the outside world. The day had been long and hazy, and the sun had just started its descent, painting striated bands of pink and orange across the sky. Affection for the rumpelstilz mounted within her, and she wondered how she would feel about walking down the street with the tiny man, about ducking with him into a tavern that hadn’t changed its decor or personnel in forty years, had she not been cradled in the soft bosom of Demerol. Embarrassed, probably. Ashamed. But painkillers are almost as effective as alcohol in the abolition of shame. After Dale took Riley away, after he put nearly two thousand miles between the girl and her son, she’d gone to a different bar every night, determined to shed her pudency. She couldn’t recall every man she’d met during those months, nor did she want to. They’d all screwed her, but only one of them had fathered the tiny, wrinkled infant languishing in an incubator in the NICU. And only one of them had provided her with the means to indefinitely pay her rent and bills.

“I never got to thank you for the gold,” she said.

The rumpelstilz ordered a double bourbon. He drained half the high-ball in one gulp. “Don’t mention it.”

“If the baby lives,” the girl said, “I’m glad you’ll be the one raising him.”

“Doesn’t the thought of giving him up hurt?”

Having taken a Demerol not thirty minutes before, just then she felt no pain, but the girl nodded. “Sometimes, you give up children,” she said. “You do it for their own good.”

He hadn’t cradled or bottle-fed or burped any of the hundreds of rumpelstilzs he’d fathered over the course of his interminable life; he hadn’t taught a single boy to shave or given away as brides any of the girls, yet the rumpelstilz had named them all. Using these designators, he was able to call up each of their faces, and he liked to imagine that in time, all his children would come together. That there would arise some holiday or occasion on which they would sit down and exchange words of affection and appreciation. This fantasy had sustained the rumpelstilz during many sleepless nights, but over the years, it had become increasingly difficult to buy into,

and he'd discovered that liquor aided greatly in the suspension of his disbelief. In truth, none of his children would have recognized him, and this was as it should be. If they hadn't yet been cleaved in two by stout Bavarian housewives, each of them was doing exactly what he or she was born to do. Haunting humans. Rutting in the spring. Getting on with their lives.

"What about Caspar?" he said. "Or Melchior? Or Balthazar?"

The girl gave him a puzzled look.

"For the baby," the rumpelstilz said. Cocooned in the creeping comfort of bourbon, he studied the girl, who looked, in the dingy light of the tavern, like a fairy princess, or a queen. "We should settle on a name."

Back in the maternity ward waiting area, the girl dozed on a blue chair, but the rumpelstilz was restless. He roamed the halls of the hospital, running through the names he'd given his male offspring, searching for one that would suit the baby. This would be the first name he bestowed that would be recognized by its recipient, and he wanted to get it right. He thought about Shortribs, Sheepshanks, or Laceleg, but these were too bizarre. He thought about Conrad or Harry, but these were too run-of-the-mill. After making a circuit of the building, the rumpelstilz returned to the maternity ward. In front of the broad silver doors leading into the NICU, he nearly tumbled into a rectangular plastic basin from which wafted the unmistakable scent of Schnaps. The rumpelstilz stooped over the basin and closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. He couldn't remember the last time he'd drunk the fruit-based liquor, and in spite of his very recent decision to reduce his alcohol intake, he didn't see the harm in having a taste.

"Drink up, little rumpelstilz," whispered Dr. Schmidt, who crouched nearby, watching the tiny man lap from the basin. At the end of his thirty-six-hour shift, the resident had driven home, showered, stopped at a liquor store and then a hardware store, and returned to the hospital. He'd placed the Schnaps-filled basin in front of the NICU and secreted himself in a dim exam room from which he commanded a clear view of his distilled bait. Still flying on Benzedrine, he thought about how grateful the girl would be. He imagined that once she was shed of the rumpelstilz, she would pledge herself to him. That she would tear off her sweatpants and stained T-shirt, let down her hair, wrap her arms around him. He'd been crouching in the exam room for two hours, stroking the handle of his brand-new ax, when the rumpelstilz appeared in the corridor.

Dr. Schmidt's heart galloped. His brain rattled. His blood thrummed through his branching blue veins. He was a Teutonic Warrior. A Wagnerian

Viking. A Great War Eagle, circling his prey. He could hear the night nurse at the desk three floors below clearing her throat. He sensed the passing of an elderly man in the burn ward. His nose was full of the commingled scents of blood and feces and urine and pus, but he did not choke. Instead, the malodorous scents sustained him, fueling his mastery, his fury. The rumpelstilz drained the basin, and once the creature weaved across the corridor, conducting an invisible orchestra and hiccupping and singing an off-key song about baking and brewing and a child and the significance of a name, Dr. Schmidt crept from his hiding place. He was the shadow. The resurrection and the life. A regular *Übermensch*. He was able to put Humpty-Dumpty back together again, and it was his duty to dispatch this rumpelstilz as his grandmother would have done, as his sad-eyed mother might have commanded if she hadn't abandoned him for Schnaps and sorrow. He was a panther, a puma, a Germanic jaguar, and as he crept up on the little man, he found that his feet had been transformed into velvet paws. He no longer needed to breathe.

"Tomorrow, I quit cold turkey!" the rumpelstilz cried into the dead silence of the hospital corridor. He rode waves of Schnaps toward the NICU. He lifted a hand, and the double doors yawned open. The perfect name was stuck in his throat, and he thought another look at the baby would jar it loose. Inside the dim room, he shimmied up the stand to incubator number seven. He studied the slumbering infant inside the plastic box, so small, so fragile, so clearly in need. The child's fingers clenched and unclenched. His wrinkled chest rose and fell with the imposed rhythm of the respirator, its white hose taped into his mouth. The rumpelstilz squinted, and in the child's minute face, he saw echoes of the girl. As they'd walked from the tavern to the hospital, the rumpelstilz had explained to her how to find his cottage beside the mountain at the forest's end. He'd described the sun that did not set until it was commanded, edging every leaf and branch and bud with gold, washing the wood in blinding brilliance. He'd described the creeping mists of spring, how they coiled around legs and tree trunks, hiding the leaf-strewn ground from view. He'd told her about the countless creatures that visited his cottage, deer and squirrels and foxes, yes, but also ibexes and capybaras and rhinoceroses. Like his brethren, the rumpelstilz had always lived in solitude. He'd been preparing his tidy, lonely world for the baby for eight months, but he did not expect to be struck, as he walked beside the girl through gathering dusk, by the unshakable conviction that she should accompany her child. She'd been born to dwell in his cottage, and they could do more for the

baby together than they ever could separately. And for each other. The rumpelstilz wasn't normally attracted to humans, but there was something about the girl. He sensed that they suffered from a similar ailment. That she was as forsaken as he. Before she'd fallen asleep in the waiting area, the rumpelstilz had introduced the topic of their cohabitation. She'd smiled, promising to give him an answer when she awoke.

"You should not be here. You will infect the premature infants."

The rumpelstilz lifted his head to find Dr. Schmidt looming over him like Mount Zugspitze, the highest peak in the Bavarian Alps. The square-jawed resident snatched the rumpelstilz from the incubator and dangled the tiny man by one foot in front of him.

"That's my baby," the rumpelstilz said, his words slurred. Upside down, he'd lost his bearings, but he tried to point toward incubator number seven. "That's my child."

"If you have a god, rumpelstilz," Dr. Schmidt said, "I suggest that you pray to him."

The doctor stalked the hospital corridors, clutching the inverted rumpelstilz in one hand and babbling about his Bavarian boyhood, about his father dying under the Matterhorn, about his mother's sorrowful eyes, about his grandmother's unquenchable thirst for the blood of rumpelstilts. For emphasis, he brandished his axe "You don't have to do this," the rumpelstilz kept saying. "I have so much love to give." In an operating theater, Dr. Schmidt strapped the little man to a stainless steel table with rubber tubing. "I could have borrowed a saw from the morgue," he said, hefting the ax over his head, "but I am a sucker for tradition."

The shiny blade seemed to whistle through the air for hours. During its descent, the rumpelstilz grew painfully sober. He wondered about his yen for a human baby, whether it might have been selfish in nature. Something sinister merely masquerading as love. He had a vision of the barefoot girl standing in front of his cottage, wearing a blue dress. Braced against her hip was a child, a small boy with reddish curls and pink cheeks. The girl pointed out a cedar waxwing, trilling in a flowering ash, and the boy clapped his hands. "Timothy!" the rumpelstilz cried just before the ax bit into him, cleaving him neatly in two.

Once the baby's lungs had strengthened, once he'd gained weight and grown into his skin, the girl took her son and fled the hospital. Three weeks had passed since she'd woken in the maternity ward waiting area, an echoing cry humming through her, certain that she should name the boy *Timothy*. A moment later, Dr. Schmidt had appeared, grinning

maniacally and clutching the halved remains of the rumpelstil. The girl's Demerol barrier had crumbled; she'd fallen to her knees and yowled like a wounded animal, releasing sorrow she'd never released for Riley, or for premature Timothy. Once the Bavarian doctor understood that the rumpelstil had not been menacing her, he apologized profusely, but she would never forgive him. She wrapped the rumpelstil halves in a hospital gown and placed them in a Styrofoam ice chest. She followed the little man's directions to the cottage next to the mountain at the forest's end, where she found things just as he'd described them. She settled into a new life there, certain that this was the circumstance in which she was meant to dwell.

After the cathartic release brought on by the rumpelstil's death, the girl found that she had no more use for Demerol. She'd dedicated a large portion of her life to the avoidance of pain, but now, she found exquisite beauty in discomfort. She'd never been so vividly in touch with the internal workings of her body, never so aware of the blood in her veins. She embraced her fear of motherhood; she clutched it to her breast and wrestled it to the ground. She rocked Timothy and whispered "shh" and "there now." She buckled him into the Jolly Jumper and watched him bounce for hours. She learned to accept his faults and shortcomings as she learned to accept her own. She encouraged him to open himself to love, to fear, to pain, to shame. She dreamed that someday he would meet his brother, that they would come together to exchange words of affection and appreciation. She took him for long rambles in the forest, naming hydrangea and forsythia, honeycreeper and nuthatch, silver poplar and black walnut. When the boy was old enough to ask about his father, she would direct him to the unmarked white stone south of the cottage, the stone under which she'd buried the rumpelstil's remains. Sleep would often elude the girl, and she would creep from the cottage to curl her body around this stone. Pressing her face into the earth, allowing darkness to wash over and through her, she would resurrect the rumpelstil, who would assure her that she was not alone.