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Baby I'm Yours

It had only been a few months since the abortion. I wasn't feeling well. Caught up in the maelstrom swirling around me, I ignored the symptoms.

Jealousy was winning in my private war over Pete's relationship with his kids. They were sweet kids. Good kids. A boy of nine and a six-year-old girl, both blond and blue-eyed, a little confused, like everyone else trying to figure out where they were in the hierarchy—our new family order. Pete was oblivious to negative feelings, mine or anyone else's. He was either genetically predisposed not to recognize them, or he held me on a pedestal as the perfect second wife—or he managed to maintain a certain level of alcohol-induced numbness.

Not long after meeting Pete, I was sucked into his testosterone-driven world of sports. He had been in the Olympics. He'd run the 1600-meter race in Rome in 1960 when he was married to someone else, seven years before we met. His talent and notoriety as a runner had earned him a position as a coach in the MIT athletic department, and his degree in English from St. John's University had convinced his boss that he'd make a good sports information director as well. And he was—when he wasn't drinking.

He coached track. His team was the focus of his work, and he liked to bring his work home. These kids were all smart. I enjoyed their company. They were my age. Pete used to tell me that all his married colleagues envied him because his young wife never complained when he brought the team home for dinner. I also did not complain about his weekends fishing or hunting with "the guys." I didn't care when he got home, never grilled him about his whereabouts.

Pete's absence gave me the free time and space to be in my studio, working on the large-scale paintings I'd started in graduate school. My newly acquired appreciation of sport insinuated itself on the canvases of life-sized figures leaning against the studio walls. Hockey players with those incredible masks, so primitive, like a long-lost tribe, the sexuality and sensuality of baseball players in their body-fitting uniforms titillated me. They would touch each other and touch themselves in intimate yet ritualistic ways, on the field for all to see. Themes of aggression, confrontation, and sex began to find their way into my art.

As sports information director, Pete had an "in" with the local sports writers from *The Boston Globe* and the *Herald*. We were among the privileged few who got to watch Celtics, Bruins, and Red Sox home games from the press box. I met Bobby Orr.

We hadn't been married that long when my appetite disappeared. This was uncharacteristic. I was losing weight with no explanation. My period stopped.

One day, shortly before Christmas, I was out shopping in Filene's. I had two big bags full of gifts, one in either hand. Stepping into a packed elevator, I found myself sandwiched between a foul-smelling man chomping on an unlit cigar and a woman who had taken a bath in Chanel #5. The air was thick; no one noticed. All eyes were glued to the blinking numbers over the door, waiting for their floor, when I blacked out. Just like

that. First I was there, and then wham—gonzo. The brilliantly lit elevator and everyone in it disappeared.

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The cloying strains of Bing Crosby singing “White Christmas” penetrate my hazy consciousness. My eyes begin to focus.

“Madam, can you hear me?” A tall, nondescript man I don’t recognize is standing over me. The hard, tiled floor feels cold right through my coat as I lie flat on my back, still dazed. He leans down so that his face hovers over mine.

“Do you do drugs?” he whispers.

“No—I’m a married woman,” I reply, a bit indignant.

I am weak. I can’t stand. I am scared. I ask the man if he can call my husband. I give him Pete’s work number. It is before the days of cell phones, so the good Samaritan has to run off to find a pay phone somewhere while one of the store clerks ushers shoppers around me as I lie splayed out on the floor with my bags of gifts scattered about, fading in and out of consciousness. The kind gentleman returns and shortly thereafter the medics show up with a stretcher and tell the man what hospital they are taking me to.

The medics ask me about my medical history.

“Diabetes?”

“No.”

“On medication?”

“No.”

“When did you last eat?”

“This morning, toast and coffee.”

What’s wrong with me? I’m too young to have a heart attack, besides there’s no history of heart problems in my family. By the time we get to the hospital, I’m feeling better. Pete is already there, in the emergency room, waiting for me. By now I can walk under my own steam. I want to gather up my packages, forget about this embarrassing incident, and go home. The doctor won’t let me leave. He asks about my recent symptoms. Pete is by my side and corroborates everything. The doctor suggests I may have a brain tumor. He actually says the words “brain tumor” with a certain emphasis, staring directly into my eyes to make sure his concern registers. It is not a diagnosis to be taken casually. My pulse quickens and I start to sweat. Pete goes ashen. Head held rigid, his eyes are boring into the doctor’s forehead as though hoping to find some reprieve. The doctor starts scribbling on a notepad and orders a brain scan immediately.

“We’ll have to transfer you to another section of the hospital.”

Pete and I are locked together, side by side; it’s unclear who is supporting whom. Neither of us can move nor bear to look at the other. Our fear mesmerizes us, binds us together in an airless void.

“First, before we do the scan, I’ll need to conduct a complete physical,” says the doctor in his most authoritative voice. I am like a deer in the headlights. I want to turn and run, but the thought never reaches my legs.

I’m shown to an examining room; a nurse hands me one of those opened-at-the-back hospital gowns and tells me to get undressed. I’m nearly naked on the exam table,

feet in stirrups, knees pointing to the ceiling; the doctor begins poking around and starts to laugh. I think this guy must be a sicko. He says nothing to me, shakes his head in disbelief, and orders me to get dressed and meet him in his office with my husband.

Has the world gone nuts? Am I so close to death's door that there is nothing left to do but laugh about it? I get dressed. Pete and I, again together, sit on the other side of a big mahogany desk facing *El Doctoro*. Rows of important-looking, leather-bound medical journals on the shelves behind him, the stethoscope draped around his neck add to the veritas of his pronouncements. All I can focus on is his giant head looming like the Wizard of Oz above his tight, white coat.

"You're *pregnant*," he says, with a certain gleeful sneer. "Three months pregnant to be specific."

I was in shock. How can you be delivered from a death sentence, be ecstatic, horrified, and disbelieving at the same time? Pete, on the other hand, was overjoyed. I looked at him and saw a man blinded by happiness. I wanted to kill myself, but I knew that was dumb. I'd accept my fate. I'd be a mother whether I liked it or not.

I'd worked long and hard not to get pregnant. An artist, a selfish, self-involved person, someone driven to excel and compete in the rarefied international art marketplace was not going to make an ideal mother. I had zero parenting skills; children were those creatures who you hoped would not sit next to you on long distance flights. *Besides*, I thought, *who needs that kind of responsibility?*

Upon reviewing my history, it was apparent my diaphragm and I never got along. It sure put a crimp in my style. It had not been my first choice as a birth control method. I'd overused the pill early on; switching to condoms had resulted in the aforementioned need for an abortion. But, I used it consistently, I swear—even though the thing would slip out of my fingers and boomerang around the bathroom. Sometimes it would take me so long to get the rubbery trampoline in place, Pete would be sound asleep. Hence my surprise when I was informed I was three months pregnant. After some intense inquiry from my doctor, accompanied by a demo, it turned out I was putting it in backward or something like that—therefore it was not too effective.

So, a six-month pregnancy goes by a lot faster than a nine-month pregnancy. How little I knew then about the effects of diet and behavior on my body and on my fetus during the three months I was pregnant. I was too young and stupid to even worry.

The doctor figured the baby was due in May, sometime around the 20th. I had wanted to work until labor started. I was an assistant to the dean of the College of Fine Arts at Boston University during the day. When I was about seven months along, *the dean* (a geezer, he came from the music department and his bushy gray eyebrows gave him the look of a schnauzer) suggested that I resign from my post for "my own safety." The old goat indicated having a pregnant woman around the office made him "uncomfortable." It was bullshit. How could he force me to quit? Well, it was 1970. Old white men were almost always in the seats of power and their decisions went unquestioned.

Reluctantly, I leave my job. Two months to go and I'm getting too big to stand at my easel and paint all day. My feet swell. Pete is so attentive it's annoying. Spring comes early and is especially warm. On a weekend when I'm close to term, Pete suggests we go fishing. We drive to the Cape on a Sunday afternoon. He's got his fishing gear, and I've got the Sunday *New York Times*. I'm set. We get to Scituate harbor, park, and Pete walks over to the guy who manages the rowboat rentals. As he hands over the money for a full day, said guy spies me walking towards them from the parking lot.

"You're not taking *her* out with you?!"

"Sure," says Pete, "Why not?"

"Well, look at her! She's ready to pop any minute."

They're talking about me as though I'm not there. I feel like pushing that asshole's head into his bait box.

Pete says he'll pay an extra \$10 for the boat rental and take full responsibility if anything happens. The guy shakes his head, takes the ten bucks, looks at me with disgust, and then turns his back and walks to his shed. Pete holds my hand as I gingerly step from the dock into the rowboat. The sun shines bright. We have a lovely, lazy afternoon floating around Scituate Harbor. Pete catches several bass, drinks a six-pack, and I finish reading the entire *New York Times*.

I was really ready to have this baby. I weighed 165 pounds. I had taken advantage of eating everything in sight—except for two things, meat and coffee. My body was smart and rejected these items even though my mind told me I wanted them. I don't think I drank any wine or beer either.

On the night of May 22nd, I started to go into labor. We were in bed; I felt the rising rhythm of periodic pain, rolled over, and whispered, "It's time." Pete bolted upright, and—like a flash—was out the door, nearly forgetting I was the reason for the need to rush off.

We made it to the hospital; they admitted me, took us both up to a labor room, and prepped me. I had not done any practice work. Birthing classes with fathers included were just not done (maybe in hippie communes but not at Brigham and Women's Hospital in downtown Boston). Fathers were not allowed in the delivery room. Although some brave women embraced natural childbirth, I was not one of them. I had asked my doctor to anesthetize me when the going got rough. Unfortunately, as we waited expectantly in the labor room, the pains stopped. Pete was sent home and told he could pick me up in the morning. Most of the nurses left. I was alone, lying on the steel examining table in the labor room.

As I lay there, staring up at my belly, I knew there was no way I would leave the hospital in the morning without a baby. The suspense had lasted long enough as far as I was concerned. I carefully slid my hulking body off the table where they had left me and started jogging around the room. I did a few deep knee bends for good measure.

Suddenly, I had to go to the bathroom. There was a private toilet in the labor prep room. I hadn't seen a nurse since Pete left; they must've been napping. I sat on the toilet

thinking I had to shit, but it wouldn't come. Then the pain—I'm talking gut-wrenching, excruciating pain—started.

Oh my god, I'm going to have this baby in the toilet, and it will drown. Too blind with pain to think about pulling the emergency cord for help, I roll my rotund body off the toilet onto the floor. Up on my hands and knees, I start crawling towards the door. I'm nearly over the threshold, into the corridor, when Pete comes running down the hall.

"I couldn't sleep at home without you. What the hell is happening around here? Where are the nurses? Why are you on the floor?"

He lifts me up and, with some effort, maneuvers me back up on the table. The nurses come scurrying. They part my knees, take a peak, slap my knees together again, and say, "*Don't push!* We have to wait till the doctor comes; we just called him."

I say, "Fuck you, I don't care who is here, doctor or no doctor I'm having this baby *now.*" I hate them. The pain is intense. No one even thinks to offer me an aspirin.

Someone says they see the doctor running towards the maternity unit. I still do not care. They wheel me out to the elevator (delivery room one floor up). Pete slips in as the doors close. I tell everyone in the elevator to fuck themselves or something worse and more. The doctor tells Pete he hasn't heard language like that since the Marines. Ha-ha, I'm not laughing. The OR doors swing open. Pete can't follow. He's left outside, an incidental appendage, no longer necessary for the main event.

We barely get inside the OR—the gurney is still moving into place—when they yell at me to look, look in the mirror above and in front of me. Through the blinding veil of pain, I see a miracle, a living creature, wet and slippery and coated in muck, emerge from my own body.

In retrospect, it was like I was Sigourney Weaver in *The Alien*. It was otherworldly. In a brilliant hail of light, all pain disappeared. I will never, ever forget that wondrous moment. Unfortunately, the idiot with the anesthesia decided then was a good time to shoot my spine with the epidural I now did not need. Guess he was only paid if he did the work he was hired to do. The nurses held up my wiggling, screaming, red-faced daughter before they whisked her away to do what they did to newborns back then. But I had seen my beautiful, perfect, wonderful baby. We named her Erika.

Being pregnant had had some pleasant side effects. I had breasts. Not that I didn't have breasts before; it's just that they were relatively inconsequential. Early on I'd learned to make the most of what I had. My rib cage is rather high and prominent. At puberty, I practiced in front of a mirror and saw that if I stood up really straight, pulled my shoulders back, and sucked in my stomach muscles, it looked like I had acceptable breasts. Men were attracted to me. It was all an illusion. I owed it to excellent posture.

In pregnancy, my breasts became lush, large, and the nipples darkened. It was as though I wasn't me. After Erika was born, they said I had to stay in the hospital until "my milk came in." It seemed ominous to me at the time, but I was sure I wanted to breastfeed. In spite of doing my best to ignore the forces of nature, everything I had read seemed to say this was the best and cheapest way to go. Motherhood was a global

sorority, and I had been admitted. It was an honor to join and once in, you can't be kicked out.

By the end of the first 24 hours in the hospital, I was ready to go home. Nurses kept coming every few hours to check to see if my milk "came in." Worry about the functionality of those breasts that had previously only been relied on as man-bait kept me awake. Maybe something had gone wrong and my body couldn't manufacture the nourishment to keep my baby alive. The morning of the second day, I opened my eyes. In front of me were two gigantic mounds, I mean the Himalayas. I couldn't see past them. We're talking hard and huge relative to what I had become accustomed to. The nurses seemed pleased. My milk had finally arrived.

In July 1970, Erika was two months old. We had the other two kids with us for summer vacation. Pete says, "Let's go camping." Hopping in a Winnebago, driving to the nearest recreational area to hook up to the electric and hot water was not Pete's idea of camping. He loved the outdoors and the closer he could get to it the better. He especially liked to bring the kids. Pete was an ex-marine in addition to having his Olympic credentials, and I had to remind myself that his survival skills were way up on the list of why I'd married him in the first place.

I, on the other hand, feel anxious when I don't have access to my hair dryer and mascara. Being seen without make-up is close to being caught naked in a crowd, so camping, the way Pete liked to go camping, was a major challenge. I was breastfeeding, so that simplified the amount of gear we'd have to take. All Pete needed was a fishing pole, a tarp, some rope, a hatchet, and a case or two of beer.

We headed off in the direction of New Hampshire in our old Ford 150 van with the rust on the side. (It was all we could afford after Pete totaled the Mustang.) Pete was familiar with the area from hunting during deer season with his buddies. We pulled off to the side of the road and parked. Why this spot was better than any other was a mystery. It all looked like the same dense forest to me. The sun beat down. The trees appeared impenetrable, etched in black against the intense blue of the sky.

We unloaded the gear. I tied the baby to my chest with a sling. This very practical way of carrying babies was just catching on. I think we WASPs picked it up from indigenous people in other parts of the world. Pete thrashed his way through the woods with the kids in front to make a path. I tiptoed behind swatting mosquitoes. I have no sense of direction and tend to get lost at the base of our driveway—so I'm on high alert in the woods.

It had been pretty dry that year, and Pete picked a smooth, open area on the flat edges of a riverbank to set up camp. We could see the river still filled with energy from the melting snows higher up running over the rocks a short distance below us. It was a beautiful spot. Pete and the kids set up our minimalist camp. They seemed happy to follow their dad's instructions. The tarp was suspended from trees to form a shelter where our sleeping bags were arranged. He put his case of beer in the river to keep it cold. My job was to nurse the baby. The plan was that he and the kids would catch fish, and he'd build the fire and cook them for dinner. They went off. I sat with the baby high on a

granite slab above the river, glad not to have to do anything other than keep an eye out for bears, ants, snakes, hawks, and other scary things.

Nothing much happened. They did get some fish. We had enough peanut butter and bread to fill the gaps. The kids thought they were in heaven. It started to get chilly at dusk, so we crawled into our sleeping bags early. I had the baby tucked in with me. We all dozed off.

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In the middle of the night, I'm awakened by a low rumble. The peaceful day seems long forgotten in the inky night as the sky opens in an angry torrent. Sheets of rain beat down relentlessly. The river has risen up and over the granite ledge where I cradled the baby only hours before. We stumble around in the dark as the water rushes down the mountain and takes our meager gear with it. Terror rises in my chest. The kids are too frightened to cry. I have the baby tucked inside my shirt, which provides no protection from this onslaught.

Thunder rolls and lightning flashes over our heads. We have to find our way back to the car through the woods in the pitch dark. Pete manages to salvage one flashlight. He goes first, we have the two kids in the middle, and I come up behind, clutching the baby. I can just barely make out the silhouettes of our sorry little tribe as we slog and tromp along the sodden forest floor. Pete stumbles and falls. He breaks a tooth, but is unfazed. He is laughing—maybe to let the kids think this is part of a plan, all in the fun of camping. I am not amused.

After about half an hour, we emerge by the side of the road and see the van parked about 50 feet away. I have never been so glad to see that rusted hulk. We pile in. Everything stinks from the soggy slog through the woods. I just want to go home. Pete suggests a motel.

We find a cheap, relatively clean place with a vacancy. The hot shower is nirvana. The kids think the whole thing is a great adventure; they are exhausted but unafraid and crawl willingly into bed.

The next morning the skies have cleared. Pete wants to go back to the campsite. I think he's insane, but the kids beg and reluctantly I trudge along, back to a spot that will remain burned in my brain for eternity.

Down to the river we go. The site of yesterday's terror seems so benign in the morning sun. The baby nuzzles my breast as I seek a dry spot to sit and contemplate the events of the past 48 hours. Pete sends the kids downriver to search for the remains of the case of beer.

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Now I realize why he was so determined we had to go back. It was Sunday. The liquor stores were closed. That case of beer he'd left cooling in the river the day before was his last hope of making it to Monday morning.