

Chimes summon the team to the nursery. Mary runs through the door, stripping off her blue mantle and golden crown. She tosses them to an angel with pink wings, who catches them with one hand and hands her a white flannel shawl. Mary settles into a cushioned, lavender-scented rocking chair. With a sigh, she resumes breathing. She sets her heartbeat slow, like her breaths, and warms her skin just enough to soothe a small child. The smell of clean sweat and milk, her mother scent, emanates from her.

Mary checks the angel's preparations. Sunlight shines through clear crystals to cast rainbows on the wall. A silver bowl of warm pacifiers waits on a table within easy reach. The silent room smells of clean, wholesome flowers. Mary catches the angel's eye and nods her approval.

A yellow-winged angel soars past Mary to the cedar and rosewood harp behind her left shoulder. Harps don't go out of tune in heaven and the angel knows exactly the songs and lullabies to soothe the baby. Mary hears the music and turns in her chair to praise the musician with smile.

The baby arrives, carried by a tall, strong, angel the color of oak bark. Mary lifts the baby and swaddles the cyan infant against her skin under the flannel, positioning him so the sun warms his bony back. She turns his face toward the gentle colored lights on the wall.

Mary snuggles the boy on her lap. Nothing touches him but the flannel shawl, sunlight, and Mary's warm skin. Lavender and Mary's mother-scent surround him. Harp music fills his refuge and rainbow colors dance before his eyes. He takes a pacifier and milk, sweeter and more delicate than anything he'd ever had from a bottle, coats his taste buds. He isn't hungry, too hot or cold, sick or in pain, or soiled anymore. He is with Heaven's own team of rockers and cuddlers, chosen and trained for centuries by the immortal, wise essence of the woman God himself entrusted with His only Son.

But the baby cannot forget how he came here. Short, hard, words come back to him. His mother's screams block out the harp. He opens his mouth to wail but cold, clinging plastic closes his nose, covers his eyes, and drives urine and feces from his overflowing diaper and soggy undershirt against his burning skin. He falls until a thud and pain on the back of his skull stop him.

Mary feels all this with him. She stills the chair and holds him against her chest and breath. But the memory of his own mother's breakdown stays between Mary and the baby. His mother doesn't love him and she won't come to save him from the stench, the burning, the suffocating bag. Silently, he begs his mother to forgive him, clean him up. He needs to hear her say his name in a gentle voice. She does not come. He remains unloved, stinking, and frightened of his mother's shrieks. The baby is dead. He cannot heal.

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First the pain in his head stopped. Inside the dark plastic bag, cut off from the usual household views and sounds, he didn't notice when sight and hearing left him. Smell and taste became one sense, a gut-churning combination of his own vomit, urine, and diarrhea until, mercifully, they too left him. Anger, fear, and loneliness went last. For a few more moments he lingered as a bundle of chemical reactions. Then life no longer held him together and he broke apart.

His memory waited for the school bus with the neighborhood mothers. They mourned the baby many had never met. Why hadn't his mother come to them for help? As parents, they understood too well how it is to be alone with a sick infant. Exhaustion and isolation can drive out love when a baby and family need it most. Had she asked, any of them would have dropped everything to watch her baby so she could nap, shower, or eat a meal without the stench of a sick infant in her nostrils.

When the baby's mother kept to herself they assumed she had her own friends. She was young. They thought she didn't want to hang out with old hags like them just because they also had small children. They hadn't realized she was hiding from the imagined condemnation of older, more successful women. The baby's death seared them with shame for not paying more attention.

More than one family somehow scraped together a bit of money to make a donation, or a larger one than usual, to charities fighting child abuse and neglect. Someone found a program for a young mother that would allow her to finish high school, even though the young woman had neither asked for help nor shown an interest in her own education. Another parent called a school principal at home because her son said a boy at school and shown him bruises and spoken of being beaten at home. Hard as it was to butt in and try to help someone who might not want it, the memory of a baby who would not grow up made it happen.

The baby did even more. His body escaped the casket when a graveyard sinkhole pulled the box deep into the ground and cracked the coffin open. Decomposition worked magic. Nutrients from the baby seeped into the soil at the base of the sinkhole. A lucky patch of ferns grew lush and brilliant from the extra minerals.

The ferns caught the sunlight and threw it back as a green beacon of hope and peace. A very young mother, firstborn son screaming on her hip, walked by them. Her baby caught sight of the lacy, sunlit leaves. Entranced, he stopped crying and relaxed his rigid body. His mother looked down at him, torn between relief and worry at his sudden quietness.

She followed his gaze to the ferns. Deep, soothing jade in the shadow and brilliant in the sunlight, they calmed her as they had her son. She imagined the boy making her proud when he went to school and learned things she didn't know. He'd have a real career and a family. Years later, he would bring her grandchildren to run beside her wheelchair as he pushed her along

beach boardwalks and forest trails. She snuggled that vision close when her son fussed. She breathed it in as she changed stinky diapers. She sang to it when he cried and when he wouldn't settle down to sleep. Her boy heard no harsh words that day, and for several days after. In time, the vision she nurtured grew to be a loyal son and loving man.