

Baby Bob and Me

It wasn't until the fourth month with Baby Bob that I realized I'd been producing whiskey, not milk. I'd figured it was the scent of my man Gordon's breath lingering that I'd caught sniffs of occasionally, but I clued into him not being the source when I tried a taste of myself in a moment of strange curiosity. I told Gordon right away and right away he asked if he could try it. I didn't see why not. I loved Gordon. Baby Bob we were still getting used to.

Baby Bob was a surprise because I thought I was no good for mothering, parts wise. I'd done the thing plenty of times—tried all through the sixties—and only this once, in 1973, did my belly balloon up. Gordon didn't get mad, though, when he saw I was swelling. He laughed and said, "Well, aren't I the lucky winner." I laughed too, for all I knew then Baby Bob would bring us closer and we'd be lovers forever.

I took Baby Bob off the nipple as soon as I realized, but Gordon kept me going. Baby Bob started keeping us up at night, then—or me at least. Gordon would wake up, take a few pulls, and pass right back out, sweat pouring off him sickly sweet as he slept. I tasted that once, too. Put my finger to his back and took a swab. It tasted like Old Crow over ice cubes made of mud.

Baby Bob cried when I gave him bottles of formula. He swatted the little glass Gerber jars of blended banana off the table with his little hazel eyes all red and puffy from the whining, which had become constant after I stopped letting him nurse. Soon enough I let him back at me so we could both sleep soundly through the night. I figured he'd been guzzling away all those months already and he seemed healthy enough. Big even, with his chunky hands and wide head and flesh folds in his arms and legs.

I wanted to be responsible, though, so I told the doc what was happening as best I could.

He asked to see for himself. I kind of sat there quiet looking at my feet and feeling my face glow hot. But he said, “No, no, no,” reading my embarrassment, and then hooked me up to some machine. It squeezed out the amber liquid down a hose and into one of those little see-through plastic cups that they ask you to pee into. The doc took the cup and gave it a little swirl like a glass of fine wine and knocked it back. His smacked his lips together a few times. “Not bad,” he said. I left, as far as I know, without a diagnosis of anything wrong.

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Before Baby Bob was born, Gordon had been working on a used car lot but he quit when the kid came, saying I’d need help around the house, and since the crisis over in the Middle East was affecting America now that nobody would be buying cars anyway. “What’s the damn point,” he said, “if nobody can fuel ‘em up.” But once Baby Bob came, our savings ran out quick and Gordon had to go back to work. He got a job unloading trucks in the early mornings, and he came home smelling like fish. “Shellfish,” he always corrected me. He’d come home from work around 1 p.m., plop his boots off any old place, and come cruising in for a kiss. I’d make him shower up to try and get the smell of the cargo off him and then feed him some chicken salad for lunch. After all that, I’d let him have a drink.

Baby Bob grew some hair and started to crawl. Some of his fat flesh bended more into muscle or dropped away entirely. Gordon, who was always a schemer, told me his idea one night, the Phillies game going on in front of us. We were sitting on the couch, Gordon’s hand on my belly—which looked pretty good considering the recent mutations in size; a few ghostly white lines on the sides was all. Gordon kept interrupting his own plan, which I didn’t like the sound of, to lift up my shirt and get another drink. I told him I’d get him a glass. He said, “I’m fine with this arrangement.”

I took his hand off my stomach and pulled my shirt down.

“Now that’s just like you. You won’t give it away for free to your husband, so of course you won’t sell it.”

“It’s not right and I’m not doing it, so drop it.”

“Anne, it’s easy money,” he said.

“It’s my body.

“We bottle it and sell it and nobody ever knows.”

“It’s not like that,” I said. “I feel like a freak.” I covered my eyes with my hand. Gordon put his arm around me. “I don’t think its right to profit off of things wrong with people.”

“What about the oil crises?” Gordon asked. “You think nobody’s making cash off all this stuff going wrong?”

I snuck out from under his arm and leaned my head up against the arm rest and closed my eyes, trying to get my heart rate back to normal. I felt Gordon sneak up on me and reach for a drink. I opened my eyes and saw him with his long, needing face, looking like a horse coming to waterhole after a long ride through the desert. He got drunk off me that night and I finished watching the ballgame by myself before I tucked Baby Bob in. I went to bed and left Gordon snoring heavily but evenly on the couch. On the way up I flipped the lightswitch and shuttered him in darkness. “Last out, lights out,” I said to nobody but myself.

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Gordon smoked the long, skinny type of cigar with the plastic filter on the end. His afternoons after work whittled by in an eternal cloud of smoke with him complaining that he wasn’t paid enough considering the smells and hot sun and cramped trucks, and then he’d start up about what he called the cash cow we were sitting on so stupidly idle. He’d get sick of

arguing eventually and play Marshall Tucker records loud on the stereo and in the evenings his drinking buddies—I wouldn't call them friends—would drop by and drag him out to the bar.

One night, I heard Gordon come in late. The clock read three a.m. and I tried to fall back to sleep as I heard Gordon banging around in the kitchen—I figured making another drink or two from the real bottles he kept stashed for when I was asleep or not around. The baby woke up for all the noise and started crying and I got up out of bed and went to him. I took him in my arms and rocked and sang a little ditty, something childish. Gordon came into Baby Bob's bedroom, holding a salami and mustard sandwich hanging from between his teeth like a wild animal, and put his hands on my shoulders and spun me toward him, feeling me up and down with crablike hands. I moved away saying, "The baby," and I smelled the mustard and his awful breath and he moved in some more.

"Stop," I said, louder.

Gordon was still all over me working up the shirt and trying to plow down into the waistband of my pajamas and Baby Bob was stuck in the middle, crying and screaming. "The baby," I said again. "Let me put the baby down."

Gordon took the sandwich from his mouth and grunted and tossed the sandwich into the corner of the room. As I was laying Baby Bob down Gordon picked me up from behind and I lost grip of the baby and he dropped the last foot or two into the crib.

"Gordon!" I yelled. The baby cried. I felt so angry at myself that I'd let him drop, even just into his bed. Gordon had me by the thighs and held me up over the crib. I felt Gordon bite into my arm. Then he unclamped his teeth and turned me in his arms and lowered me to his mouth. I put my hand over my mouth. I said, "No," through my fingers. I said, "Let me down." I said, "Get the fuck off of me."

Baby Bob screams faded, but not much, as Gordon carried me out of the room.

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The next day I finished the last load of laundry at the crack of dawn and got the rest of my things into the trunk of the Volvo. I put Baby Bob in the car and gave him his favorite toy truck and was about to get in the car myself when Gordon came out the front door. We stood in the driveway blinking at each other.

“I’m going to get cleaned up,” he told me.

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other.

“All the way sober,” he said.

Baby Bob and I drove out to my mother’s, out by Pottsville.

Mom answered the door and let out a squeal. “You never told me you were pregnant,” she said as she took Baby Bob and rocked him in her arms.

“I guess I forgot,” I said, smiling big to make it seem like it’d been a joke all along.

We went inside and she microwaved us some food in her fancy new Litton. It smelled great, even just spinning around in there. I remember those ads, too—for *the woman whose family eats in shifts*—because the first time I heard that on the TV, I thought the voiceover had said, “For the woman whose family eats ‘n’ shifts.”

Over congealing mac and cheese, I told her about my special condition.

“What’d the doctor say?” she asked. I shrugged. “When’d this happen?” she asked. I looked into my mother’s face and saw the wrinkles all mapped out and her cheeks drooping and neck a mess. Still, I wanted her to take me in her arms and tell me I’d be fine, that everything would be fine. But she stayed on her side of the kitchen table, looking unblinkingly back at me. I figured she was examining me, my face, guessing at what I’d been through. I shrugged again.

Two days later, she had me hooked up to one of those squeezing things the doc had put me on but this time it was coming down the hose into an unmarked fifth bottle. I don't know how she talked me into it. She'd said something about helping out with the rent, but it was more likely some weakness deep in me that didn't allow me to refuse my mother anything. The whiskey pinged against the empty glass bottle at first and then against itself, where it sounded like Gordon's piss splashing into the toilet when he drank his manners away and couldn't be bothered by closing the bathroom door.

We lined the first few bottles up on the kitchen counter. "I'm proud of you," Mom said.

"Proud?"

"It looks like a regular old bottle of booze," she said.

"Well, I'll be. I feel like Mr. Jack Daniels himself is about to swoop down and whisk me away to his mansion in Tennessee."

"Now," Mom said, looking disapprovingly at me.

But the thing was that Baby Bob loved Mom. He was content crawling around her house and yard, napping on the soft carpet that wasn't all itchy like the old shag Gordon and I had. Whenever I couldn't get Baby Bob to fall asleep at night, I'd call Mom in to sing him a song and he'd be out in a snap, lolling in her arms until she let him down gentle into the crib.

Mom and I kept at the bottling. After a few days, she had to go into town to get some more bottles and boxes to pack them in while I pumped away on the couch. I watched the news and heard about the Middle East and the prices of crude oil by the barrel. When Mom came home, she said that tomorrow was our day to get gas but we'd have to get there early in the morning before they ran out so we could run the booze down to Jay's General later on.

Baby Bob slept upstairs in my old crib—that horrid, splintery thing, nothing near as good

as the one Gordon built for him back at home—while I pumped and Mom watched.

“I miss Gordon,” I said.

“Gordon?”

“Baby Bob’s father,” I said.

“I don’t see a ring.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t expect you do.”

The next day it was all predawn dark blues and headlights. Looked like that famous Van Gogh through my blurry morning eyes. The gas station read eighty-three cents—way up from what it was two weeks before. We got third position in line and the cars streamed in behind us, waiting for the place to open.

Mom made me get out and fill the car. I took off the Volvo’s gas cap and put the nozzle in the hole and held down the lever. The pump whirred to action and gave the hose a jolt and I heard the liquid streaming in. Mom leaned out the driver’s window. “I can’t believe that it’s come to this,” she said. It was a cold October morning, and daylight still hadn’t broken. Baby Bob was in his baby seat, pawing at the fabric of the Volvo’s ceiling that hung down loosely. “I hear the trucks shipping food can’t get out to some real isolated areas, like out in the desert, and that the people there are losing it, starting in on family pets,” Mom said.

“I’m sure they’re not,” I said. The pump clicked, letting me know the tank was full—or that it was all I was getting.

“You don’t know, Anne,” Mom said, “When you take the modern out of people we’re left with a bunch of old crazies, making it their own way. All these rules we live by become more like suggestions, and then they drop away entirely.”

I got back in the car and Baby Bob started to cry so I reached back and unbuckled him. I

picked him up and lifted my shirt and held him to my chest as the next person in line took our spot at the pump.

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Took to be all I could handle out there in Pottsville. Maybe Mom was happy to have me home, but not for reasons like spending time with your only daughter and grandson is nice but reasons like, See, everyone's life is bound to fall apart. I told you so.

In February, when Baby Bob was turning one, Mom said she wanted to have a party for the baby. She had a couple friends coming by and I had all the mind to invite Gordon, even tried the home phone a few times. Nobody picked up though, and he must've disconnected our old answering machine that I'd recorded some simple message on. I wondered where he was if he wasn't home. Maybe, I couldn't help but think, he'd fled the joint, just as I had.

I spent a lot of my time—when I wasn't helping Mom with the bottling—in bed. The sheets were stiff like rice cakes and I didn't want to think about all that had soiled them over time. It was something to keep me warm and I couldn't stand losing that.

The bash I was mostly in charge of even though it was Mom's idea. "I'm busy with Baby Bob," she always said. She gave me a list of people from church, and then went through it with me. I'd read the name and she'd tell me whether to circle it or cross it off. She told me that she had some idea of who was worthy of an invitation. I wasn't sure one hundred percent but I felt like she had gotten hold of the church donation list and was basing her decisions on that.

I made up invitations and addressed envelopes and licked and stamped and Baby Bob either played silly games with Mom, breastfed, or rolled this little truck that Gordon had gotten him before we'd left back and forth. That truck could amuse him for hours. When he was hungry he'd stick his little arms up in the air like a football official. I'd feed him some crushed bananas

and let him suckle and he'd take a nap.

The RSVPs came in and we kept setting aside what was left of the whiskey money after groceries and baby food and Mom's mortgage for the party and then the day happened and Baby Bob was one year old and there I was, sharing my mom's living room with a bunch of old ladies. Mom made everyone Hot Toddies with real Irish whiskey and Lipton tea laced with honey. The old ladies passed Baby Bob around, each one would remark on his size, eye him up and down like I imagine a farmer would do before buying a cow, and then hand him to the next set of outstretched arms.

Maybe it was the Hot Toddy or maybe it was the fact that Gordon wasn't there or maybe it was my mom cooing in words that did not seem to be authentically hers or maybe it was the year of Baby Bob's life that had seemed so long while living but so quick in retrospect and probably it was the second Hot Toddy or the third or maybe it was me, only me, feeling my body heat up like some wild fever all over on Baby Bob's second rotation around the circle of old ladies or maybe it was all of it combined that made me run upstairs to cry.

After I calmed down I went back downstairs and Baby Bob was surrounded by torn up wrapping paper and new toys. Lincoln Logs, 12-piece puzzles, coloring books, a plastic rocket ship. "You didn't wait," I said to my mom.

"Have a piece of cake," she said.

I ate a piece in the smallest bites I could. It wasn't that I wanted to savor the flavor—it was only store-bought yellow cake—but when I was eating nobody bothered me. Baby Bob was in some old lady's lap being spoon-fed tiny bits of icing and even Mom seemed somewhat happy, running back and forth from the kitchen with cake and a bucket of ice and more whiskey and, later, coffee.

When I was done with the cake I let the fork fall to the plate. Such a clatter it made and none of those old ladies heard a thing.

The next day, Baby Bob and I woke up before Mom and fled Pottsville early in the morning. I left the presents but of course I brought Baby Bob's truck along. We drove the highway at fifty-five because of the new gas conservation laws. America, they said, was on its way to energy self-sufficiency. I didn't know what driving slower had anything to do with that, but I hoped it'd save me some money. I asked Baby Bob if it was better to drive slower for longer or faster for shorter. He giggled and clapped his hands along with some song on the radio and soon enough, even with the slow-going, we were back on familiar streets, passing the corner stores where I knew the clerks and the stop signs I'd slowed to a million times before.

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Gordon wasn't home. I walked around the house with Baby Bob on my hip. Everything looked the same as it was when I left. The house put on ice but for some dust accumulated. I set Baby Bob in the kiddie chair at the kitchen table that hadn't moved an inch. He immediately reached his arms up for me to hold him. I turned from him and went to the cupboard and heard Baby Bob start crying. I took out a glass and rinsed it and filled it from the tap. I turned the radio on. The water was cold against my fillings. Pretty soon, the radio said, there was to be an agreement made with the Arab countries after the rest of the Israeli troops pulled out of Egypt. I drank the rest of the water and put the cup in the sink and sat down at the table with Baby Bob, who kept at his incessant crying. I ran my finger through the thin gray layer of dust on the kitchen table, and listened through Baby Bob's racket for the sound of latch on the front door.