

The Baby Knows

The baby sat in its throne, its eyes lighting on her, then rolling up and around in circles. It seemed not to have control of its eyes. Or it was pretending to be daft. Perhaps it was being comical.

It was strapped into one of those lightweight canvas strollers like a tiny aluminum lawn chair on wheels. The mother—only a child herself—had been pushing it around and around the empty water fountain at the shopping center for quite a while, the baby with its hands out, palms open, eyes turned up to the heavens.

A decision had to be made. There were fewer babies out recently, even fewer today. Usually there were more of them circling the concrete plaza, rolling up and down in front of the stores that were still open, babies communicating with each other in collapsible carriages on multiple sets of double wheels; lying down meditating babies in buggies that looked like covered wagons; reclining babies on three wheels watching her knowingly as she passed by.

The mother—foolishly sleeveless as if it were warm out—sat down on the end of the bench beneath the dying palm trees, preoccupied with her cell phone. Something was upsetting the young girl—she seemed hardly older than a teen-ager—and she jumped up from the bench like it was hot and walked away furiously working her thumbs on the keyboard with her back to her baby.

The girl hadn't noticed her sitting on the bench in her good blue winter coat. Old people were invisible to young people. She reached her stiff, bent fingers out to touch the plastic handle of the stroller. The handle was hard and soft at the same time. Her hand closed around it firmly and as she stood up she pushed and the stroller rolled and her feet shuffled quickly, carrying her towards the glass doors of the big department store. A man in a suit carrying a briefcase was coming out, an auspicious coincidence because she wouldn't have been able to manage opening the door and pushing the stroller at the same time and the whole daring experiment would have been stopped right there with very unpleasant consequences for herself. She went through quickly, smiling, expressing gratitude to the frowning man even though that hardly seemed necessary anymore since

rarely did anyone notice. She was polite on principle anyway but he was possibly not holding the door after all because he was already stepping away clutching his briefcase with both hands and the door was closing on her heel. “Brrrp,” said the baby jokingly, commenting on the man’s haste.

In the empty shoe department the two glum-faced salesmen were talking to each other—they had so few customers she worried about what was to become of them —and at the make-up counter just ahead the pretty saleslady who was no longer young and slim sighed and looked up and down the aisle and then leaned over the counter and looked down at the floor, as if a potential client might spring up from there. The saleslady put her hand over her eyes, rubbing her forehead, as they passed. “Ooom,” said the baby sympathetically. At the side entrance she thought ahead and successfully backed through the heavy glass door pulling the stroller, the baby kicking its feet encouragingly. The security guard standing outside in a black, long-sleeved uniform was looking at the inside of his hat. It was always like that. She was invisible.

Her car was parked in the handicapped parking next to the door. However, the car that was there she didn’t recognize. Hers was red wasn’t it? She had always bought a red car so that she could find it easily. Cars all looked the same. Maybe it was her car and only looked a different color because of the weather, which was very cloudy. There were no other cars parked anywhere close to the store. She fished in her purse for the keys. It was a large purse and there was nothing in it except the keys and her wallet, a package of hand-wipes and a pork chop. Her hand waved around inside the purse. The baby was grasping at the grey air with its little hands, sticking out its tongue to taste it, trying to eat it. She would have followed the baby’s example—stuck out her tongue to taste the air—but she didn’t have a moment to spare. Time was passing so quickly now, and it was paramount that she get away from the shopping center. She found the keys and pulled them out and pointed the little black box at the car and pushed. Nothing happened so perhaps it wasn’t her car. She turned the box around and pushed again. The car beeped and blinked brightly at her and unlocked its doors with a loud click and a sigh.

She pushed the baby up to the back door and then pulled the stroller away again. She had to open the door first. The security guard was leaning over on one foot studying the mounds of shredded bark in the garden. The flower bushes were all dried up. She got the door open and looked down at the baby. How to get it into the car? She turned the stroller so that the baby was facing her. The baby’s eyes were rolled up to the top of its large forehead, its tiny thumbs and forefingers pressed together. It seemed to be in a trance. She bent her knees to protect her back and lifted the bottom of the stroller and shoved until the baby was lying down on its back, palms up, in the stroller on the back seat. “Ahh,” it said, pointing its bootied toes towards the ceiling.

The security guard went inside the store.

She got in the driver’s seat and put the key in the ignition. She had shrunk so that she had to sit on the front edge of the seat grasping the steering wheel in order to reach the pedals. She started the car, holding down the accelerator for too long because when she slipped the car out of park it leapt up on the sidewalk towards the glass door of the department store before she could stamp her left foot on the brake. The baby spat out some kind of advice but she couldn’t catch what it was.

Backing up the car, she got it pointed in the right direction. The vast concrete parking lot extended in every direction as far as she could see. It was virtually empty but

she followed the painted white lines anyway, not crossing any designated parking spaces, taking the time to navigate the labyrinth of painted pathways that led her in expanding circles all the way around the massive, multi-storey shopping mall at the center. The car rocked forward and back as she carefully balanced accelerating with braking. The baby gurgled its approval. They arrived at an exit that seemed to have been right in front of her all along.

Now she had a choice of entering the freeway or taking the long way home. Both routes were perilous: the freeway on account of the speed required and the long way on account of the many decisions about turns. She found it more and more difficult to make these decisions, in part because they hardly seemed to matter. She turned in her seat to look at the baby. It had fallen asleep, its face glowing serenely, open palms held out. She decided to take the freeway. Every minute was precious now. The baby had probably already begun forgetting what it knew.

The freeway was a mistake. Although there was little traffic and she kept to the slow lane, even partly on the shoulder and going well under the speed limit, she must have missed the exit; she couldn't tell where she was, even though she had lived here all her life, since long before the freeway was built. Perhaps the exit was still coming up and she was going even more slowly than she thought. The green signs and all the passing landscape were the same: the same monolithic beige buildings with green roofs, the same boarded up businesses and signs. She seemed to be passing them again and again. The same pet supply store, drug store, bed linen store, spaghetti restaurant, self-storage, auto-supply, all surrounded by acres of empty parking lots. The freeway was a loop around the city and eventually she would come around to the shopping mall again. But weren't there others that looked just like it?

She decided to get off. The most urgent thing was to learn what the baby knew before it was too late. She eased the car over and down the exit ramp and rolled up to the intersection. She wasn't sure if she recognized this intersection. They had torn down so many buildings, bulldozed entire neighborhoods so that nothing was recognizable and all that was left was mud and curbs. And then overnight they would throw up cheap townhouses or temporary branch banks or mini malls that were still for rent. Most of the construction had been abandoned half-built, just like on this corner, where the graying wooden skeleton of a hundred-percent financing condominium complex was losing its outer skin, flapping in the wind.

Which way to go was not something the baby would know. Or would it? She looked back at the baby. It was still asleep. But looking over her shoulder she caught sight of something she recognized: the florist's shop, in a leftover strip center standing alone, everything else around it having been demolished. She had been buying flowers there twice a month for years; the florist was as old as she was and had been in love with her for as long as she could remember. He'd never said so. She just knew. There was a wife once, somewhere in the background, but that was long ago. However, she had never looked for romance. She was a rational person. In her childhood she had been married briefly. She hadn't enjoyed it and she had long ago forgotten why she'd done it, except that it seemed like the right thing to do, which was foolish. Mercifully there were some things best forgotten.

She turned the car. A black SUV speeding through the intersection swerved to avoid her, its horn blaring, lights flashing. Where did it come from? She'd seen no other

cars about. She turned the car into the parking lot and stopped in front of the florist shop. Parking Reserved for Customers. She got out and went to check if the shop was open. She didn't know why it wouldn't be. Harry was old but he was a very hard worker. But would he understand? She looked through the door and saw Harry behind the counter in his apron, making a flower arrangement. He was very good at arranging flowers. She'd always admired his flower arrangements. He had gentle hands. But she had doubts about confiding in him. Too late. He had seen her. He was coming towards the door with a big smile.

“Margaret!” he cried, opening the door, the bell tingling as it had for decades. “What a pleasure to see you! Please come in.”

“Oh, hello, Harry. But if you don't mind, I've got my—my godchild with me. Would you help me?” She didn't like lying to a decent man like Harry but it was necessary.

“Oh, surely, Margaret. I'd be delighted. You've never told me about your godchild.” Harry was grey and faded, like the shop. Like herself. But he was still an attractive man. However, he'd apparently forgotten that she'd had several godchildren over the years—people were always naming her as godmother for some reason, though she'd never cared for infants. At the time she had no idea about innate wisdom. And now there was so little wisdom left in the world.

She led Harry to the back of the car and opened the car door.

The baby was still asleep in its stroller lying on the back seat.

“Unusual way to carry a baby around, Margaret.”

“It's very efficient,” she informed him. Margaret had once had a minor celebrity status locally as a features/science/religion writer for the morning newspaper before it was shut down. That was more than twenty years ago but Harry still remembered her that way.

She and Harry got the stroller out of the car and wheeled it into the dim stillness of the shop, which smelled of fresh-cut stems and decomposing plants. The flowers themselves no longer had any natural scent. Yellowed posters of flower bouquets hung on the walls. Send a Message of Love. Harry still had a few loyal customers but they were dying off fast.

The baby was slumped in the seat, its huge head lolling down so that its fat cheeks and chin were poached out. It was wearing a little knitted cap. They stood there looking at it in silence.

“What a beautiful child,” said Harry.

The baby squirmed and stretched, sticking its pink tongue out, flopped its head to the side and opened its big eyes, turning them side-to-side.

“What bright eyes!” said Harry. “What color are they?” He squatted to look more closely, lifting the glasses on the chain around his neck. “Hard to tell. Could be blue or brown. What's its name?”

“Baby,” said Margaret. She was growing impatient. She needed answers from the baby.

She leaned down to lift the baby out of its stroller. The little thing was warm and solid and much heavier than she expected. Like a big sack of sugar. It seemed to be wearing several layers of clothes. Its fat little kicking legs got stuck in the leg holes of the stroller and the whole contraption lifted up.

“Let me help you, Margaret.”

Harry held down the stroller. She shook the baby loose and carried it with its arms and legs dangling over to the customer counter and set it up so that she could look at it. But she couldn't make it sit up. It was very fat and bottom heavy. She held it up with both hands. It waved its fat arms and legs and kept collapsing forward and rolling over like a caterpillar. It smelled good, though, sweet.

It bashed itself in the eye with its fist.

“Oh!” said Margaret.

“What happened?” said Harry.

“Well, it doesn't seem to know where its head is.”

“It has a very large head. Hard to miss. Must have a very large brain. Is it a boy or a girl?”

Margaret was slightly offended by the question. “I don't know how I am going to get any information out of it if it doesn't even know where its head is,” she said irritably.

Harry laughed. Apparently he thought she was joking. The baby's head flopped forward with its tongue sticking out.

“Good lord, I hope it doesn't swallow its tongue,” she said. Its wet tongue kept flicking in and out and curling up. There was a little bubble on the end of it. The head seemed like it might fall off. She'd never heard of that happening though and something like that would surely get talked about.

Clearly the baby was nothing but a giant mind with no body control. This seemed so self-evident that she was ashamed she'd had to think of it.

“Goodness, look at that expression,” said Harry. He was standing awfully close, leaning in with one hand on the counter. He smelled like green leaves and earth. He was not wearing an undershirt. But she was getting distracted.

The baby's face was squinched up, its eyes squeezed shut. It seemed to be concentrating very hard. It made a grunting noise.

“Margaret, you're blushing.”

“Oh, Harry.”

They watched it struggle and grunt for a moment until it stopped and looked satisfied, opening its eyes wide. Margaret noticed an unpleasant odor.

She hoisted the baby off the counter, remembering to bend her knees on account of her back, and with both arms straight carried the baby slung sideways over to the couch. Squatting, she laid it down on the couch on its back. The couch seat was slanted down and the baby rolled down the incline towards the back of the couch so that its face was buried in the couch back. It lay there throwing its arm up and down and kicking its legs spasmodically like it was trying to walk. It was wearing a white cotton terrycloth jumper that covered its feet, which kept pointing. She had no idea whether it was a boy or a girl but she didn't want to know. It didn't matter. At this point they all knew everything equally. Or so she'd assumed. Now she couldn't decide whether a girl or a boy would know things differently from the start. Later on it seemed that they did but that was after they'd lost so much knowledge. She didn't know how it was at the beginning.

She stood close to Harry gazing at the baby talking to the back of the couch, jabbing its finger in the air.

There was so much to find out. And so little time.

The bell on the shop door tingled violently. Harry abruptly moved away and Margaret was surprised by the absence that took his place.

"May I help you, gentlemen?" he said.

The baby started to scream.