BORN AGAIN

Now she's desperate to be on her way, and all she can think about is getting to Penn Station. It's only three stops on the express train, but what if one of the group sees her on the platform and tries to stop her? And in her condition, can she even make it down the stairs? She's tried to take just the essentials—toiletries, underwear, a normal-sized pair of slacks, several blouses, both light and heavy sweater for when the New England autumn begins, her rain coat with the removable lining, the latest draft of her dissertation—but hefting the fully loaded bag is daunting. She opts for a cab and there goes another five bucks when she's going to need every nickel.

The cabbie gives her the same look she gets these days from storekeepers whenever she does her head-bobbing, half straight-ahead, half-sideways shuffle to maneuver her stretched to the bursting belly inside the door. She imagines them thinking: whatever you're doing here be quick about it, and for God's sake have your baby somewhere else. As the driver manhandles her suitcase into the trunk, she heaves herself into the back seat, landing a bit to one side and righting herself with difficulty. Though nothing could be more uncomfortable than this dirty cab smelling of Indian spices and bouncing down Broadway as if the driver were aiming for every pothole, the fact of being in motion exhilarates her. Have I really done it? Have I escaped?

The cabbie's unrestrained dash for the station notwithstanding, Susan misses the 3:30 train and must wait for the 4:45. It'll be nearly 9:30 when the train gets in, more likely 10 p.m. or later, given Amtrak's predictable unpredictability. What if she's too late? What if the baby will not abide by an Amtrak timetable or any other man-made plans? For 24 hours she's been having contractions on and off; she can't imagine going another couple of days in this condition, even if her due date is supposedly a week away.

Why did I wait so long, she asks herself.

Never mind, it's in the past, it's done.

Ticket in hand, she settles into a seat that will give her a view of the water on the stretch between Bridgeport and Providence. She tries and fails to swing her bag onto the overhead rack, and embarrassed, accepts help from the athletic young man with crew cut, gym bag and Brown T shirt. He eyes her almost-nine-months'-pregnant belly, then takes the aisle seat opposite.

"Ma'am if you need anything at all, just ask."

Thank you, she says, and asks where he's from. A small town in Ohio, near Columbus, he tells her; he's Brian, a junior at Brown who plays varsity football. Halfback.

"We've got a good team this year," he says, chuckling. "I'm sure we'll win a game or two." The Brown football team has gone 21 games, almost two full seasons, without a victory.

They talk some more and it's the best kind of distraction for Susan; his flat Midwestern vowels and his easy, unaffected manners take her mind off her belly. The train eases out of the darkness of the long tunnel, crosses the bridge into the Bronx, picking up speed as it barrels toward Stamford. She settles deeper into her seat. Let it be all right, she thinks, let it be all right. At one point in her life—age 13, her bat mitzvah—the words might have been a prayer. Call it what you will now, she tells herself, a plea, a mantra, just let it be so.

How did I get into this mess, she wonders, and by this mess she means giving up her prized autonomy, curbing not only her speech but also her thinking to conform to Micah Green's strictures? And if that wasn't bad enough, repressing her doubts, keeping mum and keeping still until finally this day of exodus came, as she knew six months ago, hell, a year ago, that it must.

By this mess she does not mean getting pregnant because in the turmoil and wreckage of her life the pregnancy is a constant; she can even call it a moral imperative. Whatever else happens—whether or not she finishes the Ph.D. that is 90 percent complete, whether she reestablishes a connection with her family, first with Rob and then with her parents and sister—she refuses to call her pregnancy a mistake. How can destiny be a mistake, even if destiny arrives a year or three earlier than it might have?

On her lap Susan has a bag with supper (cheese sandwich, apple, granola bar) and a manila envelope with the 157 pages of manuscript. She has no appetite, not for food, not for what's in the envelope. At Stamford she and the Brown halfback talk about, of all things, babies: he has three older sisters, all of them married, and he's seen a lot of babies born. Soon her eyes close, the manila envelope slips from her grasp and when she opens them again the sunlight has dimmed and the train is pulling into the New Haven station.

Thirty minutes later she feels the first round of contractions.

Something tells her this is no false alarm. Should she get off in Bridgeport and go straight to the hospital? The contractions are 15 minutes apart. She forces herself to fight the

panic. There's time, she says. Her mind has resolved around one thing, a banner waving above the debris of the battlefield: making it to Boston and putting herself under the protection of her brother. She called Rob twice yesterday, missed him, left a message on his answering machine.

"It's Susan. You can't reach me; I'll call back. I'm coming to Boston tomorrow and I need your help." A pause, and then: "I'm pregnant, nine months pregnant."

The second time she added, "Don't tell mom and dad, not till we've talked."

For the two and a half years that she was an adherent of the Sullivanians, she foreswore all contact with her parents: no visits, no calls, no letters. It's the only way to free yourself from the tyranny of parents, Micah Green insisted. The only way to become an adult.

Both calls to her brother were made on her frantic last day of preparations. For a week she's been transferring research materials and books to her cubicle in Butler Library. She locked the two-drawer file cabinet and gave a key to Malcolm, a research librarian twice her age. With his long beard the color of hoar-frost and his black eyes, he looks as if he's stepped out of a Norse legend. When she explained she might be gone for some months and was worried about the safety of her materials, Malcolm loaded her file cabinet onto a hand truck and wheeled it to his own locked storage space.

"Don't let anyone but me open it up," she told him. "Not without written authorization."

Malcolm gave her an amused look. He was used to the obsessive behavior of Ph.D candidates and Susan's instructions, while extreme, did not faze him.

"Aye aye," he said.

Is she crazy to be so paranoid about Micah and his notorious vindictiveness? As the founder and undisputed leader of the Sullivan Institute for Research in Psychoanalysis and its radical urban community—Micah hates the word commune, with its connotation of unwashed hippies living in urban squalor—he'll do anything to keep a member from leaving. In the early and mid 1970s the group was in its heyday but now, barely a decade later, it's a new world, politically, technologically, and things are starting to fray. Two fathers recently quit the group and, when their wives refused to go with them, sued for custody of their young children. With funds from the Sullivanians, the mothers are fighting them in court. Another young woman who had left without her toddler wound up hiring a couple of wise guys armed with baseball bats to storm the apartment and snatch the boy for her. Better to have fled now, Susan thinks, than to face such choice later—hire a lawyer or hire a thug.

At the beginning, she recalls, it was thrilling to be part of the group. She'd followed a predictable path, first becoming a patient of the Institute's and soon thereafter moving into one of the Sullivanian apartments on the Upper West Side, joining all these young people intent on remaking the world. She'd always been a rebel, a seeker of adventure, and the Sullivanians seemed to answer both needs.

Even though she's been wise to Micah for some time, it still has taken tremendous effort to break free. To get acolytes into the group he first seduces them—the women often literally, he's cruelly handsome, irresistible; the men by promising them the self-confidence that comes from rejecting mommy and daddy to stand on their own two feet. That, and the fame that will accrue to those who make a revolution, because the Reagan years have been a tonic to would-be radicals, becalmed in the liberal eddies after Watergate and after Vietnam. Here at last is a new enemy—this ex-actor, a genial, smiling devil—to reawaken the revolutionary ardor that Micah knows how to stoke.

Twice a year the Sullivanians mount a new piece of political theater in the second floor of an unheated East Village loft, its broken windows testimony to the social upheaval they promote. The RTC they call it, Radical Theater Cooperative, and each audience, small but enthusiastic, becomes a pool of potential new converts.

Many of the Sullivanians are professionals—lawyers, psychiatrists, a prolific magazine writer, even a corporate ad manager—whose salaries go to support the group. Once they are installed in the group's apartments, which he insists must be spotless and well-ordered, with schedules, work rules, discipline, Micah entreats and bullies them to bear allegiance to his ideology, a tangle of post-Maoist egalitarianism and contempt for traditional family and generational hierarchies.

One of Micah's tenets is that children must be raised communally, with members taking turns babysitting and parents allowed only limited time with their own kids. For Susan the fear of losing her baby to the group was the clincher, the reason she's fled without saying goodbye to Jay, the father-to-be. He's a high school history teacher, a gentle soul who would marry her in an instant. How could she say yes, when Jay is hopelessly devoted to Micah and his skewed view of the world?

Besides Malcolm the librarian, Susan also enlisted Ann-Marie, a college friend, to help store the things she couldn't take with her. Waiting until mid-afternoon when the apartment was deserted, she crammed an old duffel full of clothes and bumped it down two flights of stairs.

Ann-Marie and her boyfriend drove up in his VW bus, met her on the corner of Broadway and 99th St. and relieved her of the bag, to be hidden under a bed in their Prospect Heights apartment.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Ann-Marie asked.

"You're saving my life is all. I'm going out of town. I'll tell you in a couple of weeks."

"But your baby?"

"I'm not going to have it here. I'm going to Boston." She let this slip without meaning to and immediately swore Ann-Marie to silence.

"Is that wise? I mean, it could happen any day."

"I have to do it. Go on, now, and thank you. Thank you."

Now the train is past Bridgeport. It's impossible to sleep, the contractions are coming every nine minutes. Her breathing quickens; despite her efforts to keep quiet there are little puffs of anxiety escaping from her lips. Brian, watching her, says she has to get off at the next station.

"No," she says, fighting to keep her voice on an even keel.

The train crosses into Rhode Island as the last light drains from the sky. Susan cups her belly, stares at her watch; the contractions are only four minutes apart. In the focused circle of light from the overhead reading lamp, her aggrieved features are blotchy, coarsened from the labor her body is undergoing.

Brian registers the pain flickering across her face. He rises to his feet, inches from her.

"You're having your baby. We need to get you help."

They are slowing, approaching Providence and after Providence it is another 42 minutes to Back Bay station in Boston. Her insides are being pounded and stretched by this baby who wants out. Wave after wave of pain is forcing everything else from her consciousness.

"It's…it's…" The effort of trying to formulate the words defeats her, she shrinks into the scratchy seat covering and presses one hand to her belly. Brian, adamant, swaying as the train lurches and bucks, insists he'll take her to the hospital as soon as they reach the station.

"I need to get to Boston," she says urgently. "I have a brother there."

Listening to her own voice, between a whisper and a croak, reveals to her the absurdity of her plan, or rather, lack of plan. She knows no doctor in Boston, she's made no preparations with any hospital. Can she be the same person who had a dissertation outline within months of arriving in the graduate psych department at Columbia, who aced every exam, who juggled

effortlessly her teaching assistant's duties, her research and her Sullivanian chores, who lived her double life—by day the driven grad student, by night the committed, semi-promiscuous revolutionary—with aplomb? On moving in with the group she cropped her long black hair in favor of a short, rakish, revolutionary cut; her full figure, her sharp intelligence proclaimed her a person to be reckoned with—not to mention a sex object. Micah kept insisting that group members sleep with someone different every night, but after six months she found Jay and that was the end of sleeping around.

"There's no time. Here we are in Providence. I'm calling for help."

In the midst of the rustle of arms thrusting into coats, of hand luggage being hefted, of people edging out of their seats, whispering to each other, those in the know putting distance between themselves and Susan's ordeal, the conductor's voice comes over the loudspeaker: "Providence station, arriving in Providence."

As soon as the announcement is over Brian is shouting "Conductor! Conductor, we have an emergency here. This woman needs help, she needs a doctor and an ambulance."

He plucks her suitcase from the rack and reaches a strong arm toward her, grasping her left hand, urging her to stand. Instead her head and shoulders slump toward the window. She tries to raise her legs onto the seat but the effort is too great. Through the spasms she hears voices calling back and forth.

Abandoning the effort to get her out of the car, he bends quickly to grasp her ankles. He lifts. Now she is lying on her back, knees bent. Susan tries not to cry out but the pressure is too great; her moans are coming in relentless short bursts, like the chug of a locomotive climbing an impossibly steep grade.

The overhead lights in the car have switched on and the conductor's uniform, which was dusky and indistinct in the darkness, suddenly emerges in official blue. The conductor, a large man with a lined brown face, pushes past the disembarking passengers.

"What is it? What's the matter?"

"She's having a baby. She needs a doctor and an ambulance right away. And tell them to hold the train."

One look at Susan and the conductor is on the PA system. "Will any physician or nurse report urgently to car 6, repeat any physician or nurse to car 6 at once. Prefer an OBGYN but

any physician." He pushes the button on his walkie talkie to tell the engineer to delay the departure; he asks the station office to call for an ambulance.

For Susan it's impossible to say which is more painful, the baby stretching her to the breaking point or the imminent humiliation of being served up publicly. like a case-study of mistimed parturition, on two seats of an Amtrak train.

Almost immediately two doctors appear, one a newly minted fellow in obstetrics at the Brigham, the other an interventional cardiologist. The obstetrician, a diminutive woman named Rose Kelly, sterilizes her hands with rubbing alcohol. Her older colleague listens to Susan's heart beat while Kelly bends to examines her.

"What's your name? she asks in a conversational voice, and then, "Susan, how are you feeling? How much pain are you in?"

The answer is a gasp. "Too much. Can you give me something?"

"I'll see what we can do. Now listen, I don't want you to push right now," she tells her. "Breathe deeply and think peaceful thoughts. Everything is going to be fine and dandy." Then she turns to the cardiologist, Bruce Levitt, head of the electro-physiology lab at the Mass General. "The baby is breached," she whispers. "The head is facing backwards."

"Can you turn it around so we can deliver here?"

"I don't know. Pretty tough conditions. A pause, then: "What've you got for pain?"

Levitt hands her a bottle of Percoset tablets. Kelly breaks three into small pieces and tries to feed them to Susan.

No, she says, not hungry, and closes her teeth.

"It's not food, it's medicine." Kelly is speaking slowly and distinctly, afraid that Susan will pass out. She crumbles the pills into even smaller fragments and places them on Susan's tongue. Swallow them, she orders, you'll feel better.

A few paces away, Levitt is demanding that the conductor call again for the ambulance.

"It's a matter of life and death for this woman and her baby."

Kelly's hand is on Susan's pelvis and she is talking into her ear, reassuring her that it will be okay. Nine centimeters dilated, but no sign of the baby's head; the concern on Kelly's face is patent. Susan is mumbling something and Kelly bends even closer. What is it, she asks.

The pain continues to build, more intense than anything Susan has known, but her mind

is separating itself from the pain, as if her heart rate is slowing and a precious, fragile awareness is taking hold. She is seeing herself at a distance, seeing her life in all its striving and accomplishments, all its imperfections and wrong turns.

"Two things," she says to this small women hovering over her and behaving like a doctor though she was sure she was in a train car and not in a doctor's office. "First, save my baby if you can. Do whatever you can for her"—Susan clings to the conviction that this tiny infant fighting to be born is a girl—"do it, and don't worry about me. It's her I want to save."

I see, I understand, Kelly says. This is not the time to agree or disagree; she will do what she can for both mother and child and not make any choices she doesn't have to make

"Second, my brother and my parents and my sister. Brother, Rob Bruner, B R U N E R, in Waltham. Parents, Marshall and Elena, in Lenox, in western Mass. Sister, Talia, in DC. Call them. Tell them I love them. Tell them to take care of this baby and to hold on to her, whatever the struggle, whatever the cost."

"Bruner," Kelly repeats, loudly enough for Levitt to hear. "Rob in Waltham, Marshall and Elena Bruner in Lenox, Talia in DC."

"They'll try to take her away from them. Don't let them. I want my family to have custody. I want them to take care of her and not let them get her."

"Who? Who is going to try to get your baby?"

"They. Jay and Micah. All the Sullivanians, in New York. The baby is to stay with Rob and my parents. Whatever it takes. They can fight them. They can fight them and win."

"Fight who? Who can they fight?"

"The Sullivanians. Don't let them get my child."

She says this with all the force she can muster. The words ring in Kelly's ear and then, in a fraction of an instant, Susan is silent. Kelly has a prick of fear, but no, her hand registers the pressure of the abdomen, expanding and contracting. She nods. Susan's pulse is rapid but steady.

"Sullivanians," Kelly repeats to Levitt. "What in the world are Sullivanians?"

Levitt knows. The daughter of a colleague joined the Sullivanians six years ago. The daughter is older than this young woman and Levitt's colleague, a distinguished professor of internal medicine, has tried everything he can to get his daughter back, so far without success.

"I'll tell you later. As soon as we get her into an ambulance."

Kelly's been thinking about how long it will take to get Susan to the hospital. "If I can do an episiotomy I can deliver here. It may be the only way to save this baby."

"Too risky. What if she bleeds? And the chance of infection?"

"She doesn't want to lose that baby."

"She may have already lost her. We can't tell. She's got to go to the hospital.

"I can do it here."

"Dr. Kelly."

From the tone of his voice she's sure that he's going to pull rank. He doesn't. He speaks to her as mildly as he can.

"I'm sure you can. I can tell you're as able as they come. And if we were 50 miles from a hospital or in rural Ecuador I'd say go for it, let's take the chance. But not here."

"Very little movement from the baby, that's what I'm worried about."

They have no way to measure except her hand on Susan's body or in the birth canal. She crouches down and with her fingers is reaching inside, as far up the vagina as she can. What if, she is thinking. What if I can do it without cutting?

Levitt looks at his watch: barely five minutes since he and Kelly arrived on the run, summoned by the conductor's urgent plea. Where is the ambulance? The self-assurance of this calm and capable young doctor will have counted for little if they lose this woman lying on the train seat.

All of a sudden there's a commotion on the platform. The conductor dashes out of the car, gesturing. "Here, she's in here."

Two burly EMS techs enter, holding the stretcher sideways to move it along the aisle. Dr. Kelly has her fingers around the baby's buttocks and now she pulls with her strong right hand. A flash of white skin appears.

"Susan, push." She shouts into Susan's ear. "You can do it, Susan, you can do it all by yourself. Push!"

And the buttocks are clear, descending, and Kelly has both hands on the torso of the baby and pulling, gently but with a grip that will not slacken. One of the techs has white pads and alcohol and a surgical scissors; the other readies an oxygen mask. It's too crowded, how can anyone work in this space? Levitt takes two steps back and lets the techs draw near. At the doors to the car, Brian is blocking traffic, making sure no one else can approach.

"I've got her." Kelly announces, holding the newborn, looking for a sign that the lungs can work. She plucks a wipe from the tech and cleans the baby's mouth and nostrils. She opens its mouth and compresses the chest ever so gently, a butterfly touch. Come on, she urges, come on. And then it happens, a choking sound, the drawing of breath and a cry for life.

Levitt's quiet words are heard over the shrill wail of the newborn: "Time of delivery, nine fifty-one."

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It is nearly 11 p.m. when Susan opens her eyes to see a young woman in a skirt and blouse, seated in the plastic chair at the end of the hospital bed.

"I'm Dr. Kelly. Rose Kelly."

"Are you the one..?"

"I delivered your baby, yes. She's a beautiful little girl, doing just fine."

"Wow." Shy in front of this stranger who had tugged at her body and extracted her daughter, Susan says, "This was my first."

"In a way it was my first too—my first in a passenger train."

They talk and finally Susan comprehends that she's in a Providence hospital, and that Dr. Kelly interrupted her journey home to save her and her baby.

"Here's my phone number in case I can do anything for you in Boston," Dr. Kelly says as she gets up to go. "Oh, and that young man, here's his phone number, too."

She hands Susan a piece of note paper, and just as she is about to leave, a tall man with hair curling down his neck parts the curtain dividing Susan's bed from the rest of the room. It's three years since she's seen Rob and her smile is so immediate that it swallows up her entire face.

"You know how to make a dramatic reappearance, don't you?" His words are sweet to her, all his one upsmanship, his nonstop teasing from her teenage years, are a thing of the past.

"Susan, I've seen her, seen your daughter. My niece." He pauses, his voice shaky. "She's gorgeous."

She sees the tears in his eyes and suddenly she can't control her own tears; they drip and slide through her enormous smile. He steps to the side of the bed to embrace her. Despite announcing her departure Dr. Kelly is still here, against the ribbed partition, unable to take a step, barely in control of her own emotions.

Rob clutches Susan's shoulders, buries his nose in her neck, nuzzles her cheek; finally his rough stubble of a day's beard seems to wake both of them. He straightens up.

"I know it must be a long story, how you wound up in that group, how you left it—and this beautiful baby, where she came from. But what the hell, if you want to talk I've got all night."

Where to begin? Susan needs to pee, she's thirsty and even hungry; most of all she wants to see her baby, to confirm with her own eyes what Rose Kelly and now her brother have told her. Her gaze flicks from Rob to Dr. Kelly and back to Rob, who is still standing there only an arm's length away, and in this instant her regret over the years of cutting herself off from her family is acute, far more painful than the soreness of her body.

With his smile he is urging her to speak and she realizes that she has yet to say a word to him. The regret subsides, replaced by an overflowing sense of grace at having her baby, her brother and this doctor all close. Micah Green and the Sullivanians seem very far away; perhaps in time she can make them vanish altogether.

"Born again," she says to Rob, her voice scratchy at first and then gaining volume. "That's the short version. I'll tell you more as soon as I've seen my daughter. She's born and now that I've escaped those people, that group, I feel as if I'm born again."