

Crimson Stain

Inspired from Tim O'Brien's "Ambush."

When she was eleven, my daughter asked me if I had ever had an abortion. She knew about the pregnancy tests I had dropped in the trash can, though at the time she was too young to really understand. She knew about the mornings I had spent vomiting. My throat closed up when she asked, but I did what seemed right at the time, which was to say, "Oh, honey, of course not," and then to bake warm, gooey chocolate chip cookies together. Maybe she'll ask again when she's grown. I want to tell her exactly what I remember happening, and then I want to say to her that as a little girl she knew more than I gave her credit for. I want to tell her that she's the reason I keep writing:

He was a tall man of twenty-three, seven years my junior--dark eyes, dark complexion, and dark hair. I had just come out of a nasty divorce, and there he was, a distraction and something different. I felt young again, like I was a freshman in college experiencing the world for the first time. No more cheap wine or midnight runs to IHOP. No, this man was all class. He sent flowers to work one morning. The note read: Pack your bags and meet me at the airport Friday at noon. We went to Hawaii, and I left with a soaring spirit and a glass of champagne and a beautiful man. I returned with a peeling sunburn, no man, and the teeniest something growing deep inside me.

I drove by his house three times, but I never stopped. I dialed his number twice, but I never let it go past the third ring. I scrolled through Instagram once, but I never did again because the picture of a red-headed goddess hanging on his arm turned my stomach.

So I called my friend Nancy, and she said, "What the heck are you doing, Liz? Your thirty years old for goodness sake. You can't just go running around like that." Then I hung up, and I went to the fridge for a glass of my boxed wine. And then I put it back. Because. Well. You know.

A week passed, and I stopped at a Walgreens catty-corner from my daughter's elementary school. I picked up a Twix bar and two home pregnancy tests. Then I picked up Eliana. "How was school?" I said.

"It was fine," she said.

Another week passed, and two items remained in my Walgreens sack and neither item was the Twix bar. The plastic bag sat beneath my sink, squashed between my bag of Maybelline makeup

and Eliana's vanilla-scented bubble bath. I pulled both tests from the bag and sat down on the toilet.

It was a hot, sticky night, and my AC had decided to kaput. I watched the stick carefully for two minutes, feeling jittery like I'd had too much espresso. Two pink lines. I trashed it. I should have splurged for the test that actually gave you a digital reading. I took the other test from its packaging, and I repeated the process. Sweat crept down the crevices of my body, between my aching breasts and down my back, and the bathroom clock made harsh, staccato "tick-tocks." Two pink lines. I trashed it and went to bed.

"Mommy," a small voice called. I glanced at my clock on the nightstand: 2:37 AM. My heart hammered.

"Baby, what's wrong?" She came near, and I pulled my daughter close and felt her head.

From behind her back she pulled out one of the tests. "I had to go to the bathroom," she said. "What's this stick?"

I searched for a lie, and none came. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth, and my daughter stared at me, eyes wide and lips parted in childlike innocence.

"Nothing important," I said. "Darling, let's just go to bed," and I pulled her next to me, tucking the covers around her shoulders.

Nancy came the next day, and she said it was time to get my life together. "Look at these unpaid bills," she shook her head in disgust. "Liz, what happened to your job?"

"Gone with the man," I said simply.

She clucked her tongue at me as if I were a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar. "Get in the car," she said.

She took me to Planned Parenthood. "I don't want to be a parent again."

She rolled her eyes. "Exactly."

We went in and they were kind to me. A petite lady with a gentle face and soft, mouse brown curls told me I had a choice. She took me to the receptionist after she'd laid out my options. "Can we schedule you for a week from today?" the receptionist asked.

Eliana did not ask about the sticks again, but she did find me retching into the toilet three mornings in a row. She placed a small hand on my back. “Mommy, are you okay?”

I nodded as I wiped my mouth with a washcloth.

“Why aren’t you happy anymore?”

I gaped at my child. When had she realized my life had failed? Had I also stolen her joy? “Soon,” I lied, and I bent to kiss the top of her golden head.

Nancy held my hand the following day. She assured me I was doing the right thing. The operation was quick. My first thought was that it seemed impossible to take the life of someone so small in such little time. I stopped myself, wondering where such a thought had come from.

Nancy drove me home, and she settled me into bed and brought me hot chicken noodle soup. “It’s only Campbell’s,” she told me as she lifted the spoon to my mouth. “You know I can’t cook.”

I tried for a smile, but a moan escaped my lips instead. My abdomen cramped, and Nancy helped me to the toilet. Blood, so much blood. “The doctor said it’s completely normal,” Nancy said.

“Is it?”

“Yes, it will go away soon.”

“Will it?”

The words felt empty and void. I stared at the pool of blood.

It’s been years, and I haven’t begun to figure it out. My therapist says to forgive myself; Nancy says there’s nothing to forgive. In the mundane day to day, I try not to think on it, but when I’m folding laundry or packing Eliana’s lunch or helping her with homework, I’ll see a wisp of a frame with haunted hazel eyes. I’ll watch her walk toward me, arms outstretched, her sun-kissed hair gently blown by the breeze, and she’ll pass some distance from me and suddenly stop, lower her arms, smile at some secret thought, and then continue along the road until she dissolves into a crimson stain.

