

Clinic

I.

I pop in Beethoven again. I'm driving to the pediatric specialty clinic to see my child's surgeon, humming along while in the back seat Diana makes the grunting sound that for her means "coo." A few weeks ago at a burger place someone asked Geoff and me if Diana had whooping cough. Yes, she has whooping cough but we thought we'd grab a bite out anyway. I assume Geoff is at work. He disappeared last night with his briefcase and a paper bag stuffed with clothes after we'd had yet another fight. He wanted me to smile. "All I want is one smile," he'd said. He came right up to me, put his hand over my mouth and tried to force the corners up. "You *bit* me! I can't believe you *bit* me," he kept saying as I trailed after him, apologizing. "Hey," I pointed out as he grabbed his keys, "I didn't break the skin."

So here I am, a subtle and cultured creature left with Beethoven and a defective baby, zooming past the ripe-smelling dairy farm. Across from the farm is a bail bond place and next to that a church. You have to be pretty deep into your faith not to notice the stench.

I cut back through Bernalillo toward the expressway. The music bounces around the car and something slides in the glove compartment, probably the disposable camera I keep meaning to get developed. Before Diana was born, I bought some birth announcement cards with tiny pastel bassinets printed on the front and ovals cut away for baby photos to shine through. Every time I start filling them out Diana has another setback and I'm forced to imagine a follow-up mailing of little black coffin cards.

“What’s brown and sits on a piano bench?” I ask Diana, and then suddenly I remember waking last night to that old TV movie, Sybil’s insane mother banging on a piano as part of Sybil’s torture, and I wonder now what my Beethoven CD-playing does to Diana. Will she associate music with torture? What will music mean to her?

II.

The only way I can propel myself into the pale gray building is to complain to Diana about the lack of parking. Inside, just as the elevator doors begin to close in on us, a woman rushes up and sticks her arm in. I see chapped fingers and a flowered sleeve, then the doors reopen and the woman boards. She nods at me and clicks her tongue sympathetically at Diana.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asks.

“Nothing,” I answer quickly, adding the only thing I can think of, “It’s a she.”

III.

The elevator lurches. I keep a vacuous smile alive. Keep it light on elevators or the cables might break. I look down at Diana in her carrier, really seeing her, seeing past the cute little teddy bear patch embroidered on her t-shirt to the eleven-and-a-half wasted pounds, the bruises left behind by the most recent IVs, the sliced and then crudely sewn wrists. Not even four months old and it looks like she’s tried to kill herself seven times. “Is everyone trying to do you in?” I ask her, tugging her blanket back over her twisted thumbs. Time for an inspirational message: at least Diana *has* thumbs. *Lies*. It’s not lying, the absent-yet-clearly-much-needed Geoff would say. It’s being positive.

IV.

I fish out Diana's patient card and hand it to the receptionist, who waves at us to go in and wait. This is why we need a patient card, I always think. We wait. Diana dozes in her carrier. Or she cries. I open my book. Or I don't. My book signals I'm different from all the others. No, I'm not a regretful and bitter biter, I'm an elite intellectual. See me read.

As for the waiting room itself, a decorator has been through at some point. Dusty southwest colors predominate, enlivened by touches of turquoise. Large watercolors of waterfowl grace the walls, counteracting the desert effect. The carpet is strictly utilitarian, the all-inclusive non-color of secretions. Today kids are crawling all over, dragging battered and filthy toys, leaving wet trails like snails. Back in one of the treatment rooms a baby howls. A boy with a big blotch on the seat of his pants yanks idly on the curtains to a window that looks out on a tarred and graveled roof dotted here and there with oddly shaped vents, humped aluminum sculpture.

I turn a page even though I haven't been reading. Even at home with no Geoff watching I sometimes flip pages unread.

V.

Across the room a mother bending over her son makes small sounds of exasperation. She dabs ineffectively at her kid's stomach, her eyes filling with tears, and says to the room in general, "He's leaking."

I watch over the child while the mother goes in search of supplies. These days I'm always prepared for sloppy eventualities. I'm determined never to make a mistake again,

which is in itself a mistake, I know. The boy has beautiful rolls of brown pudginess creasing at every joint. I'd like to steal a handful of flesh and press it like clay onto Diana's skeleton. He's certainly not suffering from *failure to thrive*, one of the phrases I keep hearing from doctors as they discuss Diana.

When the mother returns most of the other parents look at the carpet or the ceiling and try not to breathe as she peels away the blown colostomy bag and mops him up. The whole time he frog-kicks happily. Diana's colostomy is higher up on her abdomen than this boy's. The mother replaces the bag with a gauze pad for now. There's no point in messing with a new bag. The surgeon will want to take a look.

VI.

Dr. Troy has the blunt shapeless haircut of a five-year-old who has decided to cut her own hair and the sad dark eyes of the smartest kid in the class. Whenever I call or visit her, my heart beats hard in a way it hasn't done since high school. Every medical explanation she gives unfolds in splendid order, as if her brain works from an outline, and yet her personal life remains a complete mystery.

When we finally get in to see her I explain that I'm afraid I will have to give up the breast pump. It's cute and all, a miniature sucking and bobbing Texas oil jack, but I don't have time for it. Diana will have to go entirely on fake formula poured through her stomach tube. "This will mean I'm a bad mother," I explain. To me it's a fact. I'm too tired to deal with anything but facts, so I am surprised when the doctor bristles on my behalf.

"If anyone ever says that about you, you send that person to me!" Dr. Troy thuds

the desk with her forefinger. It's all very dramatic. Even if it's an act, I appreciate it.

VII.

“If she does another one of those bladder taps and doesn't get anything I'm going to jump off a cliff,” I say to Diana, who is visible in the rear view mirror, her monitor wires sprouting like chest hairs out of the top of her terrycloth jumpsuit. Clinic trips are recurring dreams of the Sisyphus variety. “I'm going to jump off a cliff and land on three innocent people and leave all my money to birth control.”

VIII.

Geoff shows up at the clinic. He looks OK. His hair is kind of long.

The hallway by the reception desk is lined with families. We share the refugee look: dull and tortured eyes, odd bundles of supplies, grungy and makeshift bandages. We pass through our peers to find that the waiting room is surprisingly empty. A young woman cradling a baby sits near the window, and a toddler with his back to us plays with some blocks on the floor. Another woman with blond hair curled as tightly as concealed grief stares at the carpet. As we sit down, the toddler turns, revealing an enormous deformed jaw shaped like a football. The boy opens his mouth slightly as if to speak and I see a black, solid, bleeding mass inside. Geoff busies himself with Diana, tugging fussily at her sweatshirt, bouncing her on his knee.

With her foot the blond woman shoves a few blocks in the toddler's direction. Is she the mother? When they are at home, at least, does she look the boy in the face? I want to see the mother's eyes. I want to grill her on the condition, actually, so it's lucky for her

that she doesn't glance up. The kid continues to balance blocks in impossible ways, big on small, cantilevered, creating a structure more horizontal than vertical.

When he crouches to study his work from a new angle, his long chin nearly touching the floor, I ask him what he is making. Dumb question, with that jaw he can't talk. He moves his lips. I tell him that he's doing a great job, that I have never understood this preoccupation with building *up*. Sideways is better, it lasts longer. The mother, if that's who she is, acknowledges nothing.

Eventually a nurse leads them away. "Bleeding again..." I hear. Once they're out of sight Geoff slumps like punched dough. The remaining woman shakes her head sadly at him, jiggling her child protectively. "Poor thing," she says in a hushed voice. "It's all relative, isn't it? Sometimes I feel almost *fortunate*."

"I know what you mean," Geoff says. Diana lets out one of her strange squawks and the woman smiles, then immediately frowns, as if she has committed some sort of transgression.

"I guess God doesn't give you anything you can't handle," the woman adds doubtfully, and Geoff nods, careful not to look at me. I'd once told him I'd shoot the next person who said that to me.

IX.

My list says I want to drop the 3 a.m. feeding, down from eight feedings to seven per day. The gastrostomy has been leaking and stomach acids are eating at Diana's delicate skin. She is gagging more and more frequently after each tube feeding. The apnea monitor settings must be adjusted to reduce the number of false alarms or I will go

rabid. Diana's colostomy still prolapses from time to time, and a gray spot is forming on one of her cutdown scars.

"Carole." Geoff waves the list at me. "I asked how you guys were doing. I called *specifically* and asked."

"What is the answer to *how are you?* The answer is *fine.*"

The door opens. "Ah, the list!" Dr. Troy enters, smiling. She has us in the palm of her hand and she knows it. "What would we do without the list?"

Geoff ploughs through it. Godlike Dr. Troy has an answer for everything, new schedules, new monitor settings, hints from the ostomy nurse. The gray spot on Diana's wrist turns out to be a missed stitch. Dr. Troy goes on about how flesh can't heal properly around a foreign object, how an abscess forms as the body slowly ejects the thread, how it is common for lost sutures to surface over time. Meanwhile, she holds Diana's arm flat against the examination table, sharp scissors appear, and she snips. Blood beads up and the coarse black thread, a bit of the larger darkness, is plucked free. Dazzled and horrified by this display, I press a cotton ball against the site while Diana screams and Geoff makes nervous soothing noises. Dr. Troy has scarcely paused in her recitation.

"Doctors," Geoff says later, as we yank on Diana's clothes.

"What did you want Troy to do? Take forever?"

"She just stuck scissors in our kid's arm." He reaches for Diana's socks. "When did you get so hard?"

I stuff Diana's shoes into my purse. I have no answer. The cotton ball now taped to Diana's wrist has an intense dot of red, a bracelet set with a ruby.

X.

“Diana, dear,” I say as the (my) (our) baby squirms and cries, “Must we go through this every time? We always weigh you at the clinic, what’s the big deal?” But Diana continues to fight. She hates the scale, the way it shifts under her as if to emphasize she’s on loose footing.

“You’re always so patient,” the nurse says to me.

“That’s what you think.” Together we wrestle with Diana. It takes five grown men to get an X-ray of her. “There’s something about the middle of the night, for example.” The nurse laughs. It’s not funny, though, what happens in those dim rooms as I carry Diana back and forth, sopping up her life’s fluids as they seep out of her. Last night her monitor had gone off twice, both false alarms. I ripped off the belt that held the sensors to Diana’s chest and pulled the plug. *So the kid quits breathing, at least I’ll get some sleep.* Did I sleep? No, I wrestled my Errant Self to the ground, gave it a few kicks, and then with the shaking hands of surrender strapped the monitor belt back on Diana.

But maybe night is just nightmare because here I am now basking under the bright lights of the clinic.

XI.

Holding Diana on my lap, I ride the wheeled desk chair across the treatment room, gently bumping the far wall. The next time across I allow us to thump louder and Diana laughs, or what passes for a laugh. If it didn’t have all those connotations I’d say she *croaks*. I spin us around the examination table, my foot flies out and kicks the wastebasket.

“Who’s making all that racket?” I ask. “Is it your awful mother?” And the door opens, revealing the esteemed Dr. Simmons. Unlike Dr. Troy, Simmons never remembers who we are and never tells us anything. Maybe all neurologists are like that.

XII.

A resident begins sketching the family tree, placing Diana at the root and then branching up to include my family history, a history that I already know won’t offer any clues. Is Diana the root or the fruit of this tree split by lightning?

The resident finishes with me and turns to Geoff.

“Why do you want to talk to *him*?” I ask without thinking. On my lap Diana won’t sit still.

“It takes two to tango, Carole,” Geoff says, and the resident laughs. Geoff’s hazel eyes gleam an unfamiliar blue in this light, and now he’s smiling along with the resident.

Later, I hold Diana standing on my lap while the dysmorphology expert diagrams sets and subsets and the intersection of sets. We’ve seen most of it before. Diana’s birth defects are a fluke, loosely grouped, forming not a syndrome but rather an association. “Oh, is there an association?” I ask. “How do I join?”

“Is something wrong with you today?” Geoff asks when the doctor steps out of the room.

“Why are you pretending to be part of my tree?”

“I *am* a part of the tree,” he argues. There’s a knock on the door and the doctor and a pregnant woman wearing a turquoise-colored silk dress enter the room. She’s holding a stack of manila folders. When the expert introduces her I don’t catch her name

because Diana lets out a screech and arches her back.

Geoff takes Diana and stands, bouncing and lifting her to calm her, raising her high over his head like an offering, while I watch the pregnant woman. The doctor rumbles on in his kind way about how there is no reason Geoff and I can't have more children. There are no guarantees, of course, but our risks would be that for the population at large. On the other hand, he reminds us, we have more work to do with Diana and may want to consider waiting until we're in the clear.

"In the clear?" I echo, unable to turn away from the woman in turquoise, an apparition, bulging and serene, filled with light and leaking a faint celestial music. How does she do this job? Does she assume she's immune? In the clear?

"It would be pretty hard to have another kid." I have interrupted the doctor, who stops politely and waits. "I mean there's a certain loss of innocence." They nod. It's nothing they haven't heard before.

"The good news is that it's not progressive," the doctor tells me gently. "The news is not always this good. All of this can be corrected through surgery."

"If she lives through the surgery," Geoff says.

"Yes." The doctor is as unfazed as the pregnant woman, professionally sympathetic yet essentially untouched. I look at Geoff, at his fingers spread against Diana's back, then back at our angelic advisors. I'm gazing into a blank, cloudless sky, a mirror with no reflection. The clear.

XIII.

"So, Diana, here we are at the clinic." I pull off Diana's sweatshirt and then her

shoes. “Who is with you at the clinic?” Diana blinks at me. “Right! Mommy is at the clinic. And who else? Right! Dr. Troy.” The doctor and a medical student wearing a Donald Duck tie (nice try) are busy with some spiral notebooks piled on the desk. “And who else is at the clinic?” Off come her pants.

“Da.”

“Diana! Right again. You are so smart. Arms up.” I tug off the t-shirt and turn to Dr. Troy. “I’m going to leave the diaper on until you’re ready.”

Dr. Troy opens a drawer and pulls on latex gloves. Diana stiffens and her mouth goes square.

I hold Diana’s arms flat as Dr. Troy examines her. Diana’s t-shirt falls from the examination table and the student bends to pick it up. The back of his neck is brick red.

“It’s OK,” I say over Diana’s cries. “Almost done. Almost done.”

“That felt good.” Dr. Troy snaps off a glove. “I think we’re OK.”

“Well, Diana—” I tape the diaper and pick her up. The kid is furious. “Did that feel good?”

Dr. Troy shakes her head at me as she walks out. The student hands me the shirt and helps with Diana’s socks even though Diana fights him the whole way, kicking like mad. He struggles to introduce her suddenly rigid arms to the sleeves of her sweatshirt. She whips her head back and forth. Drool flies. She is so intent on thwarting him that she forgets to cry.

XIV.

“Well, I don’t see why you put up with him,” my visiting sister says. Diana is on

Nell's lap, playing with the gray frayed cord of a play telephone that has been chewed by God knows how many mouths at the clinic. "You should stick up for yourself. What you *should* do is come back home where we can all help you."

"I don't own him."

"*Disown* him, is what I'm saying."

"Oh, I don't know. Things could be worse." Nell shifts in disbelief as I stage a little tug-of-war with Diana. She has a death grip on that phone. "He's paying for everything, his insurance is, because I can't work anymore. He shows up here and there, now and again. He loves her. Some people just need to think they have a choice."

"*You* have a choice."

"No, I don't. Actually, he doesn't either. Ha!" I wave the phone over Diana's head. "Victory! But who am I to rub that in?"

XV.

I strap Diana in and start to back out when I notice the rear view mirror is out of whack. As soon as I adjust that, the seat seems wrong, too far back. I'm shrinking. Pretty soon I won't be able to see over the steering wheel. Someone honks. The vultures are lining up for my parking space.

XVI.

I tell the nurse I'll be right back. Carrying Diana, I duck into a clinic restroom and lock the door. I don't want Diana to touch anything except me so I hold her while I go, and then we wash hands together. Our reflection ripples in the cheap indestructible sheet

of metal that serves as a mirror.

“Your mother is quite an acrobat,” I say, lingering. Diana still doesn’t have enough hair to make a ponytail, but I have stuck a barrette on top of her head anyway. The tip of her ochre gastrostomy tube, sealed with a rubber band, pokes out the leg of her pink ruffled sunsuit. She has Geoff’s color eyes, as changeable as the mood ring a boy gave me in seventh grade. When I was pregnant I told my sister I didn’t care *what* I had, as long as the child inherited Geoff’s color eyes.

I wave, sprinkling a few drops of water. “Hi, baby. You’re my baby.” Finally there’s a mirror that really reflects us. “They’re going to wonder what we’re up to,” I say to the distorted Diana, whose forehead appears elongated, as if absorbing the idea, then suddenly shrinks.

When eventually I hear Geoff’s voice outside the door, I unlock it. “Come in.”

“But it says *women*,” Geoff protests. I don’t bother to answer so he enters warily, holding out his arms for Diana. When I relinquish her I feel a sharp pain, or maybe I’m having a heart attack. I return to the mirror and rock forward and back to watch my nose blossom and wither.

“So, have you finally gone nuts?” Geoff asks.

I find a relatively smooth spot in the metal, gather up my hair and turn from side to side. This is how Nell and I amused themselves for hours as teenagers, imagining glamour.

“I never lie to her about where we’re going. She looks straight at me, she knows what clinic means, and she cries, usually not for long.” I let my hair fall.

By now Geoff is standing behind me with one hand resting on my shoulder, his

other arm looped around Diana, caught by something—the warped family portrait. Diana tips forward, laughing. She has the goofiest laugh, as if someone stepped on a crow. We can't help but laugh with her. Who knows? I'm thinking maybe we'll stay in this funhouse for good.

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