

Good Night, Silence

There she is: black hair, hazel eyes, arched brows, gummy smile, and miniature Chewbacca laugh. She's got a diaper swollen with piss and she's batting the dangling legs of a purple giraffe as it hangs above her on the play mat. My baby girl.¹

It's late. Too late for babies to be awake and playing. And there is school tomorrow for both of us: me, teaching at the high school², she, napping at the daycare down the street³. But this is our time. Our only time, really. I will not review the frantic morning pace: alarm at five, shower and dress listening for any sound from her crib, quick feeding⁴ before throwing her into the car seat and dashing out the door. Evenings are our haven. Or mine at least. She doesn't seem to mind hours later than what the *Baby 411* and *Parents* magazine dictate. We work it out, us girls.

"Hungry?" I ask, rising from my spot next to her on the floor. I've become broader, body and style. I notice my pregnancy-thickened hips with the pinch of my jeans. But I rather enjoy my larger self. Like I enjoy the florescent colors and molded plastic her toys have brought to my apartment. We're looking reminiscent of a psyche ward, sure. Who would have thought I'd come to appreciate the clash of electric red and blue with my drab green walls? The heft of my body? My own newly utilitarian breasts?

¹ Tyra. Three months of nausea, six months of anemia, Ten pounds I might never lose. Six hours of agony, two of slime and stench. I'm already forgetting it, aren't I? A trick of biology.

² The awkward silence in the principal's office. "Pregnant?" A wordless look at my bare left hand. She surely tallied the hours ahead of her, fielding phone calls from parents unwilling to let a woman like me teach their children. Because high school students have yet to discover sex.

³ The first afternoon when I ducked out before the bell to pick her up I couldn't get home fast enough. Peeled off her clothes, sick with dread, searching her inch for inch along her warm, white skin, studying her vagina for any sign of trauma.

⁴ Cracked and bleeding nipples, the horror of my blood smeared across her face: vampire baby. It took 3 weeks for us to figure out breastfeeding.

She squeals a little, frustrated that the giraffe doesn't quite make it to her waiting, gaping mouth.

"I'll take that as a 'Yes please, Momma.'"

I tuck her to me and she settles in to feed. Her concentration is evident down to her toes that curl tightly. In a few minutes I'm looking, but not seeing her, seeing him⁵ in the curve of her black brows.⁶ The tightness in my breasts loosens, milk replaced with symbiotic gratitude.

She falls asleep mid-feeding, but I wake her for a diaper change. She fusses, tiny protests, but doesn't cry. She's no longer a creature as she was in the first three months.⁷ But in these moments of need (for sleep, for food, for warmth) she regresses.

"Sh, baby." She doesn't quiet. I zip her into her sleep sack, hold her close. She squirms and groans, head bumping against my collarbone. Giving up, I lay her in the crib, stroke her cheek once more. Whisper *goodnight*.⁸ Closing our bedroom door, I hear her sigh. Then, quiet.

There is a stack of papers I should grade waiting for me on the kitchen table. They suck; I don't have to read them to know it. Working my way through the stack I will doubt my teaching abilities, I will doubt the future of America, and I will doubt the arrival of summer. I'll read Alicia's essay, or David's, and feel momentarily relieved. Thus refreshed I'll grade the papers that follow a little too harshly, knowing that coherent expression of thought is possible, even for teenagers. I'm just not ready to face that. Instead I unpack my cooler from work, the

⁵ Ryan. How disappointing, his response to her arrival. A quick and unexplained fade. My ballooning body taking over the space that used to be us.

⁶ I wonder how she'll fill the hole her father has left in her future. I tell myself that I am enough, but somehow that doesn't sound true. I imagine a box into which I carefully place this worry. It is a sturdy wooden box, a crate. A nailed-shut crate, red-inked *Fragile* along the side and on the top.

⁷ Her first smile, terror. As if a person had possessed her in the night and filled Tyra with human understanding. Then a tsunami of realization, my own sudden importance in the world.

⁸ Do not imagine her cold, blue, and still. She will be warm and needy, as now, in 12 hours.

dirty lunch dishes and the milk I pumped throughout the day.⁹ The dishes go in the sink and the milk in the refrigerator. I repack the cooler for tomorrow: salad with low fat dressing, four empty containers for breast milk, one huge bottle of water, a fork. The house is still.¹⁰ It brims with a lack of motion and sound, and absence heavy enough to feel. Tonight I owe a phone call.¹¹ These Wednesday phone calls are compensation for a distance both emotional and physical.

“I was hoping you’d call,” she says. “Let me get your dad on the phone too. *John!*”

“Hey guys. What are you up to?”¹²

“Talking to you. What’s going on there?”¹³

“Tyra rolled over this week.”

“No! Did she really?” says Mom.

“Good for her,” Dad squeezes in.

“Sure did.” I don’t know why, but I begin to ache. The urge to cry suffocates me, but this is really not the time.¹⁴

⁹ Locking the classroom door, covering the window with paper, crouching in the corner of my classroom with plastic megaphones squashed to my breasts; the fear of discovery, as if I’m a pervert, scurrying across the hall with the milk before anybody can see it and ask what I’ve got.

¹⁰ Ryan loathed silence; television, laughter, Eminem, friends from back home on the phone, anything to fill our apartment with noise (electric cackling and inane conversation, lusty murmurs beside me on the couch, minute-by-minute narration of his culinary efforts. Is she worth this trade? Is there any point to that question?)

¹¹ Mother. How hurt she was that I didn’t want her in the delivery room. “Warrior woman,” I explained, false confidence abounding. I didn’t want to move back home; no words to laugh that off.

¹² The question, a door I’m opening. In the past, a test of our relationship: will this be a discussion of remorse? Regret? Anger? Guilt? The test is a habit I’ve never learned to quit.

¹³ That question, a deflection. It is a new trick of hers, only acquired since my graduation into motherhood. The birth of her granddaughter has delivered perpetual safe conversation.

¹⁴ Another phone call, years ago. I’m standing at the pay phone in a bus station downtown. Next to me there is a paper bag with two changes of clothes, a pack of cigarettes, and *The Queen of the Damned*. “I left school. Can you come and get me?” And, of course, they did.

“What else?” Mom wants to know.

“I’m quitting breastfeeding.” I hadn’t meant to say this.

“Really? Why?” No sound from Dad now.

“It’s too hard at work.”¹⁵

“Hard how?” asks Mom. “Because of the pumping?” I can hear Dad clear his throat in discomfort at the turn in our conversation.

“It’s just too hard thinking of her during the day. I need to...compartmentalize.”

“Hm,” says Mom. “Hard to be Mom at work.”¹⁶

I will not cry.¹⁷

“Do men feel like that?” I ask. “Did you have trouble going to work after I was born, Dad?”

He laughs. “Oh yeah. Men think about that all the time.”

He laughs?¹⁸

“Men are different,” Mom says, kicking into analytical mode. “We become instantly responsible for our babies. It’s survival. That’s why it’s so exhausting, all the love and care, and

¹⁵ Aching, heavy breasts; mind sluggish with milk; surprising, this physical pain of separation.

¹⁶ She should know. I called my mother from school the first day she did it: went back to get her degree. My phone went straight to her voicemail and just like that, she failed. Junior year I punished her by skipping school every Tuesday and Thursday when she went to the university downtown. Smoked cigarettes by the side of the backyard pool. Tanned. Invited my 21 year-old boyfriend to come over with beer.

¹⁷ The twinges and contractions in my breasts will tell me that down the street she is feeding. A rubber nipple. A strange woman feeding her. A day I’ve missed. My own failure apparent.

¹⁸ A man’s prerogative, to pretend she doesn’t exist. He’ll feel no phantom connection, physical or otherwise. No sense of amputation. He’ll laugh for years, travel, love, fuck. He’ll fall in and out of jobs and move across countries. And one day, when life is solid, when he’s decided for himself that he’s ready, he’ll find a young girl. As young as he wants. And they’ll marry and procreate and dote together. In security. And Tyra will never have to cross his mind. His life is, and will always be, a cavernous room; open, airy, so large and undivided, so filled with his own desires that he might go days without ever seeing a window, wall, or door.

overwhelm. On some level you always know that your baby can't live without care. Your care. Men don't have to do that. The good ones learn."

Dad has gone quiet again.¹⁹

"I hear the baby,"²⁰ I soon say. "I'll call you next week."

Dead phone in my hand, I stand outside the bedroom door.²¹ I could creep in and watch her sleep for a while. I could crumple on the floor and cry because I'm alone. I could walk away and leave her.²² I could shut my mind and pretend²³ that I know where we're headed.

I dial the phone. "Ryan?"

"Hey. You okay? Tyra okay?"

"Fuck you. And fuck your superficial concern."

Silence.

"Okay. Wow. I don't know what you want me to say to that."²⁴

"I want you to admit that you're an asshole! That you've left the best thing that could have happened to you. I want you to want to come back. I want you to want to hold your own daughter."

"Do you really want me back in your life?"²⁵

"I don't know."

¹⁹ Lucky for him, because right now, in this moment, I want to scream. I want to hurt him. I want him shackled, gagged, bloated, sleep-deprived. I want him alone and afraid. He should feel inadequate. He should be haunted by his own inadequacies. Does he know this? That his silence is protection? My silence is a noose.

²⁰ It's a lie. She's noiseless. She'll sleep until dawn. Oddly, I wish she'd wake for a 2 a.m. feeding. Three months of gasping for sleep and all I want is for her to wake up.

²¹ Our room. Tyra's room. The room Ryan couldn't bear to share.

²² Frantic cries of hunger and thirst, a baby alone. I'm sick to even imagine.

²³ that I want this, am good enough for her, can function with my own life as a subtext.

²⁴ I've made a mistake, believing he'd understand my anger. Forgetting that I never asked him to stay, never insisted that he listen, left open the option for him to leave as if it were his right.

²⁵ I don't.

“I don’t know either. I do feel like an asshole. But I know I’m not ready for all this. And I just got this job where I’d be in Manila for at least 2 months. I love you. But I just have all this stuff going on right now.”

His reply is so earnest that I laugh. I begin to laugh with an equitable earnestness and soon my laughter escalates. I grab my guts and laugh and laugh until I can’t breathe and I hear the baby start to cry. She begins to cry in earnest and still I can’t stop laughing. He has stuff going on right now.

“Are you okay?” his voice is tinny and small against the present noise: my abdomen aches, my ears burn.

“You know what?” I finally gasp. I open the bedroom door and hold out the phone so he gets a good sound-byte of his baby girl wailing. Without putting the phone back to my ear I shout over her. “I’m going to have to call you back!”

I toss the phone onto the bed and pick her up, hold her in the noise-crammed darkness. We bounce. I shush. She cries and cries.

“It’s all going to be just fine.”