

Our Baby

Drugged on her breast milk, he slumped like a marionette whose manipulator had relinquished her grip on the control bar. Carefully, so as not to startle him awake, she laid him in the bassinet and beamed over him, focusing on the tiny folds of his sleeper that stretched and coiled with every breath. Their son. Their miracle.

She let herself linger a little longer, before turning to attend to the soiled diaper on the changing table. So automatically now, she performed the routine, having perfected her technique over the last two weeks. Rinsing it in the toilet, until the mustard seeds diffused away, then ringing it out, she pivoted to toe the foot pedal, lifting the lid off the plastic tub, and dropped the soggy, balled-up cotton cloth into it with a little splash. The chlorine in the diluted bleach stung her nostrils....

For just six months, why couldn't he have given up the pleasures of the hot tub—for her. For them? It could have been the reason his sperm count was so low. The doctor had said so. Or the fact that he had to get high nearly every night. That too, they were told, was another cause for male infertility. But he wouldn't quit. Not for her. Not for them

It didn't seem fair. Mary and Giovanni had gotten pregnant after a miscarriage. So had Sara and Peter. In fact, they had had two children since their miscarriage, and Peter had recently gotten a vasectomy, marking the end of his procreative life. But she and Paolo just couldn't conceive again.

For months she had bourn the grief of that awful day, when her supreme happiness was dashed, shattered like a priceless porcelain vase knocked accidentally to the tile floor. Once her sorrow had finally abated, she became infused with that woman's need again. She had become seductive with Paolo, making love daily or, occasionally, twice a day. But when that didn't yield results after two months, she immersed herself in "How To" books, became obsessed with measuring her basal body temperatures, and maniacally checked her cervical mucous so they could save themselves for the optimal time of the month for love. But months of scientifically timed sex hadn't succeeded either. In contrast to her relentless pursuit, she thought Paolo had become apathetic in the quest for a baby. It was her idea, she recalled, that they see a doctor about it.....

A tapping sound—was that Peter knocking? No, just a chickadee cracking a sunflower seed against the wooden bench outside the window. Time for her to get to the other chores before her precious babe would awaken again and demand more of her intoxicating elixir.

With her forearm, she pressed twice on the pump, dispensing the soap, and used her elbow to turn on the water. After she finished washing and drying her hands, she mentally scanned the "to-do" list. Last night's dishes, she decided upon, and ambled to the kitchen.

Rudely greeted by the cold water that the dishes were soaking in, she shuddered...

Why didn't he ever warm that thing? Running it under hot water for a few seconds or even holding it in his hands, would have made the insertion of the speculum, prying her labia apart, a little more of a sensual experience. As intelligent and successful a man as he was, Paolo just didn't have the sensitivity to things like that. But maybe this task was just outside his comfort zone. Or perhaps he thought that his frozen, concentrated sperm would have been stressed if the gangplank were too warm. Or who knows what

else may have been going through his mind as he prepared to thaw the vial in his left hand, and then to shakily suck its contents into the syringe with his right.

They were to make love once the sperm was squeezed onto her cervix, the stainless steel removed from her vagina, and he was undressed. She recalled the last time, which was like the first—and most of the others in between. She had stayed on her back, and he had lain on top of her. They kissed until he achieved a hard-enough on, then he worked his erection into her vagina, and pumped away, his bony hips rocking against her amply-padded thighs and abdomen, reaching the harmonic frequency of the mattress that made the bed creak and groan. Minutes later he came, gasped out the perfunctory “Love you, love you” and then collapsed on her chest, breathing deeply, sweaty and warm. As he was due at the airport the next morning at 8:00, he didn’t have time for a lengthy afterglow, and he rolled off her, turned over, and was soon breathing in sonorous sighs. She had reached down inside herself to find his warm residue, and brought up a two-finger dollop through her nether lips to her clitoris. Encircling her womanhood, to suffuse it, to nourish it, to make it swell into a taut-skinned berry, she had then crushed it with her fingers against her pubic bone, stiffening in jerks and tightening in spasms of pelvic contractions while she imaged the sperm being sucked up into her willing and waiting womb. And it had worked! The rest was history—natal history, that is...

She glanced at the wall clock—almost 10:00. When did Peter say he was coming over today? Eleven, she remembered. Today was Thursday, his day off, and as he had seen her baby only briefly at the hospital, and then among a throng of congratulators the following week, today would afford him the luxury of time to hold little Pietro, and to watch him suckle, and maybe even to change his diaper.

They had grown close in those years after her miscarriage; so patiently had he listened to her as she perseverated on her loss, their failing attempts to conceive again, Paolo’s this and Paolo’s that, her proffered certitude, her hidden doubts. There was that time when he placed her hand between both of his as she lamented how everyone had children so why not them? “We’ve done nothing to deserve this,” she had wailed.

As she had evolved from woe-are-we to working through this curse as if it were a strait to negotiate, he sat transfixed at her stories of wifely wantonness, at those escapades of alluring Paolo with a stiff bustier, lacy lingerie, and liberally applied mascara, blush and eye shadow. Again, when her efforts had ended in tears of disappointment, Peter had been there. They had hugged. A lot. Which gave her the encouragement to go on.

*It was he who had suggested **Take Charge of Your Fertility**, and she, devouring it like an Agatha Christie mystery, became convinced it was the answer. But it too, failed to bear her any fruit. And when month after month of getting her period had repeatedly pushed her over the edge, he was there to catch her at each free fall, with a tender embrace, a kiss, and....*

She squeezed out the sponge and wiped the counter crumbs into her palm, raised the compost lid and deposited them. Time for a quick shower. She picked up the baby monitor and carried it with her to the bathroom. He was still sleeping—his respirations clearly amplified through the device. What did mothers do before these gadgets, she marveled.

Naked, she surveyed her olive-tinted complexion in the mirror. Without makeup, her eyes still had color, but it was from the bluish hue of sleep deprivation beneath them,

and the pink glow produced by repeated rubbing. Her arcing nose remained unblemished, but her mouth still lacked that prominent “cupid’s bow” which helped to launch the career of cinema stars, like Sophia Loren. Her gaze tracked from chin to neck to her now gargantuan breasts, with rich brown areolas and cobblestone nipples, milk droplets beading up on them, then dripping to the floor--and those prominent veins. She grimaced at her belly’s paunch, zigzagged by ruddy stretch marks, both bold reminders of the size she had once swollen to. The full extent of her generous thighs was interrupted, fortunately, by the mirror’s edge, and she broke away from her critique and turned to adjust the water temperature, reassured herself once more by listening to Pietro’s breathing pattern, and stepped behind the vinyl curtain.

She toweled off, wrapped up, and strode briskly into their bedroom. Quarter to eleven she registered. The pair of panties she grabbed from her top drawer—her last clean pair--had a large separation in the elastic legging where it met the crotch....

Paolo was hollering for his Blackberry; he was getting late and would miss his plane. She had hurriedly pulled on some underpants and threw her flannel wrap over herself as she ran out to help him search. It was easily located. She carried his laptop to the door while he worked himself into his coat, then kissed him heartily goodbye, reminding him to think positive thoughts about his sperm racing to embrace her egg. He hadn’t been in a congenial mood since the alarm squawked to awaken him at 5:30, and he scoffed now at her silly imagery as he twisted the doorknob to leave for the week. Pouting slightly, she turned away from the door when his Fiat backed out of sight.

It was so early. She would eventually get to her desk and resume the grant she was writing, but for now, she would indulge herself a bit by reading. She got a fire going, settled herself on the divan in front of it, curling her bare feet beneath the warmth of her flannel, opened the novel to her bookmark, and began. Then she dozed.

The opening of the door startled her, but, although the face was welcomingly familiar, the look upon it was new. His stare revealed a need, and she felt its intensity more than the blaze in her roaring fireplace. With her right hand, she ran suddenly moist fingers through the thick, black strands of her hair. One lock fell back across her eye. He watched her as if entranced, slowly removing one glove, then the other. He pulled open his coat and let it fall off behind him. She stirred, extracting her legs from their now too hot confines, and rolled her lips inward, trying to make sense, but rejecting rationality all the while. His relentless advance narrowed the gap between them. She rose to meet him, as he was upon her.

Locked together with ferocity, their mouths raked at each other, teeth clunking, heads vying for advantage left, right. His tongue thrust beneath her upper lip, along the ridgeline one side, then back. Blood. She had bitten his tongue. Her lip was tugged between clenched incisors, amid the co-mingling of muffled groans.

She felt his fists close around her lapels and heard the dull thudding of the buttons of her wrap popping through their holes. Her shoulders were stripped. The wrap bunched at her feet. Gripping bared breasts in thick-fingered hands, he squeezed them. She cried out. Unaffected, he continued roughly, contorting each nipple then stretching them. Moaning, she answered roughly back, her claws strafing his ribcage. He growled down her throat. Fingers full of wiry hair she torn from his chest. He yelped.

Leading a vicious tango, he spun her, pulled her tight into his embrace, then, with his right arm supporting her torso, he forced her back into an arching dip against his

thigh, and lowered her to the carpet. Writhing beneath him, she twisted to free herself, but his greater strength prevented escape. Still, she struggled on.

Sliding both hands up her bared arms, he pinned her wrists above her head with one hand. Using the other, he yanked at the clip and zipper of his khakis and an erect manhood burst through the metal-lined V.

His free hand reached for her covered groin. He probed for access. A tiny rent. He shoved a finger inside, enlarging it, inserted two, ripping the threadbare panties apart. Then he was full upon her, into her wetness with his ravager, his procreator. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" she cried, at every thrust, every stroke, every stretch, feeling herself as every female animal feels being impaled by the male of her species. She arched her back, dug her nails into his flanks, as she managed one more view of her stallion--his neck extended, face red-orange in the firelight, eyes squeezed shut, mouth widely gaped--then she, too, clamped her lids tightly closed, and together they yelled, bellowed, and howled.....

"Pietro, I'm coming!" she called out, and pulling on her robe, she raced, half-naked, to her wailing infant's side. On his back, crying lustily, the late morning sun penetrating the slats and shining into his mouth, revealed to her a most unusual sight. Hanging from the roof of his mouth at the very back was an upside-down tiny heart. His uvula was split! To her knowledge this was very rare. Except for pictures, she had never seen it before—or, maybe once before, but she couldn't locate the memory.

"I'm here, my little Pietro, I'm here." She swaddled her son to soothe him before turning him to face her bosom, opened her robe, and using two fingers rubbed her nipple against his cheek. He responded by turning toward it and sucking. Hard. "Ow!"...

He let go of her wrists and resumed his squeeze of her breasts, firmer now, as he rode her. She sensed he was close to exploding within, and she arched her back, dug her nails into his flanks, as she managed one more view of her magnificent stallion--his neck veins bulging, face aglow, buried eyelids, lips widely parted, and there, glistening from the roof of his mouth, the firelight bounding off it, was his inverted little heart...

Her knees buckled. She managed awkwardly to maneuver herself into the wooden rocker at the side of the bassinet. Pietro's slurping and swallowing became distant, the blood booming louder in her ears. His fussing roused her, and she hoisted him up and over her shoulder to burp. "There, there," she patted his back firmly, as her mind, now wild with imaginings, roiled with impossibility, fear, and wonder.

"What was that? A knock? It's Peter," she said aloud. She lowered Pietro so that she could gaze upon him. Their son. Their miracle. And, closing her robe, she whispered to the precious bundle cradled in her arms, "Let's go show our baby to his father."