

Word Count: 3118

*Arrendersi*

So my wife and I were trying to have this baby. My wife was trying, really, and I was just sort of going along with it. That's how things were most of the time. She wanted to visit her parents, we visited her parents. She wanted to switch to extra absorbent paper towels, we switched to extra absorbent. Now she wanted this baby. We did the thing you had to do to have babies. It was okay, I guess. After a couple months she peed on a stick and found out she was pregnant.

"This is great news," she said.

"Where's the hot water bottle?" I said. I was holed up in bed with a stomach virus.

"We're having a baby," my wife said. "Stuart. It's a baby."

"I know. You already told me that."

I put my head under the pillow. It felt cozy in there, like maybe I was still waiting to be born. If I stayed there long enough I knew my wife would go away.

I closed my eyes. My face felt like Mercury and my stomach felt like Nagasaki. I waited.

My wife sighed and stomped into the hallway. She was probably going to call her parents; she could be a pain in the ass like that when she wanted to.

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I used to like my wife. Maybe this is something worth pointing out. She tells great FDR jokes and she knows not to say anything when I drive sixty through a

school zone. She always shaves and she has a grabbable ass, which isn't a real word but sure is a real thing. I should know. I grab it all the time.

The bossiness snuck up on me. It was subtle, you know? But it kind of accumulated like dry rot until I was watching the Prussian Ballet perform with her and I realized wait, hold on, *I'm watching the goddamn Prussian Ballet*. That was a few months before this whole baby business, and I guess I was still coasting on inertia when I got her pregnant, still trying to figure out what my move should be.

I worked in estate planning, by the way. I wasn't used to making moves.

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My wife's parents showed up that evening. They were from Richmond, which was just close enough for them to visit a lot but far enough that they wanted to stay the night. I kept trying to convince my wife that we should move another state away.

"Congratulations!" The parents said. They hugged my wife, who was standing in the front of the foyer (her word) wearing Ugg boots and a sundress. They did everything in pairs, which is to say that the mother in law did things and the father in law followed her around with his credit card. I didn't like seeing that kind of stuff; I was too afraid that it would be me in thirty years.

The mother in law whispered her chitchat with my wife—probably telling her how to subjugate men—and I watched them through the open doorway, from an angle where they couldn't watch me back. I heard my name mentioned. I heard it mentioned again. Then they came into the living room to sit down.

“Oh my!” The mother in law said when she saw me. I was on the couch in my underwear.

“I have a stomach virus,” I said.

“You’re sick?” The mother in law said. “You’re sick and you’re having a baby?”

“That’s it.”

“Well,” the mother in law said.

The father in law sat down in my recliner and turned on the sports station. I was always pulling for that guy.

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The last time the in laws had visited it was still winter. My wife was just starting to get her ideas about babies and the bulletin board in the kitchen was smothered with pictures of them: black ones, white ones, stumpy ones and ones that were beet-raw and hairless. When Hank walked in he stood in front of that board for a while, nodding and nodding with his hands in his pockets. He looked at me. He pointed at the board.

“Jesus,” he said. “Sorry. I mean, *Jesus*.”

That night I’d stayed up late with him watching TV. After the news shows and the sports shows had started repeating themselves he switched over to National Geographic, to some documentary about the Buddhists. There was a picture of stars. The stars were whirling around in a kind of tornado while the narrator explained about karma.

“Can you believe this stuff?” Hank said. “Reincarnation?”

I told him I didn't know.

"Don't get me wrong—I wouldn't mind the *idea* of it," he said. He folded his hands over his belly button. The remote was tucked somewhere between the arm and the seat of the recliner: safe. "Just seems like to me that's wishful thinking."

I thought about that but it didn't make me wishful, just antsy. Starting over? With nothing to take with you? And you might turn out to be an ant or a blade of grass? Birth was an ordeal; death seemed a lot less complicated.

All at once I was dizzy. I felt sick—maybe I had liver cancer. I went into the kitchen and splashed hot water on my face until I couldn't see my reflection in the faucet anymore, until everything I knew about myself ran down that drain and into the sewage system.

There was Fireball in the fridge. I peeked back into the living room and asked Hank if he wanted a shot.

"Sure," he said. "I want two of them."

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The wife and the mother wanted dinner.

"What do you want to eat?" The mother kept saying.

"I don't know," my wife said. "I don't care. Stuart, where do you want to eat?"

"I have a stomach virus," I said. "Remember? I've been throwing up?"

"Italian sounds good," the mother said. "But I don't want to impose."

The father in law sat on the couch. He was watching baseball—or looking at baseball, at least. I'm not sure if he was really watching it.

“I don’t want to make this into a big to-do,” my wife said.

“You deserve to celebrate, dear,” the mother said. “We should go somewhere fancy.”

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At Olive Garden everything smelled like a pizza box. It looked like a pizza box, too, because the walls were painted a certain shade of brown and there were grease stains on the carpet.

The wife and the mother ordered a bottle of Pinot. I threw my napkin into my lap and asked for water.

“Ice?” The waiter said. “Lemon?”

“No,” I said. “Just the water in a glass, please.” I didn’t know how specific I was supposed to be.

The mother in law wanted to talk to me about fatherhood. “You need to be gentle,” she was saying. “But also teach them to have discipline. Discipline is important, but being gentle with it is more important.”

“That sounds about right,” I said.

“Hank,” the mother said, “tell Stuart here about fatherhood.”

Hank—that was the father in law’s name—was halfway through a breadstick, eating just fast enough that no one would ask him to talk. “I got to take a piss,” he said, and he slid out of the booth like it was a birth canal.

Boy, do I admire that man.

“How do you feel?” The mother in law asked my wife. “How are your sleep cycles?”

“It’s nice not having my period,” my wife said. “I like that part.”

Something tectonic shifted in my lower intestine. “Excuse me,” I said, and I crab-walked to the bathroom.

Hank was standing in front of the mirror, squeezing a zit on the bottom of his nose. He must have been sixty years old but he still got acne. When I thought about stuff like that it made me want to buy him a gift basket or something.

I nodded at him. He nodded at me. There was an Italian lesson playing over the stereo: *famiglia. Family. Cappio. Moose.*

I slammed the door to the handicapped stall and did what I had to do.

When the first bout was over I could still see Hank’s feet in front of the sink. He was running water now, washing his hands or heating up the zit. “You okay in there, champ?”

“I’ll make it.”

“That’s all right.” He turned off the water. He tugged out some paper towels. “It’s good news. About the baby, I mean.”

“Yeah,” I said. “People keep telling me that.”

The speakers clucked out more Italian: *Tapiro. Tapir. Uragano. Tornado.*

Hank sighed. I pictured him leaning into the mirror, pinching the pus out of his skin. I pictured myself doing the same thing a few years from now, pictured how I’d have to take care of this kid my wife was making.

“If it’s okay with you, champ,” Hank said, “I think I’ll stay in here for a while.”

“Sure,” I said. I honestly didn’t blame him. I never had.

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When my wife and I were getting married I still liked to sneak cigarettes in the garage or the backyard when she wasn’t looking. She’d made me stop before she moved in—it was blue collar, she’d said, but she’d never mentioned anything about my health—and I had, mostly, except for after we fought or on Redskins’ game days.

That’s what I was doing before the dress rehearsal, out by the dumpsters behind the church with a tux and a Marlboro. It was hot enough to glue the seams of my sleeves to my armpits, which I guess made sense because this was in Maui, in the middle of June. At three thirty I was going to walk to the altar and fake-marry my wife.

I scratched around the heels of my dress shoes. I smoked. I had two packs of Spearmint in my pocket to chew off the nicotine.

The exit door was propped, probably because these rehearsals got a lot of guys like me. I kept listening for the hinges so I could toss my cigarette, but when Hank walked through it he moved quiet as a cloud.

“Howdy,” he said, and I almost lost my shit. He had his tie undone and his shirt open down to the chest. There was a yellow circle of sweat around his collar.

“Hey.” I didn’t put out the cigarette but I didn’t keep smoking it, either.

He stepped onto the curb, eased the door shut like its hinges were nitroglycerin. “Hot in there.”

“Hotter out here.”

“Guess so,” he said. “Seems like wherever a guy goes things keep getting hotter.”

“Could be global warming.”

“Or shitty luck.” He leaned against the wall and slid off his jacket. He was just as uncomfortable as I was. “Hey, champ. Got an extra cigarette?”

I did.

“You smoke?” I lit one and handed it to him.

He inhaled, coughed. “Now I do.”

We stood in humid silence, watching the sun ooze ribbons across the asphalt parking lot.

“I don’t know why I’m nervous,” Hank said. “You’re the one getting married.”

I looked at him sideways. I didn’t know what to say.

“My daughter knows what she wants. She also knows how to get it, but I guess I don’t need to tell you that.” He stepped closer, leaned in like he was going to hit me or kiss me. Either way something important was happening. “I used to play rugby. Rec league, local guys, that kind of thing. We had games on Saturdays. After I married Trudy we joined this country club, and she was always wanting to go hang around at the pool. Friday nights she’d ask if I was going to a game tomorrow, which of course she knew I was, like I said we played every goddamn week, and when I said yeah she’d sort of puff out her cheeks and give me that look—you’ve seen it, my daughter does it too—that look that says, *really? You mean that?* And I did, because I wasn’t going to let her get to me, right?”



I put out my cigarette. I wanted to know why he was telling me about rugby.

“Well that goes on a couple months,” Hank said, “and then she starts coming home drunk from the pool. Which we’re young, that doesn’t seem like an issue to me, so I don’t say anything and I keep on playing rugby. Next thing I know I’m at this sevens match, rucking like a bastard—I used to be a prop and I’d run people over—and my buddy waves me over like hey, your wife keeps calling you, better check it out. So I run over there and call her back and she’s crying, like I can’t even understand what she’s saying, and it turns out she ran the car into a stop sign.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Jesus is right.” He was looking somewhere over my shoulder like he’d forgotten where he was going with this.

“Rugby,” I said.

“Rugby. Right. Point is, I haven’t played rugby in twenty-five years, but I’ve gone to the pool just about every goddamn week.”

He put his hands on my shoulders; they felt like anvils. I imagined him using those hands to pummel rugby players, then imagined him using them to choke the water out of a pool noodle. It gave me this sizzling feeling at the bottom of my gut, the same kind of sinking you get when you realize you forgot to finish something important.

My father in law was dead serious. “I just—I did this too, this whole wife thing. And I learned pretty quick that it’s best for you to decide that you want what she wants, because if you want something different you’ll never get it anyway.”

“Wow,” I said. “Okay. Thank you.”

Then we went inside so I could practice marrying his daughter.

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In the bathroom things weren't going great. I was getting these stomach cramps, probably the kind of stuff my wife would have a few months from now. On the other side of the stall door Hank talked me through it.

"You got to breath, champ. People are always forgetting to breath."

I put my head in my hands. I breathed.

"Good thing about a stomach virus is it's over in a day or so," Hank said. "Just think, champ: you'll be okay tomorrow."

"Sure," I said. But my wife was pregnant. My wife's mother was visiting. Tomorrow, even sans stomach virus, would probably not be okay.

Over the speaker system more Italian instruction: *Nonna. Grandma.*

*Arrendersi. Surrender.*

What did my wife want? What was I doing? The top of my throat sizzled. I threw up again, all stomach acid, and remembered holding back my wife's hair while she did this in college.

"Don't wait for me," I said. "I'll be here for a while."

"It's all right, champ. The ladies can talk. They won't get bored."

Paper towels. Running water. Hank must have been trying to tackle that zit again.

"Can I give you some advice?" He said.

"Please."

“What I’m doing now—squeezing this pimple, I mean—it isn’t doing my face any good. If I didn’t want a pimple I should have washed my face and my bed sheets more often. But I’m fifty-five years old. I’m not in here to get rid of a damn pimple.”

“Really?” I said, but that much I already knew.

“I’m here the same way you’re here. I’m here to get rid of my damn wife for minute.”

“What?” I said. “Sorry?”

I heard Hank’s loafers clicking across the floor, heard his hand propped against the outside of the bathroom stall. “All I mean is, there’s a part of me that’s glad I got this pimple to squeeze, just like there’s a part of you that’s glad you got this stomach virus right when you got my daughter—your wife, I mean—pregnant. Am I right?”

He was right.

“Look, champ. We all need to take a break once in a while. Don’t think it’s a bad thing. The bad thing would be if you didn’t take that break, and if you kept sticking around until you lost it and had to have a permanent break, you know?”

My legs were going to sleep from kneeling on the tile, from hunching over the toilet bowl like it was an altar and my puke was something holy. “I think I’ll get up now,” I said.

“Yeah,” Hank said. “I think so too.”

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Back at the table the food was ready.

“Sure did take you long enough,” the mother in law said.

"I'm starving," my wife said.

"You didn't have to wait for us," Hank said.

"No," the mother in law said. "But we wanted to anyway."

I slid back into the booth next to my wife. She was hardly pregnant but it already felt like she was taking up more space. I let her have it.

Across the table Hank was working on his pizza. That zit looked like a clump of sea salt on the front of his nose; squeezing it had only made things worse.

"I can't believe you ordered a pizza," the mother in law said. "This is supposed to be a fancy dinner, Hank." She skewered a mozzarella stick with her fork. "Sometimes I think you don't have any class."

"Sorry," Hank said.

For the first time I understood how that word didn't have to be a shield—from Hank it was a bullet to the chest: the way he kept chewing his pizza, the way he didn't bother looking at her when he said it. Context was everything.

I leaned into the corner of the booth. My drink was empty; I sipped water off the tops of the ice cubes.

"Stuart," my wife was saying. "Stuart, aren't you hungry?"

"I'm sick," I said. "Remember? The stomach virus?"

My wife shoved a forkful of alfredo at me. "Try some."

"I can't. I'll throw up."

The mother in law was giving me a look like a meat grinder. Across the table Hank kept the front of his face tucked behind the pizza—he was holed up for the evening.

“Please, Stuart,” my wife said. “You don’t have to sulk.”

I folded my hands in my lap. The lights on the ceiling made everything look artificial, like maybe if you touched a wall the whole room would collapse. My wife wouldn’t have collapsed; she was with child.

“Sorry,” I said. I felt like I was being squeezed through an umbilical cord.

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