

Max, They

The dog jumps into the iPad frame, grey and scruffy, saliva flying from its mouth. My daughter Nina yanks him back into her lap and hugs him. He is a stray who never left. A Toto. Nina lives in Las Vegas with her husband Brad. I live in Seattle with her father, my husband, Jim. Nina and Brad are both middle school teachers. It's before dinner and she wants to talk about her seventh grade students and yesterday's school lockdown and how the shooter never came. She's still jittery. So am I, especially about what her anxiety might do to Max, the baby, my only child's first child. Toto wiggles and licks Nina's face and jumps out of the frame and I am relieved to finally see my daughter's bulging tummy. I should be listening more carefully to her story, but all I can focus on is Max, who will be here soon. Max not Maxwell or Maximilien, one-syllable Max, long-awaited Max, my Max.

Later at dinner, Jim and I eat microwaved frozen meals in the living room because our house is being remodeled. We scoop carefully portioned cilantro chicken and white rice from the black recesses and discuss our day. Jim asks about Nina's lockdown and I explain that she is fine, although I don't know how anyone could be *fine* after that. Her classroom is a windowless portable. The lockdown signal was a series of horn blasts. Her kids had practiced. She secured the door while they circled up and sat on the floor. A girl, Shaniqua, fainted and Nina revived her. Everyone scoured their phones for news but found none. Someone played *Uptown Funk*, loudly. When the all-clear came, more blasts, Nina opened the door onto to a perfectly normal unchanged world. It sounds unsettling, we agree.

The next morning, still in my bathrobe, I peek behind a temporary plastic barrier and inspect my unfinished kitchen. The remodeling crew has inserted small wood shims into cracks between the new cabinets. The poky-outy sticks look silly. They have a big job to do.

Lunchtime. I'm knitting at a patio table, listening to the contractors work, when Harter joins me. We're pseudo-friends. He's eighteen, just out of school, one of the crew's little buddies. He pulls out a hot dog rolled up in a slice of American cheese and plows it down. He thinks the other older workers are stupid. The boss is his uncle. He isn't allowed to touch power tools yet.

"What do you want to do with your life?" I ask.

"You know, get good at something."

"Like what?"

"Like computers or games or something."

"How about carpentry?"

"Too dirty. Besides, I have asthma." He coughs to prove it.

"You can get help for asthma."

He points at my knitting. "What's that?"

"A Christmas stocking for my grandson." I hold it up. It is green and red with MAX spelled out in white block letters around the neck.

"That's cool. How old is he?"

"He's not here yet. Soon, though."

"Cool. I want a mini-me someday."

"You need to take care of other things first, Harter."

“I know,” he says. “Cool. Cool.”

I don't understand boys, Nina's phantom shooter or Harter or the appeal of weapons and games and power tools and lip smacking. Their default shape is maddening. Nina was always unsurprisingly feminine, and I doted over her. Will Max be maddening? I wonder. Will he be a they or she or them or her instead of a him or he? Will he survive? Will he thrive?

My first of four invitros occurred when Nina was five. Jim can still recite the medical bill's procedure code. We were giddy with excitement that day. Later, not so much. Now our family's mission is to make sure *I'm okay*, to watch for *signs of depression*, so they can rush in and help. After invitro two, Jim and I explained babies to Nina. She sat slack jawed, rubbing her doll's tummy. When I tried to pull her hand to my womb she pulled back. Even then she knew I was making gut shot wagers. Last June, when she called to say she was pregnant, I stopped taking my meds, so I could be pregnant again along with her. *Feel it*. Now a new worry is squarely planted in my frontal lobe, a moldy spring bulb.

My next conversation with Nina is tense. It is a week after the lockdown. We're on the iPad again. Her voice rises and falls with fatigue. Her freckled face is swollen and her brown hair is wispy and limp. Before the pregnancy she worked hard to maintain her appearance. She knows I'm envious of her marvelous fecundity. You'll snap back, I say. Toto's unfortunate black nose appears and fills the frame. What happens when Max arrives, I ask? She is silent. Brad is installing a dog door. I think about all my openings and how each invitro deposit felt like a breath and every exit a sneeze. Toto licks the iPad screen and Nina's face and she pushes him away and my openings throb with misapprehension. *I feel it*.

The next morning Nina goes into labor and I schedule a last-minute flight to Las Vegas. The contractor is laying hardwood floors, four-inch boards, finely grained with lovely brown veins. They're beautiful in their solidity. As I step out the door to catch my Uber, Harter bids me goodbye. He looks eager.

My flight is uneventful and at the McCarran Airport baggage claim I notice a text from the contractor and phone him. He needs decisions about drawer pulls. Background noises creep into the call. He's in the emergency room. Harter chopped off his pinky finger on a table saw.

I'm still thinking about Harter's injury at the rental car center. I've seen injuries before, my own and others, but severed digits really get me going. I nervously pick out a black Dodge Charger and take off for the hospital. On the freeway I accelerate toward the desert's vast horizon. Looming lawyer billboards reassuringly promise help if I get drunk and screw up. Behind them, outcroppings of new housing developments stretch into the filmy distance and disappear. I like the desert's blandness, its sweeping anonymity, and lack of expectation. People come here every day to change their luck.

At the hospital, I greet Nina's in-laws who are waiting in the birthing center. We chat and I head for Nina's room. She is pretzeled beneath tented blankets, seven hours into labor, four centimeters dilated. Her epidural has kicked in and she is wanly cheerful. She jerks and Brad jumps to attention. It's nothing. We all laugh. I leave for the cafeteria to get Brad a hamburger and when I return, nurses are probing Nina's midsection. Max is out of position and Nina's blood pressure is rising. They need to adjust the baby so he can get out.

In the waiting room, my co-grandmother clutches my hand, sniffles, and takes large bites out of Brad's hamburger. Hours pass. None of us are allowed in. At 8:00 PM, Brad comes out. Nina has been pushing and is spent. Max will arrive sometime, probably in the middle of the night. We should all go home. Brad will text us.

My nearby hotel is a cheap and I'm lying awake at midnight remembering Nina's birth, a high forceps delivery that followed a 30-hour labor. It took all my strength of and that of three nurses to get her out. Her scrapes and bruises healed quickly but I memorialized the forceps' undertow. The thinnest of

membranes separate joy from sorrow. My head hurts and the imaginary space under my skin burns. My meds are at home. I try to focus. I pray for joy.

Morning. Sunlight streams into my room. I'm in a fog and grope for my phone. Max is here, a large photo of a small face. I get dressed and rush to the hospital. Nina is nursing a wee person in a blue stocking cap. I touch Max's cheek and take in his measurements, the baseline numbers of an uncertain future. He stares at me through shrouded unsullied eyes and I wonder why I am not feeling more relieved. My newest best friend has entered the world. *Pretty great*, I whisper and Nina replies, *yeah*, nonplussed and exhausted. Behind Nina, a white board reads *Thomas Maxwell Cranston*. I blink and re-read the words. The Christmas stocking is wrong, all wrong. Uncommunicated changes have been made. I want to scream but head to the bathroom instead, where I weep into my coat sleeve. I pull myself together and call Jim. When I say the word Tom, I break down all over again.

Are you *okay*, he asks. *Okay, okay, okay*.

Yes. I am *okay*.

Brad sends me to their house to straighten up for tomorrow's homecoming. I walk to the parking lot trying to remember where I parked the Charger. I click the panic button and hear its wail. I go to it and am overwhelmed by its extravagant masculinity, its ripe bulges, oversized tires, and mean grill. I climb in and run my hands over the steering wheel like it is a round gun barrel. I imagine Harter in the back seat, crowing about torque and horsepower, urging me on, holding up his maimed hand, yelling, *fuck yeah!* I turn onto the freeway and punch the accelerator and shoot past a Prius, a panel van, and a red Cadillac, biting down on my adrenaline. The car is flying, almost out of control.

Fuck yeah! I scream. *Fuck yeah! Fuck yeah! Fuck yeah!*

A child. A baby. A boy. A grandson. A family. A legacy.

I was a teacher once, like Nina, high school English, but I quit a few years ago. I don't miss it. I wasn't very good at it. Jim is a librarian and will retire soon. We met in college, fell in love, and settled down. No wild streaks, just us and our fates and later the petri dishes. My therapist likes to talk about the movies trapped in our heads – the ones that loop over and over again. Watched up close, they dominate your emotions, but from a distance they're manageable. I drive the Charger to Nina's school instead of her home and pull into the parking lot. I get out and stretch to gather strength. The main building resembles a World War II bunker, windowless gray concrete covered by a sunburnt metal mansard roof. The six white portables are in the rear. I have been to Nina's classroom before, but want another look. It's the last one in the row. I walk across a grassy play field, an afternoon stroll, taking in the surrounding neighborhood of cracker box houses and cyclone fences. Hers is a title ten school. I have never felt safe for her at this school. It's hot outside and I'm sweating. I wonder why I ever wanted a second child. I wonder why Nina is not enough. My movie reels slap loudly as I parse each celluloid grain. There is no way to get out, not even through a small opening. *Stop*, someone yells and a school security guard, a woman pointing a handgun, motions at me. I smile and wave. I'm just a sixty year old woman in jeans with a gray ponytail, for crying out loud. The security guard advances. *Hello, I'm a mother*, I yell. *My daughter teaches here. She just had a baby*. I lift up my hands up and someone tackles me from behind driving my face into the grass. Horns blast in the distance. I am cuffed.

The next day, Nina, Brad, and Max arrive home to a well provisioned, ready-to-nurture home. Nina places the baby in a bassinet and Brad helps her get comfortable on the couch. She is pale and bloated and still a little shaky. It's the blood loss.

Nina and Brad are grateful for my help. They know I have a kitchen to finish. I don't mention yesterday's school debacle. I stare at Max in his bassinet, at his acne-dotted skin and bland expression. I blame him, despite his innocence, for my confused feelings and dangerous meandering. After a while, he begins to fuss and I pick him up and change his diaper. His dotted meconium is a perfect yellow. I dab

ointment on his raw belly button and whisper, *there, there*. I pull him close and he wriggles his face into my dry breasts and I flinch with phantom pain.

Nina wakes up. “What happened?”

“Max is hungry.”

“I know,” she says, unbuttoning her top. “He’ll always be hungry.”

“Will he now?” I ask. “I wouldn’t know.”

I stay a week. I cook and freeze meals and tidy up and run errands, while Nina and Joe tend to Max. The mood is tense and vigilant. Nobody wants the baby to die. I check in at home with Jim and the contractor. The floors are waxed and the backsplash is being tiled. Harter can’t work yet. The contractor laughs. His nephew is angry. The injury messed up his video gaming skills.

I am to leave tomorrow. I try to act sad. Brad’s parents bring Toto home but the dog pulls away when Nina reaches for him. She calls and he slowly advances, bewildered. She coaxes, *that’s a good boy*, and he jumps into her lap and licks her face. She hands Max to me and I whisper, *that’s a good boy*, and he begins to cry, a tiny hoarse cry.

After dinner, my phone’s news feed is red, a middle school shooting in Texas. Lockdown memories come flooding back. Nina says that she would have killed the shooter at her school, would have ripped his throat out to save her kids. Her mama-bear intensity scares me. I mention a voicemail she left for me as the lockdown was occurring. She was in control, her usual self. Fortunately, we talked before I listened to it. I kept it and play it sometimes, taking in her every inflection, every crackling pause, every strain, wondering what I would have said, how I would have sounded in the moment. If I would have comforted her.

“What would you have said if I had picked up when you called?” I ask.

“I don’t know. I won’t call next time,” she says, attuned to my problem.

“Dear Lord. Please, no next time.”

The next morning, I kiss Max goodbye. He is growing up already. His eyes are wider and his eyebrows more visible. I give Nina the stocking and offer to make a new one. She laughs and hugs me. She forgot to tell me about the name change. It is our best moment since my arrival. The sixteen-year-old gunboy from Texas is dead, shot down by police. His girlfriend had just broken up with him. I remind Nina that one of the leading causes of death amongst teenage boys and young adult men is suicide.

“I know,” she says.

The day after I get home, my therapist squeezes me in. We talk about the inexplicable feelings grandmothers can have. We discuss the Charger, Harter, his stump, the shooters, my remodel, and how much I already miss my daughter. I tell her how much I love Max, so very, very much. I don’t tell her my grandson’s name is Tom.

As I speak and listen to my words, I take in the office’s neutrality, its half-shut blinds, the oak bookcase, the stiff medical tomes, and shiny magazines. My therapist smiles and types, fingers flicking over a small laptop on a rolling desk. She is always a little too alert. She nods and asks questions and I fill in the spaces, careful to sound reflective in a meaningful way, careful not to incriminate myself. I want her to know that I will be okay. We discuss my movie and my meds, which I am taking again. I admit to having watched some of my movies recently, newer versions.

Oh, and something else happened, I admit, finally.

The kitchen is finished. It is spotless and shim free. It’s exactly what I wanted, and for the next few weeks, we get acquainted. I line the cupboards with white mesh and buy new pans, my first copper. I try

out new cooking techniques, oven-dried fruit, sous vide chicken breast. I wipe down the stainless steel three times a day. I stare at the granite. I video chat with Nina on the iPad. Each time Max is dressed differently, a polka dot onesie, a turquoise neck kerchief, teensy knitted socks. I *ooh* and *ahh*. Her leave of absence from school will end soon. I stare at my granite.

One day Harter stops by, ostensibly to see the finished kitchen, but I know he wants to show me his stump and talk. He has gotten a prosthetic pinky, a science-fictiony thing made of hard rubber and metal. Now he can shoot a gun again. Bang, bang. He picks up a strawberry and proudly pops it into his mouth. He rubs his new hand over the granite and tells me that he has met someone and asks about restaurants and how to order wine and I remind he is not old enough to order wine. He asks about Max.

“He’s great. His name is Tom. My mistake. Getting big.” I show him a picture on my phone.

“Whoops. He looks awesome.”

“Yes. You’ll know someday.”

He stares, pensive, thinking about it.

“Why didn’t you have more kids?” he asks. “You’re a great mom.”

“I couldn’t.”

“You could have adopted.”

“I couldn’t,” I say harder.

“You could be my mom.”

“Don’t you have a mom.”

“She died when I was ten. Want to be my mom?”

I'm surprised I don't know this essential piece of information.

"What does it mean? Be your mom?"

"Nothing really. You can just think of me that way. No strings attached."

I peer into Harter's goofy face. It's an easy solution to a difficult problem. A gift. I grab his hand and pull it to my cheek. We hug and he whispers, *cool, cool*.

Nina phones on the iPad a few days later. She has returned to school and is wearing make-up and a necklace. She holds up Tom, so I can see him, before handing the baby off to Brad. She is wearing her stern teacher look. Toto has moved to Brad's parents permanently. I don't miss the big black nose and out-of-control tongue. Something Nina says reminds me of my last invitro and how later that same evening I was combing her hair, trying to figure out how to explain the concept of an only child to her. Even then, her fertility scared me.

"I pulled your hair a little too hard," I say. "I'm sorry."

I don't usually talk about these things. I can see from her expression that she knows what happened at her school, how they cuffed me and sent me home after a short nap in the nurse's office.

Nina pauses. It is usually the time when she asks if I'm okay.

"I don't remember it, Mom. I truly don't."